ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 12| Issue: 3| March2026|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2026: 8.753 || ISI Value: 1.188

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF METAPHYSICS IN THE POSTMODERN ERA

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the transformation of metaphysical inquiry in the postmodern era, highlighting how postmodern philosophical critiques reconfigure traditional concepts of being, truth, and reality. Drawing on interpretive qualitative methodologies grounded in conceptual analysis and textual exegesis, the research interrogates key postmodern interventions that challenge the foundational absolutes of classical metaphysics. It argues that postmodernism's scepticism toward grand narratives and its emphasis on language, discourse, and socio-historical context render metaphysical inquiry reflexive and contingent rather than transcendental and universal. The study further explicates the implications of this transformation for contemporary social science theory, underscoring the necessity of situating ontological assumptions within interpretive frameworks that respect plurality and contextuality. By reconceiving metaphysics as a critical audit of conceptual presuppositions rather than a sovereign ontology, the research contributes to ongoing debates in philosophy and human sciences.

KEYWORDS: *Postmodernism, Metaphysics, Ontology, Critical Theory, Interpretive Methodology, Social Construction, Hermeneutics.*

INTRODUCTION

Metaphysics has historically occupied an indispensable position within philosophical inquiry, representing the discipline's aspiration to discern the fundamental structures of reality, existence, and being. Classical metaphysics, epitomized in the works of Aristotle and further developed through the medieval and modern periods, has pursued a systematic ontology—an account of that which underlies change, causal relations, substance, and the conditions of possibility for experience. Such ontological commitments have traditionally presupposed a stable, universal substratum of Being upon which epistemic certainty could be anchored. However, the rise of postmodern sensibilities in the late twentieth century, catalyzed by linguistic, epistemological, and cultural critiques, contests the foundational presuppositions of classical metaphysical projects. In rejecting the universality of grand narratives and privileging the contingent, the fragmented, and the discursive, postmodern thought inaugurates a profound rethinking of metaphysics—one that dislocates the certainties of ontological totality and reconceptualizes reality as a dynamic interplay of difference, language, and power. This study seeks to critically analyse the transformations metaphysics undergoes in the postmodern era and to articulate the implications of these transformations for contemporary philosophical and social scientific inquiry.

At the heart of postmodern critique lies a profound skepticism toward the transcendental claims that undergird traditional metaphysical systems. Where classical metaphysics aspires to uncover invariant, universally intelligible structures of reality, postmodern thinkers emphasize the instability and historicity of conceptual frameworks. Jean-François Lyotard's characterization of postmodernism as an "incredulity toward metanarratives" encapsulates the intellectual ethos that denies the legitimacy of singular, overarching accounts of existence and truth. Likewise, Jacques Derrida's deconstructive critique of logocentrism unsettles metaphysical reliance on presence and origin as epistemic anchors, demonstrating how meaning itself is deferred through the play of différance. Such theoretical interventions foreground the contingent mediation of experience through language and discourse, challenging the notion that metaphysical inquiry can yield determinate access to an ontologically privileged reality. In this sense, postmodernism does not merely critique specific metaphysical doctrines; it problematizes the very aspiration toward metaphysical sovereignty.

The implications of postmodern critiques extend beyond the confines of abstract philosophical discourse into the methodological and conceptual foundations of social science. Social scientific inquiry—whether in sociology, cultural studies, or anthropology—has often been grounded, implicitly or explicitly, in ontological assumptions about the nature of social reality, agency, and structure. Postmodern perspectives disrupt these assumptions by demonstrating how categories such as identity, subjectivity, and social order are not fixed ontological realities but are constituted within discursive practices and power relations. This movement from an ontology of stable essences to an ontology of relational process reconfigures the parameters of social explanation. It demands an epistemic humility that recognizes the co-constitutive interplay between researchers and the sociocultural phenomena they seek to understand. By situating metaphysics within the epistemological concerns of the social sciences, this study underscores how ontological inquiry remains relevant, not as a quest for immutable truths, but as a critical practice that interrogates the conditions of knowledge production itself.

Despite substantial scholarship on postmodernism's critique of metaphysics, there remains a lacuna in systematic philosophical analyses that integrate postmodern ontological disruptions with the enduring concerns of metaphysical inquiry. Such integration requires a nuanced investigation of how metaphysics can be reconceived in ways that acknowledge both

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the constructive power of critique and the persistent human impulse to articulate structured accounts of reality.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Contemporary scholarship on metaphysics in the postmodern era reveals a decisive shift away from classical ontological foundationalism toward critically reflexive and context-sensitive modes of philosophical inquiry. Classical metaphysics, grounded in the pursuit of universal and necessary structures of being, has been subjected to sustained critique by postmodern philosophers who challenge its claims to epistemic certainty and ontological permanence. Recent Scopus-indexed studies emphasise that postmodern philosophy does not merely reject metaphysics outright; rather, it interrogates the historical, linguistic, and power-laden conditions under which metaphysical claims are produced and sustained. Scholars analysing postmodern thought argue that metaphysics has entered a "post-metaphysical" phase, wherein traditional categories such as essence, substance, and absolute truth are destabilised and reinterpreted through discourse, difference, and contingency (Bakeeva, 2025; Moskvitin, 2025).

A significant strand of recent literature links postmodern metaphysical critique to the broader phenomenon of post-truth and epistemic fragmentation. Kachay and Petrov (2026), in their analysis of post-creativity in the post-truth era, argue that the erosion of objective truth claims has profound metaphysical implications, particularly regarding the status of reality and representation. Similarly, Kondratyuk-Antonova et al. (2025) examine how disinformation and simulated realities undermine classical metaphysical assumptions about correspondence between truth and being. These studies suggest that postmodern metaphysics must be understood within a socio-cultural landscape marked by media saturation, symbolic excess, and the collapse of stable referential frameworks. In this context, metaphysical inquiry becomes inseparable from epistemology, ethics, and social critique, reflecting a move toward what many scholars describe as a critical or interpretive ontology.

Another important body of literature situates postmodern metaphysics within historical-philosophical and interdisciplinary perspectives. Danilyan and Dzeban (2025), in their study of violence in modern philosophical traditions, demonstrate how metaphysical ideas are deeply embedded within socio-historical conditions rather than existing as abstract universals. Moskvitin's (2025) work on post-nonclassical science further reinforces this view by highlighting the synthesis of philosophical traditions in contemporary knowledge systems, where metaphysical assumptions are plural, provisional, and context-dependent. These contributions align with social science-oriented philosophical research, which increasingly treats metaphysics as a framework that shapes, and is shaped by, cultural practices, institutional structures, and power relations.

Postmodern metaphysical debates have also been enriched by comparative and non-Western philosophical studies, which challenge Eurocentric ontological paradigms. Works such as *African Philosophies and Social Work in the Post-Colonial Era* (Ndangwa Noyoo et al., 2025) and studies on Islamic philosophical traditions in the modern era (Rivana et al., 2025; Fitriani et al., 2026) demonstrate how metaphysical concepts are rearticulated within postcolonial and religious contexts. These studies underscore that postmodern metaphysics cannot be confined to Western poststructuralist critique alone but must engage with plural traditions that reinterpret being, value, and transcendence in relation to modern social realities. Such literature contributes to an expanded understanding of metaphysics as culturally embedded and ethically consequential.

Despite the growing volume of scholarship, existing studies often remain fragmented, addressing postmodern metaphysical issues through isolated themes such as post-truth, violence, economics, or cultural identity. While these contributions are theoretically rich, they reveal a gap in integrative analyses that systematically examine how postmodernism reconfigures metaphysics as a whole. Recent works on escapism in the post-metaphysical era (Bakeeva, 2025) and human values in post-work societies (Hur, 2025) gesture toward the need for a comprehensive philosophical synthesis that connects ontology, social theory, and lived experience. The present study situates itself within this gap by offering a critical and holistic analysis of metaphysics in the postmodern era, drawing upon contemporary Scopus- and ABDC-indexed scholarship to reconceptualise metaphysics as a reflexive, socially situated, and philosophically indispensable mode of inquiry.

IMPORTANCE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The significance of this research lies in its endeavour to reconceptualise metaphysics within the intellectual contours shaped by postmodern philosophy and contemporary social scientific inquiry. Traditional metaphysical frameworks have historically underwritten foundational assumptions about being, reality, and truth; yet, the postmodern critique foregrounds contingency, linguistic mediation, and the socio-cultural constitution of knowledge, thereby challenging the validity of universal ontologies. Engaging critically with this philosophical shift enables a deeper understanding of how notions of existence, subjectivity, and meaning are reframed in an era marked by epistemic pluralism and discursive complexity. This study, therefore, contributes to ongoing scholarly debates by elucidating the ontological stakes of postmodern thought and its implications for interdisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences, where metaphysical presuppositions continue to shape theoretical perspectives and analytical frameworks.

In alignment with the foregoing importance, the primary objectives of the study are: (i) to critically evaluate classical metaphysical doctrines and trace the transformative effects of postmodern critique on ontological inquiry; (ii) to articulate the conceptual frameworks through which postmodern philosophy reconceives fundamental metaphysical categories such as being, truth, and identity; and (iii) to examine the implications of postmodern metaphysics for contemporary social scientific paradigms, particularly in relation to interpretive methodologies and theories of reality.

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METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The methodology of this study is grounded in a qualitative interpretive framework informed by postmodern and hermeneutic traditions in social science research. Drawing upon established methodologies in philosophical inquiry, this research deploys critical conceptual analysis, textual exegesis, and systematic literature synthesis to evaluate the evolution of metaphysical thought under postmodern critique, following established social scientific conventions where language, discourse, and context are central to understanding phenomena. Conceptual analysis enables the clarification of core categories such as being, truth, and reality, while textual exegesis rigorously engages primary philosophical texts, including postmodern key works and critical secondary literature.

POSTMODERN CRITIQUES OF METAPHYSICS

Postmodern critique begins from the suspicion that classical metaphysics—whether Aristotelian substance, Cartesian foundational certainty, or Kantian transcendental grounding—quietly depends on a promise of *finality*: that being can be stabilised in concepts, and truth can be secured by an ultimate framework. In late twentieth-century theory, this promise is read as a cultural and epistemic style of "legitimation" rather than a neutral discovery of reality. Lyotard's influential claim that the postmodern is "incredulity toward metanarratives" reframes metaphysics as a grand narrative practice that confers authority by narrating totality—History, Reason, Progress, Emancipation—as if these were universally binding forms of meaning. From this angle, metaphysical universals appear less as timeless truths and more as modernity's strategies for organising knowledge, disciplining uncertainty, and rendering the world administratively coherent.

Derrida radicalises this shift by diagnosing a deep grammar that runs through much of Western philosophy: the tendency to privilege *presence*—origin, identity, immediacy, self-evidence—as the guarantor of meaning. In deconstruction, the so-called "metaphysics of presence" names the habit of conceiving truth, reality, and being in terms of essence, identity, and origin, while neglecting how absence and difference are structurally constitutive. Metaphysics, on this reading, repeatedly seeks an anchoring "transcendental signified" (some final meaning that would halt interpretive drift), but such closure is undermined by the iterability of signs and the ongoing deferral of meaning. Lyotard and Derrida converge, therefore, not in a simple denial of reality, but in a critique of *metaphysical sovereignty*: the aspiration to guarantee being and truth from a standpoint allegedly outside history, language, and social power.

Foucault's archaeology and genealogy extend the critique by shifting attention from what metaphysical categories *mean* to how they *function* in regimes of knowledge. Genealogy, inspired by Nietzsche, does not narrate the emergence of concepts as rationally inevitable; instead, it shows how systems of thought arise through contingent historical turns and mundane struggles, not by unfolding a metaphysical destiny. This move matters for metaphysics because it treats the ontological as historically produced: the "real" that metaphysics describes is never merely given; it is shaped through practices of classification, institutional authority, and norms of truth. As a result, postmodern critique does not only dispute metaphysical propositions; it interrogates the social conditions that make some ontological claims appear natural, self-evident, or scientifically inevitable.

Deleuze offers a different, constructive challenge: rather than lamenting the collapse of foundations, he displaces representational metaphysics by advancing an ontology of difference, becoming, and immanence. In representational thinking, difference is often subordinated to identity (difference is treated as deviation from the Same). Deleuze's project, as described in major scholarship, targets that subordination and seeks to think difference as primary and productive rather than secondary and negative. Here, the critique of metaphysics becomes a critique of how philosophy has traditionally "recognised" reality: by forcing multiplicity into stable categories and reinterpreting becoming through the lens of identity. Deleuzian postmodernism thus challenges metaphysics at the level of method—what counts as a concept, what counts as a real, and what forms of life are enabled or constrained by the metaphysical image of thought.

RECONCEPTUALIZING METAPHYSICS IN THE POSTMODERN ERA

If postmodernism unsettles metaphysical certainty, it does not follow that metaphysics simply disappears. Instead, it is frequently reconceived as *postmetaphysical thinking*—a mode of philosophy that remains critical after the decline of strong foundations. Habermas's formulation is significant here: "postmetaphysical thinking" names philosophy conducted under conditions where traditional metaphysical claims are no longer credible in their older form, yet critique must persist without surrendering to mere scepticism. This reorientation treats metaphysics less as a doctrine of ultimate being and more as an ongoing reconstruction of the conditions of rationality, communication, normativity, and social integration—questions that classical metaphysics often tried to settle through totalising frameworks.

A parallel reconceptualisation appears in Vattimo's "weak thought" (pensiero debole), which aims to reconfigure the inheritance of metaphysics in accordance with postmodern conditions. The "weakening" here does not mean intellectual laziness; it means relinquishing the metaphysical ambition to command reality through rigid universals. Metaphysics becomes interpretive and ethical: a practice of humility that recognises plural histories of meaning and the violence that can accompany claims to final truth. In this sense, postmodern reconceptualisation can be read as a "softening" of ontology—less concerned with metaphysical conquest, more concerned with the situated production of meaning and the responsibilities that follow from ontological choices.

The digital and media-saturated context of late modernity further reshapes metaphysical questions by altering the very texture of the real. Baudrillard's account of simulation is often cited precisely because it frames a postmodern condition in which representation no longer mirrors a stable referent; instead, models generate a "hyperreal," a real "without origin

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or reality," where the map precedes the territory. In such an environment, metaphysical inquiry is forced to confront how reality is mediated, produced, and circulated. The metaphysical problem becomes less "What is being in itself?" and more "How do regimes of signs, technologies, and institutions produce what counts as real?" The consequence is not a denial of material life, but an insistence that reality is lived through infrastructures of meaning—media, platforms, expert discourses, bureaucratic classifications—whose metaphysical implications cannot be bracketed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCE THEORY

The implications for social science are substantial because social inquiry is never metaphysically innocent. Every sociological explanation and cultural analysis presupposes an ontology: what kinds of entities exist (individuals, structures, discourses, networks), what counts as causality, and what relation holds between observer and observed. Philosophy of social science, as standard accounts note, explicitly examines the philosophical assumptions that underpin social inquiry, including its ontological commitments. Postmodern critiques intensify this examination by challenging the idea that social reality is a stable object waiting to be discovered by neutral methods. Instead, they foreground that social realities are *constituted* through interpretation, classification, and power-laden practices of knowledge.

First, postmodernism pushes social theory toward reflexivity and methodological pluralism. If categories such as gender, class, nation, tradition, and even "the social" are partly constituted through discourse and institutional practices, then research must interrogate its own conceptual instruments. Foucault's genealogical sensibility is especially influential here: it invites the researcher to trace how "truths" become authoritative, how subjects are produced through norms, and how knowledge and power operate together. This does not eliminate empirical work; rather, it reframes empiricism as historically and conceptually mediated. The social scientist becomes responsible not only for data, but also for the ontological background that renders some data meaningful and some invisible.

Second, postmodern metaphysical shifts support relational and network ontologies in social research. Actor–network theory (ANT), for instance, has been influential for proposing that social and natural worlds are made of shifting networks of relations, treating human and non-human elements as participants in assemblages rather than assuming "society" as a pre-given explanatory force. Although ANT is not identical with postmodernism, it resonates with postmodern suspicion of deep, external foundations and emphasises the production of order through relational practices. As a consequence, explanation in social science can become more processual: the task is to show how realities are assembled, maintained, and contested, rather than assuming fixed essences beneath appearances.

Third, postmodern reconceptualisation complicates the status of truth and critique in public life. When social worlds are saturated with simulation and mediated sign systems, Baudrillard's challenge becomes a social-theoretical problem: how do we analyse power, ideology, and collective action when the boundary between representation and reality is unstable, and when models (metrics, rankings, media narratives) can shape what institutions treat as real? The implication is that contemporary social theory must include the study of symbolic infrastructures—media ecologies, algorithmic governance, audit cultures—because these shape lived reality and therefore shape the "objects" of social science.

Finally, postmodern critiques invite a renewed ethical and political awareness of metaphysical choices in theory. Strong metaphysics can underwrite exclusion by insisting on fixed identities and universal narratives; yet total relativism can weaken critique by dissolving standards for judgment. Habermas's postmetaphysical orientation is relevant because it cautions against both extremes: philosophy should remain critical while acknowledging the historical limits of metaphysical reason. In practical terms, this encourages social theory to justify its normative commitments—justice, equality, dignity—without pretending these are metaphysically guaranteed from outside history. The result is a more explicit, accountable relationship between ontology and ethics: our accounts of what exists in the social world (subjects, structures, networks, discourses) are inseparable from what we think ought to matter.

DISCUSSION

The discussion elaborates how postmodern critiques recalibrate our understanding of metaphysics by shifting emphasis from fixed ontological frameworks toward interpretive multiplicity and linguistic mediation. Classical metaphysics aimed at identifying universal structures of reality, but postmodern thought—exemplified by Lyotard's characterization of postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives"—problematises such attempts, asserting that grand theoretical systems conceal power-laden assumptions and marginalise plural knowledges. Postmodernism's insistence on plurality disrupts metaphysics' claim to fixed meanings, pointing instead to the multiplicity of worldviews embedded in language, culture, and social practices. This aligns with broader social science paradigms that treat social realities as constructed rather than discovered, emphasizing that epistemic commitments are shaped by discursive regimes and power relations. By interrogating metaphysical claims through the lens of postmodern critique, the study demonstrates that metaphysics in the contemporary era cannot be understood in isolation from cultural narratives, communicative practices, and institutional structures. Such a reconceptualised metaphysics resonates with interpretive and reflexive approaches in the social sciences that view knowledge as embedded in socio-historical contexts rather than objectively universal.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that postmodern critiques fundamentally transform metaphysical inquiry from a search for immutable truths to a critical, contextualised interrogation of how reality, identity, and meaning are constructed within language and social practices. The postmodern stance—marked by

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scepticism toward grand narratives, decentralisation of epistemic authority, and emphasis on discourse—reveals limitations in classical metaphysics but also enables a more reflexive and socially grounded engagement with ontological questions. By situating metaphysics within broader socio-cultural and historical matrices, this research demonstrates that metaphysical categories are never neutral; they operate within networks of power, communication, and interpretive traditions. Accordingly, metaphysics in the postmodern era becomes a discipline of translation—one that attends to how concepts acquire significance in specific contexts rather than asserting transcendent certainties. This conclusion has important implications for interdisciplinary research, inviting philosophers, social scientists, and cultural theorists to engage with metaphysical questions in ways that acknowledge epistemic plurality, narrative diversity, and contingency. Ultimately, postmodern metaphysics does not discard metaphysical inquiry; it reanimates it as a critical, historically sensitised practice that remains indispensable to understanding lived reality.

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