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## THE THIRD ENLIGHTENMENT AS AMERICAN: A REPLY TO KONDYLIS

### 1. Introduction

In his major work on the subject of the Enlightenment, *Die Aufklärung im Rahmen des neuzeitlichen Rationalismus*, Panajotis Kondylis (1981/2002) points out some of the sources of profound conflict that inherently arise as a result of the political liberalism that the Enlightenment inspired. In particular, Kondylis exhibits strong disapproval of the United States of America and its intellectual foundations. In *Modern Age*, Paul Gottfried explains that "Kondylis dislikes not only Americans for what he perceives as political hypocrisy but for their consumerist mentality. He has editorialized against the corrupting effect of American hedonism, which he thinks is now affecting Europe" (1997: 404-405). Against certain theorists, it may well be that Kondylis's critiques are warranted. In this essay, however, I will present the American Pragmatist philosophical tradition as a school of thought which seems to me to avoid each of the worries that Kondylis rightly raises about outdated ways of following the lessons of the Enlightenment. In this way, I will defend America as a place in which a new, rich philosophical tradition burgeoned and is flourishing today, one which Kondylis has not properly appreciated.

I will take cues from a number of scholars who have contributed to the American philosophical tradition. In particular, Hilary Putnam's (2005) *Ethics without Ontology* presents the case that the Pragmatists recognized the need for a revision of Enlightenment thinking and contributed what Putnam has called a third, *Pragmatic* enlightenment, still to be appreciated fully.<sup>1</sup> After explaining the flaws that Kondylis notes in American and Enlightenment thinking, I will present Putnam's contribution to scholarship on the Enlightenment and the Pragmatists' revolutionary ideas as a third enlightenment. Finally, I will conclude with rebuttals to some of the remaining criticisms that Kondylis has raised for America and its philosophical traditions. In true philosophical spirit, then, I hope to honor Kondylis and his work with criticism, what a former professor of mine called the philosopher's fondest form of flattery.

### 2. Kondylis's Critiques of Enlightenment and America

In some ways, Kondylis's work shares and rejects elements of Enlightenment values. On the one hand, he rejects the idea that any inquiry can be value free or avoid polemics. On the other, he claims to offer non-polemical, scientific analyses that avoid the problems he seems

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will use the upper case "Enlightenment" to refer only to what is commonly known as *the* enlightenment. Following Putnam, I see a first enlightenment in Plato's contributions to Western thought. It is in this context that Pragmatism, according to Putnam, represents the third enlightenment.

to have called unavoidable elsewhere. What he clearly rejects of Enlightenment thought is the universalist tendencies that it inspired, both in inquiry and in morality. In the former, he claims that universalism and pluralisms cannot help but fail. In ethics, he explains his reasonable worries that claims of universal human rights are often developed in problematic ways and are used politically at times for simple expediency, and thus falsely.

In his article, "On the Possibility of Global Thinking in an Age of Particularism," David J. Krieger points to some key passages in Kondylis's work on Enlightenment that get at central criticisms of the tradition. Krieger translates two relevant passages of Kondylis (1981) as follows:

The rationalistic plea to let an issue be decided in common from all sides through experiment and observation is neither impartial nor unselfish: it presupposes that the opponent *a limine* must accept the worldview within which experiment and observation are meaningful; but this would necessitate that he gives up not only his own rationalism, but also his entire worldview even before he could begin to fight for them. (54)

Later, Kondylis writes, still according to Krieger's translation:

The search for truth takes place within the bounds of a struggle against an opponent, and since the opponent stands in the way of 'truth', the search for truth necessarily becomes polemical. And for this very reason it must present itself in the form of a systematic theoretical alternative, which goes far beyond the limits of indubitable and certain knowledge. If it did not do this, then it could not make use of that most precious of all weapons, universality. (111-113).

In support of Kondylis's critique, he shows the worry that indeed developed for scholars like John Rawls. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls had to contend with the agents who do not accept his views on the proper limits of the "ideal of public reason" (Rawls, 1996: 216). In short, a liberal society built on principles of toleration must have limits to what it will tolerate. In this fact, Kondylis sees a great difficulty for societies grounded on Enlightenment principles.

To support his contentions about the challenges for liberal societies, he presents the second passage translated hereabove from Krieger's essay. Where do the problems of Enlightenment thinking come from in liberal societies? They are grounded, according to Kondylis in the fact of inherent polemics, the basic power struggles that are inevitable in any theoretical framework. Krieger (1990) explains this second passage, writing, "The search for knowledge seems unavoidably bound up with the exclusivist and apologetic pragmatics of a struggle for social and political power" (226).

Given Kondylis's diagnosis of the inherency of power struggles and polemics in any theoretical analysis and critique, one would expect him to see the same traits in his own work. Gottfried (1997) shows, however, that

Kondylis claims to be pursuing value-free science and stresses the distinction by nineteenth-century social thinkers between descriptive statements and concepts formed out of observation and value-assertions. He insists that his scholarship does not contain expressions of normative morality and is openly contemptuous

of political advocacy disguised as analytic thought. Yet the nonscientific aspect of his own judgments keeps intruding, seen in the obvious moral passion shown by Kondylis in scolding political utopians. (409)

Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas (1992) used the term “performative contradiction” (80) to describe the kind of trouble we see here in Kondylis’s critique of Enlightenment thinking and its descendants, which if meant sincerely should inspire him to avoid the same mistakes. Whether or not Kondylis commits the same difficulty he sees in others, he nevertheless presents an important development in Enlightenment thinking, which Axel Honneth (1987) describes in his essay, “Enlightenment and Rationality”.

In that essay, Honneth builds on Kondylis’s scholarship to explain the fact that the Enlightenment held in germ elements of its own undoing. Citing Kondylis’s great work on the Enlightenment, Honneth writes,

Indeed, a theoretical process already set in motion during the age of Enlightenment undermined the opposition of sensuousness and reason by inquiring into the rational content of human feelings and the affective roots of rational achievements. From this starting point, the attempt to desubliminate the concept of reason or rationality was then continued by the “Left Hegelians,” pragmatism, phenomenology, and philosophical anthropology in such a fashion that gradually rational achievements were being shifted and implanted at an ever deeper level in human life. (695)

Honneth next explains his view, supported with Kondylis’s work, that

Reason, as a mental ability, is thus no longer accorded superiority over the process of human life; but, in contrast, as a moment of reflection, it is now so embedded in the course of human life that it serves to solve conflicts or problems that arise therein.... It is easy to show that, once it has come to predominate one’s dealings with other people or with one’s own wishes and needs, such a capacity for purposive-rational knowledge becomes a medium of instrumental domination. (695-696)

In these two passages, it is easy to place the sort of criticism that scholars like Kondylis raise for pragmatists. The challenge is essentially that the trouble with Enlightenment thinking and its descendants is the inevitable spiral into instrumental uses of reason, which become groundless, according to the criticism. Their historicism and relativism come to clash with the universalism of Enlightenment thinking, revealing little or no basis for the prioritizing of reason over other elements of life. As such, reason comes to undo its own importance. Similarly, problems for ethics arise and calls for universalism, such as in the language of human rights, come to be used only when politically expedient, and thus hypocritically.

For Kondylis, the language of human rights represent a pernicious consequence of the universalist tendencies of mass democracy, which masks its efforts of conquest with moralizing ideology. According to a translation in Paul Gottfried’s (1997) essay, Kondylis (1996) argues that “human rights are a political tool within a planetary context whose density requires the use of universalist ideologies: within this framework, however, great nations continue to determine the binding interpretation of those same constructs” (Gottfried, 1997:

403 and Kondylis, 1996: 4). Gottfried explains further Kondylis's debt to Marxist thought. Gottfried (1997) writes that

Like Marx, [Kondylis] considers "ideology" to be "false," a shared body of social and cultural attitudes which distorts historical reality, willfully or unwittingly. Kondylis mocks ethicists for packaging as "human rights" the interests of empires or the political ambitions of particular intellectuals. For Kondylis, such ethicizing conceals a will to power or the force of an expanding consumer economy. (404)

In this passage, we see Kondylis's reasonable worry that the language of human rights can be used to justify a powerful government's military action. It seems, however, that what troubles Kondylis in this is not the fact of domination and power, but the veiling of it in moral justification. The trouble I see here, however, is that either Kondylis thinks that oppression is a bad thing, perhaps because non-democratic societies ought to be protected, which sounds like an Enlightenment-inspired cosmopolitanism, or the issue is primarily one of dishonest moralizing for the purpose of acquiring strength, while not recognizing or acknowledging true purposes. One might reasonably ask Kondylis why honesty about a nation's will to power is important. Is it immoral to hide one's will to power? By what moral standard is such dishonesty wrong? However Kondylis answers, it seems to me, he is either caught in the problem of making no moral claim, thus undercutting the force of his mockery, or he must join the game of making prescriptions, coming to the table of dialogue, which will then demand of him respect for the force of intelligent inquiry. In the next section of this paper, I will show how a third enlightenment, the *Pragmatic* enlightenment inspired in America, has overcome many of the worries that Kondylis raises. It avoids the difficulty of over-reaching in the Enlightenment's quest for certainty. It predicted the collapse of the postmodern radical relativism that saw reason as *only* one element of human life among others. It also softened the rationalists' hard lines of universalism, noting the infinite variety of human natures. Finally, the Pragmatic enlightenment offers a fallibilist understanding of knowledge which calls for wide participation in contributing to the instrumental developments of reason toward richer and richer goals of human flourishing. In sum, the Pragmatists offer a virtuous circle of the creation of meaning, enriched through the continual process of intelligent inquiry. As Pragmatist Larry Hickman (2007) has paraphrased an important insight from Richard Rorty, "... when certain of the postmodernists reach the end of the road they are traveling they will find [John] Dewey there waiting for them" (13). In this way, Hickman opens his book, *Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism*, signaling as Putnam did also the way out of the flaws in both the Enlightenment tradition and the postmodernism which followed it.

### 3. Pragmatic Enlightenment at the End of the Road

In his short book, *Ethics without Ontology*, Hilary Putnam (2005) presents his understanding of the history of thought, in which he counts three enlightenments. The first, he explains,

occurred in Athens, especially symbolized in Plato's *Euthyphro*. In that text and elsewhere, Socrates challenges the common practice of accepting the authority of others simply on the grounds of their claims of authority. He shows that a person either accepts authority arbitrarily or accepts it for a reason. In dividing authorities from the reasons for which they are accorded authority, Plato freed the intellectual tradition to explore the world and moral reasoning for themselves. In this way, Socrates and Plato opened the door for individuals to see themselves as agents in the process of seeking knowledge and meaning in life.

Although the Greek enlightenment opened inquiry to free questioning in many ways, Putnam explains that it was *the* Enlightenment, nearly two millennia later, which truly reinforced the freedom of people to question their governments. He explains that the idea of the consent of the governed came to be treated as a crucial requirement of legitimate government with the writings of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, who built the social contract tradition and the tradition of natural rights (92-93). Putnam explains

But apart from the details, and apart even from the question as to how social contract theory is to be understood, we can say that the lasting effect of the social contract conception—one that we tend to take for granted—is the widespread acceptance of the idea that governments derive their legitimacy from the consent of the governed: while the lasting effect of the Enlightenment's talk of natural rights is the prevalence of the idea that every human being should have the opportunity to develop certain capabilities. (93)

Here we see an important passage to note in response to Kondylis. In particular we have here a response to Kondylis' worry about powerful countries like the United States, which clash and war with nondemocratic states. What could Kondylis see as the problem with domination? He must share an Enlightenment concern for opportunity of ways of living different from the democratic point of view—opportunity to develop capabilities in conflict with the United States' values.

While Putnam points out two elements of the Enlightenment period, namely the social contract tradition and the development of the new, modern science, it is the former he sees as bearing the greatest difference from Greek enlightenment. This is because in Plato's time, government was legitimate when it was established to follow the rule of a meritocratic class, the one best disposed to set rules which come closest to the Good (96). The central hindrance for the early sciences was the fact that it was still a priestly class of people who were charged and privileged with the task of pursuing truth and justice. Given the class interests preserved in Plato's enlightenment, which Kondylis certainly could appreciate, the explosion of the sciences in and after the Enlightenment had everything to do with the correlate of the development of the new sciences in the modern period: namely the social contract tradition's emphasis on the consent of the governed. A consequence of the latter is the fact that it became no longer a requirement of engaging in sciences and government that one be already a member of the privileged class, a development which echoed the Protestant Reformation.

Among the flaws that Kondylis notes in Enlightenment thinking is the universalism inherent in the language of human rights, itself founded on natural rights theory or some variant, such as Kantian moral philosophy. Putnam explains that for the Pragmatists, such as John Dewey, "The Kantian dualism of 'reason' and 'inclination' is rejected from the beginning" (103). Putnam explains further that Dewey rejected also the basic social contract tradition's idea of society as a development of isolated individuals who need to learn and accept that each other citizen has interests. Rather, persons are organic entities, raised in communities in which care for one another is a necessity for the young to survive. Putnam explains that

For Dewey, the problem is not to justify the existence of communities, or to show that people ought to make the interests of others their own; the problem is to justify the claim that morally decent communities should be *democratically organized*. . . . That our communities should be democratically organized follows, for Dewey, from the fact that only in a democracy does everyone have a chance to make his or her contribution to the discussion; and that they should be *social democracies* follows from the fact that the huge inequalities in wealth and power that we permit to exist effectively block the interests and complaints of the most oppressed from serious consideration, and thus prevent any serious attempt at the solution of such problems as the alleviation of stubborn poverty, or deeply entrenched unemployment, or the inferior educational opportunities afforded to the children most in need of education, from ever getting off the ground. (104-105)

In effect, the challenge for Kondylis is to explain why it is people should be concerned about fairness to nondemocratic societies if not for the fact that people should be allowed the opportunity, as best can be afforded, to live their lives as they choose. If we permit such a norm, then, Kondylis must admit one of the very developments of the Enlightenment that he appears to reject.

Though the Pragmatists avoid some of the difficulties of the postmodern tradition, it is wrong to consider them wholly in agreement with Enlightenment beliefs. The first difference between the two traditions inspires a criticism of Kondylis. It involves the dichotomy between fact and value which some strains of the Enlightenment tradition held as crucial, especially evident in the rationalist Kantian moral tradition, which has inspired many of the contemporary human rights theorists, like Thomas Pogge. As Putnam (2004) has argued in *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*, one of the crucial lessons that the Pragmatists hit home was the fact that all experience involves an evaluative component. This is involved at least at first in what Charles Peirce called Firstness, experience at a brute, qualitative level. On a higher level, William James (1879) called our attention to the feelings we experience when we note the value of good reasoning versus flaws in argumentation in his essay, "The Sentiment of Rationality." Our sentiments of rationality are not to be treated as perfect intuitions that grasp reality perfectly, but rather as our unavoidable instant guides for how we react to reasoning. These sentiments can be trained, furthermore, to avoid the typical

flaws of reasoning that we uncover. In this sense, when Gottfried (1997) shows Kondylis to be aspiring to a value-free science, expressing no normative claims, only the cool rational descriptions of an impartial observer (407), we can anticipate the Pragmatists' response that his goal itself is misguided.

Two further elements of Kondylis's critiques of America and post-Enlightenment traditions demand evaluation. The first is the matter of human rights and the related universality that Kondylis attributes to that tradition. The second is the very idea of reason as instrumental and the relation of this development to the growth of radically relativizing postmodernism.

To the first concern, it is important to note the fact that human rights as a tradition can clearly be taken up in a variety of ways. The fact that some might make use of ideas as mechanisms to conceal ulterior motives is something to watch for, to be sure. Journalists like Barbara Slavin (2004) accuse President George W. Bush of hindering the fight for human rights just as he used human rights and democratic language as justifications for war, the kind of problem that Kondylis foresaw. Doubtless we must watch against the misuse of human rights appeals to sanction war. Any injustice this causes is precisely the fact we can appeal to in showing Kondylis to be engaged in democratic dialogue and inquiry that he seems elsewhere to oppose, however. The issue, furthermore, of universality in human rights, which Kondylis opposes need not be as rationalistic as he suggests. Take for instance the language that President Bill Clinton (2001) used in his speech at Georgetown University, where he presented the motivations for human rights language in a noble, yet pragmatic fashion:

This battle fundamentally is about what you think of the nature of truth, the value of life, and the content of community. You're at a university which basically believes that no one ever has the whole truth, ever, because you're human. It's part of being a human being. It's part of the limitation imposed on us by God. We are incapable of ever having the whole truth. They believe they got it. Because we don't believe you can have the whole truth, we think everybody counts and life is a journey. Hopefully we get wiser as we make this journey, and we learn from each other, and we think everybody ought to be entitled to make the journey.

Although Clinton's explanation for human rights appeals is religious at base, it can be made in a secular framework, so long as we recognize the fallibility of human knowledge. Here Clinton points out what Dewey noted earlier, that the value and priority of democracy in social inquiry comes from the fact that communities of free inquirers are far more able to see the myriad points of view necessary for advancing knowledge. Only when we respect persons as sources of insight and as members in communities of inquiry will the ideal of progress be optimal. Nondemocratic societies, therefore, lack precisely what is crucial for a society to develop intelligently. A society that wishes to develop not following the path of intelligence may do so at its peril, for Dewey, but the idea of preferring such a state of affairs, as Kondylis seems to suggest, can only be understood through an explanation of the values of unintelligent social

arrangements. If there is such a value, the explication of it would fall prey to the demands of intelligent inquiry. In other words, either it would involve limited value as only perceived from one or a few privileged points of view or it would be demonstrated from many points of view, possible only under the guise of the democratic respect for difference and mass input.

Finally, it is important to note the ways in which scholars like John Dewey would avoid some of the problems that Kondylis sees in both the Enlightenment and postmodern traditions. Putnam rightly explains that

Dewey does not, in fact, like the term "reason" very much (certainly not the term "Reason" with a capital "R"), preferring to speak of the application of *intelligence* to problems, and the change in terminology is symptomatic of a deep criticism of traditional philosophy. "Reason," in the traditional sense, was, above all, a faculty by means of which human beings were supposed to be able to arrive at one or another set of immutable truths.... Pragmatism in general (and not only Deweyan pragmatism) is characterized by being simultaneously *fallibilist* and *anti-skeptical*... [and Dewey in particular insisted] that the most ordinary of individuals has at least one field of unique expertise—if only the knowledge of where his or her "shoe pinches" (97, 99, 104).

We see here several characteristics in the Pragmatic enlightenment which clash with *the* Enlightenment and also with postmodernism. The Enlightenment thinkers too often were not fallibilists, and thus encountered trouble in their quest for certainty. The postmoderns, by contrast, were fallibilists in a sense, but went too far in their skepticism. Pragmatism in this sense avoids the need for certainty resting on immutable foundations, while nonetheless proceeding with flexible, working foundations of a sort. Prior to publishing *Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism*, Larry Hickman (2001) explained the kind of foundations at work in Pragmatism, using the term "platforms" in his book, *Philosophical Tools for Technological Culture: Putting Pragmatism to Work*. As a metaphor, when we think of "platforms" epistemologically for Pragmatists, we can think of those constructions set up at sea for a variety of purposes. They are things on which we can stand and build, yet are movable as needed.

The important thing to notice about the Deweyan move to focus on intelligence as purposeful social inquiry into common problems is the background of evolutionary theory in the inspiration for seeing intelligence as instrumental. As Honneth (1987) notes, reason does become instrumental in a number of the traditions which follow the Enlightenment. The difference in the Pragmatic tradition, however, is that the evolutionary power that intelligence offers is not only derivatively valuable. It is not a process turned into a tool alone. If only a tool, then reason, or intelligence, would be simply instruments of power for the simple purpose of exercising strength in domination. For the Pragmatists, by contrast, intelligence is not used merely as a means. It is not simply the process through which ends are sought. Instead, intelligence for the Pragmatists is a process through which ends themselves are revised or created. The goal of certainty we see in Enlightenment thinkers is abandoned for the

Pragmatists, but the process of intelligence is constantly refined and in need of adaptation to new problems and situations.

The democratic character of democratic societies, furthermore, is not closed to challenge, both from within and from without. This fact offers an important rebuttal to Kondylis (1981), who criticizes democratic societies, as cited above, for presupposing "that the opponent *a limine* must accept the worldview within which experiment and observation are meaningful" (54). This is in fact not the case. The challenges to democratic intelligence, which fit the Kondylis-style label of nondemocratic, are not entirely unwelcome in democratic societies.

On this point, Dewey's (1921) own words offer the most powerful pronouncement I know:

Yet it may be that the best thing which can happen to the ideal of democracy is to be put on the defensive. For then it will no longer remain a vague optimism, a weak benevolent aspiration, at the mercy of favorable circumstances. It may become a compact, aggressive and realistic intelligence directing circumstance. Such an idea will recognize that its one great enemy is the hankering of men for unity of existence, aim and law in whatever form it may offer itself. It will recognize the infinite variety of human nature, and the infinite plurality of purposes for which men associate themselves together. It will recognize that progress is never in one line, but comes when a variety of things move along together. It will take its stand on the conviction that this movement comes about by many-sided interaction in which lee-way is given each force and principle for an experimental development. It will distrust every emancipation of the masses from above whether coming from a benevolent capitalism or a proletariat dictatorship. (MW, 13: 316)

Even the undemocratic persons in a democratic society play a role in advancing the good of democratic progress, whether they like it or not. In this sense, then, the person who is not democratic is accorded democratic respect, but is limited just as much as is the democratic citizen. After all, why should the undemocratic citizen be prioritized over the democratic one? To answer the question is to engage in precisely the kind of democratic, intelligent inquiry that the Pragmatic enlightenment would applaud.

### 3. Conclusion

In sum, Kondylis notes some serious worries about democratic societies in which leaders manipulate the public under the guise of universalist moralizing. Pragmatists worry about this also. This does not mean that there is no potential for the future of human rights, however, taken not as an obvious, universal value. Rather, following a distinction that Dewey frequently made, human rights may not be universal, but it is their quality as universalizable that inspires people to reach further in extending maximal respect for persons that is consistent with similar respect for others. I advance elsewhere just such a theory as a way in which a Pragmatist might advance values of universalizable human rights (Weber, 2006). At the same time, what I advocate here is not some rapid, militaristic initiative in which rights are forced on people.

That would be inconsistent with the very idea of respecting persons, societies, and difference. Some changes can only occur under the right circumstances to allow democracy to flourish.

Two further points are worth noting. First, at the close of Honneth's (1987) article, the author makes a move, much like the one Hickman and Rorty describe, where postmodern thinkers come round the bend to find Dewey there, waiting. Honneth writes, "Thus, in the final instance, enlightenment will only be able to assert itself if it is able to demonstrate empirically that it itself has, in fact, already become an integral element of social praxis" (699). Such a value is right in line with Dewey's call for practical, applied intelligence aimed at alleviating the problems of human beings. What scholars like Kondylis so frequently ignore is the fact that their contributions in critique of mass democratic societies are precisely the insights which allow democracies to adjust their practices and to improve conditions. Criticism of intelligent social inquiry, in other words, is a crucial component in its own refinement. Thus, whether he intends it or not, Kondylis does a great service in assessing the troubles of American democracy.

Finally, I should note that when I have in this essay spoken of the Pragmatic enlightenment, the third enlightenment according to Putnam, it is one still in development. When Putnam turns to "talk about a *third* 'enlightenment'," he admits that it is "one that hasn't happened yet, or that hasn't at any rate fully happened, but one that [he hopes] *will* happen..." He insists that it is an enlightenment "worth struggling for" (96). The reason the Pragmatist enlightenment is worth fighting for is simple. We are presented a choice today between on the one hand societies driven under false pretenses of certainty and universalism in moral theory which can run amok and on the other hand a radically relativistic postmodern world in which no inquiry is prioritized over any other, where whatever a society wants to do is not more or less justified than any other course of action. In short, we can choose between blindness of the limits of our intelligence, or arrogance, and blindness of the moral differences there are between choices in life and society. The Pragmatic enlightenment reveals a third path in the middle, which avoids both extremes. We are fallible, yes, but we are also capable of charting courses of action and of social intelligence far superior morally to other choices. There is no guarantee of success in the latter, furthermore. This is why the processes of intelligent inquiry, seen from multiple points of view so prevalent in democratic societies, are so vital to human progress.

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