

The accusations in Professor Thomas L. Pangle's letter appear personal. It is up to the readers of our journal to decide whether his criticism is valid. It is evident from Richard Rorty's and Tom Darby's replies and those of several Slovak respondents that Professor Pangle's critique is not a matter of a "deep misunderstanding" or a dissimilar understanding of democracy in Central Europe and the West. What is at stake is the way in which democracy is being defended at the end of the 20th century anywhere. For this reason, we would welcome your reactions to Professor Pangle's letter, our responses or on this topical issue in general.

Editor-in-Chief

Dear Mr. Abrahám,

Thank you for your invitation to respond to your question concerning "intellectuals and society" for your journal. Unfortunately, after perusing the excerpts from the journal that you sent me, I must decline, because I am in deep moral disagreement with the intentions of your journal.

Your journal has as its motto a famous, or infamous statement, by Joseph Schumpeter that endorses relativism and condemns all anti-relativists or believers in the Truth (like myself) as "barbarians". How do you think that I would ever participate in a journal so animated? As "barbarian" exhibit number one? You say you "follow my work well" in that case, how could you have missed my attack on the passage from Schumpeter and Rorty that you have taken as the motto of your magazine (see The Ennobling of Democracy, pp. 57-58)?

In explaining and elaborating your editorial agreement with Schumpeter and Rorty and their aggressive and intolerant, not to say fascistic, form of relativism, you yourself say that "while defending liberal democracy one has to stand up against those who are convinced that they possess the 'truth' and present themselves as having found 'the right path'". In other words, you stand against the American Founding Fathers, and the Declaration of Independence, with its ringing proclamation of the "self-evident TRUTHS" rooted in the "laws of nature and of nature's God." You stand against the entire secular Western tradition of natural right, as well as against all serious religious traditions. Let me assure you that I take my stand exactly against you and what you stand for: I stand with Jefferson, with the truth of nature, and against relativism, which I regard as the single most dangerous and destructive moral current of our time.

Your relativism is unwittingly very close to that elaborated by Benito Mussolini, in his famous statement on relativism as the foundation of fascism (see K&K 2/96). I think you should think again about the motto and the intention of your journal, and in particular ask yourself if you may not be contributing unwittingly to the return of that fascistic relativism which is in some measure responsible for so many of the horrors Eastern Europe has suffered in this century. It was the irresponsibility of liberal relativists, and of relativistic journals like the one you are launching, that I believe helped contribute to the favorable reception of fascism on the part of "advanced intellectuals" in your part of the world.

My suspicions regarding your irresponsibility are aroused by the fact that your discussion of Socrates and what you call "the Socratic ideal", in the presentation of the question you asked me to comment on, is a complete misrepresentation of what Socrates did, said, and stood for. There is no textual basis for most of the positions you attribute to Socrates: he never used any word which could even be translated as "intellectual", never made the gross error of confusing philosophers with intellectuals, and never endorsed the ethic of "autonomy" which you attribute to him. Socrates nowhere ever "questioned the legitimacy of the gods of Athens." The truth is exactly the contrary of what you say: Socrates repeatedly and emphatically endorsed the legitimacy of the gods of Athens, and nowhere more clearly than in Plato's Apology of Socrates. And Socrates would never agree with your nihilistically and cynically individualistic assertion that a "brilliant mind" which in public "loyally and uncritically serves the established order, however benevolent that order may be", is somehow deficient.

You say you audited a course of mine; I find it hard to believe that you paid much attention to what I said about Socrates or any other of the great political philosophers.

Thomas L. Pangle, Professor

Dear Professor Pangle,

I was surprised by the content but especially the tone of your letter. I could not understand why your reaction was so animated and why I am, in your view, "contributing unwittingly to the return of that fascist relativism which is in some measure responsible for so many of the horrors Eastern Europe has suffered in this century", when neither I nor the Journal propagates relativism. My first impression was that the names of Schumpeter, Rorty and Berlin were like a red flag to you which distracted you from the rest of the question and from the description of the philosophical intentions of *Kritika & Kontext*, as set out in my introductory essay. Having read parts of your book and given more thought to your letter, I am aware of our fundamental philosophical differences that stem from our different background and thus different outlook. Yet, I am writing to you mainly because I believe that our appreciation of liberal democracy is similar; what divides us is not its foundations but the source of its legitimacy and the means for its protection. Let my response to your letter thus serve as an effort to explore and explain the source of misunderstanding rather than offer a point-by-point rebuttal to your charges.

In fact, I too stand against post-modern relativism and for liberal democracy. Like you, I oppose relativism because, just as often as not, relativism is used by demagogues, populists and neo-fascists to justify their "cause" by relativizing other views, especially those of liberal democracy. The danger of relativism is, of course, that any hack can claim that his views are as valid as anyone else's views and to him there is no reason why liberal democracy is any more legitimate a regime than is a Communist or a fascist one. That relativism is often the source of stale academic polemics is bad enough. The far greater danger is that relativism can be so readily misused to legitimize the views and policies of enemies of an open society. Thus far, I am sure we agree; although your letter would suggest the contrary; quite the contrary.

In my original question, I posed the problem as follows: "how is one to defend one's own convictions, in today's postmodern, relativist world, on the one hand, and in the midst of increasingly fundamentalist, fanatical, indeed barbarian eruptions, on the other... Especially while defending liberal democracy one has to stand up against those who are convinced that they possess the "truth" and present themselves as having found "the right path" and are able to by-pass the painful aspects of democracy."

Although writing from Central Europe, I see the task of defending liberal democracy as a universal predicament. If in the West democracy is challenged by various forms of political correctness, in post-Communist countries it is undermined by more traditional anti-democratic forms like populism and nationalism. I find both of these adversaries to be forms of fanaticism which cannot stand, cannot argue with those who question the sources of their certainty and legitimacy.

You know better than I do that the liberal tradition of Enlightenment, based on reason which we inherited from the Ancient Greeks, is vulnerable notably from outside but also from inside. From outside it is attacked by those who have no scruples, and who – in their quest for power and control – are ready to destroy the open society. I believe we would both agree that to "stand unflinchingly" against outside enemies is the only sound position. Any attempt to reason with them cannot but threaten democracy because those who have no scruples will take anything short of a solid stand by democrats as a sign of the latter's weakness. (We in Central Europe were given this lesson in 1938, 1948, and 1968, and are reminded of it now as well.)

Still, from the inside, liberal doctrine is vulnerable to those who by virtue of their rights as democratic citizens, are free to question its legitimacy. Secondly, liberal doctrine is also vulnerable because it is not based on "self evident Truths" rooted in the "laws of nature and of nature's God", as you claim in your letter, but is in fact wrought with inner tensions. Only as a state doctrine can liberal democracy be based on such claims, and that, I find, is a legitimate mode of defence – defence against outside enemies. But the same state doctrine cannot be used to silence or attack those of its supporters who are yet aware of the inner weaknesses of liberal democracy.

In this respect, I am convinced of the soundness of Schumpeter's statement that "to realize the relative validity of one's conviction and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian." It allows me to stand behind liberal democracy without being fanatical about it. As a Central European who lived through the absurdities and awfulness of Communism, this is for me a central concern. And, Professor Pangle, it is not a matter of "choice" that I defend liberal democracy, it is a matter of lived experience. I stand "unflinchingly" for liberal democracy not only because it is the "best regime" which allows me to debate its merits – as I do now – but also because it provides the means and the space to expose absurdity and to call the bigots, populists, nationalists and fascists by their true name. No less valuable, it also allows me to live my life in peace and share my experience with other free-spirited, rational people. If I were a believer, I would thank God for these blessings. Yet, even then, I would consider as blasphemous the claim that the regime I so cherish is based on "self evident TRUTHS". If I did, the spectre of fanaticism would haunt me and would paralyse my thinking.

Now, what your letter seems to suggest is that in order to fight the outside enemy you not only deny the inner tensions of liberal democracy, but dismiss wholesale those who cherish and support liberal democracy even despite their awareness that the foundations on which democracy is based are not absolute. As I stated, I consider your position acceptable strictly as a state doctrine and a legitimate defence against outside enemies of the open society. However, I regard your position as neither true to the Socratic tradition of unrelenting questioning nor as fair to those Enlightened thinkers upon whom Jefferson and the American Founding Fathers, whom you refer to, based their "Declaration of Independence".

This brings me to the alleged "irresponsibility" of my "discussion of Socrates". First, a minor point: I accept your charge that Socrates in fact never "used any word which could even be translated as intellectual" and I will return to this issue. Yet, in the same sentence you state that Socrates "never made the gross error of confusing philosopher with intellectual". But if, as you say, 'intellectual' was not a term that Socrates used, then it is unclear how – or even whether – he could have confused them.

When Socrates defended himself before the Court of Athens, he defined "human wisdom" as wisdom in a "limited sense" (19d-21a, the Penguin edition, H. Tredennick's translation). Socrates claims further, "that real wisdom is the property of God" and that "human wisdom has little or no value." He continued that "the wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless." (21e) We may search for truth but can never be certain whether or when we possess it. As I wrote in the Slovak introduction to the first issue of *Kritika & Kontext* (which was however, not translated into English): "Through the tunnel of reason, common sense and logic, we are able to detect irrationality and hoax and identify stupidity. Thus, through these faculties we can gradually discover what is not truth, but these same faculties will never enable us to reveal what truth "is"!... [Reason cannot comprehend] what is eternity and infinity, the two basic premises from which we derive our ignorance: past and future." To me this idea represents our inheritance from the Ancients. It is a blessing but also a curse of reason: the scope of knowledge is infinite but not ultimate; questioning others must coexist with a doubt of our own wisdom. Socrates questioned the arguments of those who claimed that they possessed wisdom and knew the truth. While exposing their ignorance, however, he never claimed that he possessed such things.

I do not think, Professor Pangle, that we would disagree very much on this account of Socrates, although your reading would, no doubt, be far more refined. Yet, you reprimand me for misreading Plato, for calling Socrates an intellectual, and for attributing to him an ethic of "autonomy". True, "intellectual" is a modern term but I have no problem in calling Socrates one. Is he not the founder of our Western intellectual tradition? Did he not stand for what he believed was right rather than that which would benefit him? Perhaps you might argue that modern intellectuals seldom act this way and, more often, serve the regime in which they find themselves. Perhaps. But by my understanding, such people are not intellectuals at all but mere sycophants.

This leads me to the strongest of your objections to my discussion of Socrates, and particularly to my statement that "a brilliant mind which loyally and uncritically serves the established order, however benevolent that order may be, is not an intellectual at all." (Or your version: "'a brilliant mind' which in public 'loyally and uncritically serves the established order, however "benevolent that order may be"; ' is

somehow deficient.") Brilliant minds often do serve the public order, be that order tyranny, democracy or something else. Sometimes this is done for the betterment of society, sometimes for the worse. What is certain, however, is that even in the best case (i.e. democracy) such intellectuals risk losing both their critical stance and personal distance, while in the worst case (i.e. tyranny of any type), they often face the stark choice of collaboration or persecution. I refer again to Socrates to the passage where he explains why he chose not to enter politics (31d):

*It began in my early childhood – a sort of voice which comes to me; and when it comes it always dissuades me from what I am proposing to do, and never urges me on. It is this that debar me from entering public life, and a very good thing too, in my opinion; because you may be quite sure, gentlemen, that if I had tried long ago to engage in politics, I should long ago have lost my life, without doing any good either to you or to myself.... The true champion of justice, if he intends to survive even for a short time, must necessarily confine himself to private life and leave politics alone.*

Many East and Central European intellectuals who entered politics might now confirm Socrates' statement. Some of those who eagerly devoted themselves to building Communism in the 1950s could not, in fact, confirm it, since they were long ago executed. Still others have proven unable to recover fully the intellectual's capacity of independent thought and critical distance, as they remain both tainted and traumatized by their earlier collaboration with a tyrannical power. Intellectuals who entered politics in Czechoslovakia after 1989, failed as politicians and were gradually marginalized, leaving space to those who were better fit for politics or those who had no scruples. Unlike the others, by and large, they did regain their critical stance. But they too have been traumatized by their brush with power. A great number of them since have expended considerable intellectual efforts in reflecting on their failure in politics. (I refrain from commenting on Václav Havel as long as he remains in politics.)

As regards my linkage of Socrates with the term "autonomy", perhaps I am guilty of applying an excessively modern concept. On the other hand, though, wouldn't you call "autonomous" a person who declares, as did Socrates in Apology (27b-28c): "...perhaps someone will say: 'do you feel no compunction, Socrates, at having followed the line of action which puts you in danger of the death penalty?' I might fairly reply to him 'You are mistaken, my friend, if you think that a man who is worth anything ought to spend his time weighing up the prospects of life and death.'

Now let me explain why I "missed" the attack on Rorty and Schumpeter in your book, The Ennobling of Democracy, despite the fact that I bought your book last year and was looking forward to reading it. Especially, when I noticed in the contents that in Part II. you deal with East European thinkers. After reading that section, I closed the book although I knew that other parts of your book reflect your erudition in political philosophy. I have now read the part you pointed out to me in your letter and I find your attack on Rorty, Berlin and Schumpeter neither sound nor fair but that is not really the issue here. I was most disappointed with your notion of the role played by East European intellectuals in the passages from your book I cite below. At most, I surmised that when you wrote the book – which, I gather, was before 1992 – you had great hopes – shared with many of your colleagues in the West – that intellectuals from East-central Europe might possess the capacity to restore to the "West" that vital something which had been lost. What I do not understand is how you could put so much hope into something of which you have such little familiarity. How could you, as a respected scholar of political philosophy, and one whose writings clearly show careful and diligent research, come to such hasty and superficial conclusions about East and Central Europe? A cursory readings of Milosz, Havel, Michnik and Kundera, important surely as they are, is simply not sufficient. Their work might represent the sublimation, the pinnacle within a particular context of Eastern and Central Europe. Without knowing that context, one might appreciate their works but can hardly comprehend the complexities of those societies. It is, for example, Isaiah Berlin's life long study of Russia's thought or the erudition and vast knowledge of Central European intellectuals of your colleague H. Gordon Skilling that should be consulted in these matters and deserve your attention.

As illustrations of what I consider your inaccurate characterization of the issue, I will quote those passages which, sorry to say, sounded to me unscholarly, unrealistic and ostentatious. (I will quote at length for the benefit of the readers of *Kritika & Kontext* to judge for themselves.):

*Unfortunately, we can look with only qualified hope to Western European intellectuals, too many of whom are infatuated by their own endless petty squabbles and evanescent ideological infatuation. It is therefore also to Eastern Europe, and to Russia – to the Russia of the great dissidents – that I would look for intellectual leadership in the new European vocation whose outline I am attempting to discern. (p 87)*

*In Eastern Europe the divine spark has a presence that has for too long been missing in the West: thought is serious, evil has a meaning, heroism makes demands. Three reservoirs of human depth – love of country, religion, and art – still brim with juices of life that are becoming scarcer in the West. (p 87)*

*From Poland and from Eastern Europe in general, we may learn again the benefits of making room in our public life for some divine presence, with the attendant superhuman limitation and sanctions. One might add that if we do not learn this lesson, we may reap the whirlwinds of crude and fanatic reaction that seems always to follow attempts to exclude the sacred from a nation's collective self-consciousness. (pp.88-89)*

*Today, it is in Eastern Europe that the decisive inner unities binding art and life – the unity between art and justice or political responsibility, the unity between beauty and morality, the unity between art and god – still inform the calling of the artist and still bless the response that calling evokes in large segments of the masses, who must be the audience for any truly vital art. It is in Eastern Europe that the artist seems still to recognize his task as mediator between mundane daily existence and those moments that arrest and trans-figure the forces of mind and heart. The writers from the East remind us of the heroic moral demands that art can make, but of greater and more lasting significance is the reminder they have given us that the artist is both the conscience and the leader of the consciousness of peoples. (p.89)*

*In the East, art is not just a game; it is not a separate compartment of life into which people step when they want high-level diversion, or into which they flee when they want to escape life and responsibility, above all the responsibility of citizenship. In the East, art is still intelligible in classical republican terms: as the heartbeat of life, and as the school of civic virtue. (pp.89-90)*

*From Eastern Europe we might learn again what it means to argue, not for the sake of victory or display, but with a thirst to know that scorns vanity, pretensions, and popularity... (p.90)*

**“Ex oriente lux”!** True, the sun does rise in the East, but its illuminations are, alas, strictly of the physical sort. East-Central European intellectuals are no more capable than their Western colleagues of performing the miracle which will deliver us from the ills of modern society. At the end of the day, we are left to resolve our existential, spiritual, political and economic crises alone, no better armed nor wiser than others. Hopefully, we can learn from each others' experience, but that learning will vanish in the mist if in our discourse we use the style and words you used in your letter. I would expect such a tone from lesser minds, but certainly not from you.

In her novel, *Wise Blood*, Flannery O'Connor has one of her characters talk about "The trouble with you innerlektules..." The character, unlettered as he may be, goes on to criticize those who have anointed themselves with the responsibility of telling others how they ought to live. And indeed this is the trouble with "intellectuals", at least some of them. I say them, because I, for one, am reluctant to place myself in this camp, a camp that all too often defines itself, by encircling its wagons, as it were, wagons heavily loaded with self-importance and presumption. This is especially true in the North American academy, a virtual fort where the presumption of the "intellectual" is given official assent, an institution which today often is but a boot camp for reforming recruits within and a staging base from which raiding parties are sent out to harass, cajole, damn, convert and generally to transform the citizens in the larger society on the outside.

These "intellectuals", often seek some group to act as their clients, in exchange for their being able to use that group to further the aims of some ideology and political agenda often masked as a scholarly point of view. Usually, these "intellectuals" are merely the unself-conscious practitioners of some secularized religion, with its own holy jargon, its own totems and taboos, and its own often publicly funded, canonical missals posing as scholarly journals.

As said, the "intellectuals" I'm thinking about are, of course, those who reside mostly in the North American university who spread some gospel they have received second, third or fourth hand from Europe or some notions vaguely imagined as having come from Asia or Africa, gospels both over-cooked and over-told.

These professions of faith have, as of late, been propagated in the form of so called "post-modernism, "political correctness", yet there are "scholarly movements" which zealously proclaim possession of Truth with a capital "T". All these true believers, mistake their faith for the Truth, and, because of their certainty, see no need to question that which they claim to know or that which they are so determined to foist upon others.

These self-styled "intellectuals" are actually cryptoreligious fundamentalists, today's Scribes and Pharisees, whose words and actions are justified by some vague "calling", the meaning of which they can give no account and the origin of which they often are unaware, and when aware see of little consequence.

These "intellectuals" also are our sophists. They are like Socrates' "late" accusers, who while not Sophists themselves, are like sophists in that they are reputed to have the wisdom to tell others how they ought to live. Yet when they are subjected to Socrates' relentless questions they are shown to claim to know that which they do not. Were it enough, one may just dismiss the accusers as the silly, self-important phoney they are, except that during times of political and social disorder, these are the same people who often are wont to exterminate the wise.

It is remarkable that the modern term, "intellectual" grew out of another trial. I refer to the sorry business we call the "Dreyfus Affair". The difference is that Captain Dreyfus was condemned because he was a studious Jew, while Socrates was condemned because he committed a crime.

"Socrates is a wise man, a thinker, who investigates things above and below the earth, makes the weaker argument the stronger and teaches others to do the same." Socrates at least in one sense, admitted to all these charges, and even went so far as to demonstrate his criminal activity before those gathered in the supreme court of Athens. He says that he is wise because he knows that he does not know everything, and must therefore question in order to learn. In questioning, Socrates not only exposes those whose claim to wisdom is unfounded, his investigations - his trespass - knock the very pillars from under the edifice that is his already crumbling city and culture. To make matters worse, this man who the upstanding citizens of a disordered Athens took to be a mere pesty buffoon has the audacity to teach young citizens to follow his example.

Socrates does not restrain himself in his investigations because, as he tells us, his daimon does not stop him. So he proceeds in the face of grave danger. The evocation of Socrates' daimon legitimates the questions he asks of his fellow citizens, the questions that reveal not only the disordered soul of Athens but the illegitimacy of the mythical gods who no longer can hold the cosmos together. Thus through the



commission of Socrates greatest crime the West, at least in part, is born. Philosophy begins with a critique of the gods.

Athens and the old cosmos could not be saved under such an onslaught. But alas, she was already dead, and what Socrates did was to pronounce her dead, to sum her up, to sing her eulogy, to give her demise meaning. But, Socrates himself could have escaped his dead city. Indeed, he did have the chance to escape. But Socrates compares what he is saying - and by implication what he would soon do - to the very practice of combat on the field of battle: Socrates, like the loyal Athenian citizen-warrior, cannot leave his post. Athens, however rotten, is not only worth fighting for, but worth dying for. But had the circumstances been different, perhaps he would have lived out his few remaining days in Thessaly, as Aristotle was later to do when he escaped to Chalcis with his friends.

So the crime committed by Socrates was the crime of thinking, and the further crime of teaching the young to think. Socrates is guilty of thinking because thought is indeed dangerous, dangerous for both the thinker (*phrontistes*) and for those who presume to possess all the answers.

But Socrates, limited by the incompleteness of his own humanity, could not be all wise, for as he says, "Wisdom belongs only to the God." Thus from his human limitations - from the knowledge that he cannot be all wise - arises his desire to know, to question not only others, but to question himself as well. So, unlike the puffed-up "intellectual" who presumes to have the wisdom to tell others how to live, Socrates merely asks us "How ought we live?" But while Socrates does not presume to possess all the knowledge required to teach on how to live, he teaches us something about life, by teaching us how to die.

I am aware that in Europe, and especially in central and eastern Europe, the meaning of and hence the role of the "intellectual" has connotations different from those in North America. In Europe it often is assumed that the educated, talented and privileged classes have certain responsibilities to society. With this I agree, in that I think this applies to all citizens, and especially to all citizens who by circumstances, industry or by special gifts are privileged. However, I do know the profound effect these classes of people have had on mass movements, few of which, in my opinion, have lead to anything but human degradation and suffering. No, I cannot help remembering Marx's presumptuous notion that the intellectual bourgeoisie was destined to be the "vanguard of the Revolution", only because his great proletariat was too stupid to know its own interests.

Yes, part of my scepticism lies in the fact that I am a North American, and that we North Americans have no indigenous history before the Enlightenment, and on the whole, because, of our Enlightenment heritage, have never cared much for self-appointed authority, and care even less for paternalism.

Also, I think the term 'intellectuals' too imprecise. Are only professors intellectuals? If so, then, we all know some dumb intellectuals. Are artists intellectuals? Journalists? Lawyers? Bureaucrats? Technocrats? Is as intellectual anyone who makes his living with his mind? Is my dentist an intellectual? Are all those who wear glasses intellectuals? If we will remember, this is what Pol Pot taught his Khmer Rouge goons who then conveniently found a target behind every pair of lenses.

Having admitted to my scepticism, I will say that I think every educated, talented and privileged citizen owes society a debt. Sometimes these debts should be paid with the kind of harsh criticism that may even place the critic in harms way. At other times one is amiss if he fails to deliver loud praise, to work tirelessly for, and above all, to be loyal to a deserving society. Societies, like individuals, have their own limits and possibilities, and if those who are trained to think remember this, then they will be less likely to try to transform people and their societies into what they cannot become.

In dark times when one finds himself living in a regime so perverse as to deserve no praise and in which silence would amount to assent, a regime in which work of any kind would aid and abet the enemy, and criticism would be ignored, laughed at or answered with the blast of a gun, one would have to make a courageous judgement. Is there anything in such a regime worth dying for? If, in ones judgement, more harm than good would result if one remained in such a regime, then prudence ought to prevail. Loyalty does have, and ought to have, its limits. When such pertains, then it is time to leave.

But where does one go? I ask this because today we live in one of those strange times, a time in which the old, comfortable ways of making sense of our experience becomes increasing meaningless. Put bluntly, our categories no longer work very well. But there is both a good side and a bad side to this. The

bad side is that with the eclipse of the variables that we so recently took for granted as being eternal, some will find life unsettling no matter where they reside. So, in some respects, our predicament resembles Athens in the fifth century. The good side - and perhaps the painful side - is that a time is upon us that engenders thought, engenders thought because thinking has nothing upon which to hold.

EGON GAL

There are at least two ways of understanding someone who considers themselves to be a civilized individual, realizes the relative validity of their own convictions and stands behind them unflinchingly. The first is that such an individual is aware of the plurality and equivalent value of truths, that people use for justifying their convictions, and concludes that to push one's views requires force not truth. The second is that an individual who is convinced that even people of different beliefs and convictions, if they are truly civilized, can agree among themselves on the self-evident truths of life that bind them together. According to Mr. Pangle the relativism of Schumpeter and Rorty supplies ammunition to the defenders of the first view, but in my opinion their relativism supports the second.

For an individual to reach the second position, they do not need to know the profound Truths rooted in the "laws of nature and of nature's God". They only need realise that we all depend on one another and if we are unable to agree among ourselves we all suffer.

Thomas Jefferson, whom both Rorty and Pangle venerate, wrote that "he does not mind at all if his neighbour proclaims that there exist twenty Gods or proclaims that there is no God whatsoever". Richard Rorty begins his essay: Priority of Democracy before Philosophy with this quote. He continues that such convictions are not important for democratic politics. "...for civic virtues are sufficient moral qualities common to typical theist or to typical atheist".

Jefferson was a typical theist and a conservative politician, Rorty is a typical atheist and a convinced liberal. Both Rorty and Jefferson are passionate defenders of participatory democracy and believe that only a free and open discussion between individuals of different convictions might bring an answer to moral and political questions. Both also write that with respect to the "self-evident truths" written in the Declaration of Independence, (like the rights to life, freedom and equality), they can even be agreed upon by people who hold different profound truths.

The dispute between relativists and anti-relativists would be politically harmless if it was restricted where it belongs - to philosophical discussions regarding the knowledge of truth. Such discussion ceases to be innocent when terms like "knowledge" and "truth" are used as shield for political action; when instead of rights the disputes are about truths; and when instead of intolerance and aggressiveness arguments are about relativism and anti-relativism.

STEFAN NÉMETH

How can a civilized individual attain Schumpeter's imperative, i.e., stand behind one's own convictions yet be aware of their relative validity?

How to attune these two requirements so that one does not slip into either fundamentalism, relativism or nihilism? Professor Pangle reprimands the addressee of his letter for slipping into relativism. The latter, allegedly, betrays all Western tradition and, in fact, espouses a fascist position. Professor Pangle supports his view by arguing that there is a substantial similarity or at least convergence between "liberal" and "fascist" relativism. In this respect he argues that even Mussolini considered relativism to be the foundation of fascism. Mussolini, however, claimed that "fascism is nothing else but absolute activism".

Can one, however, remain a relativist and at the same time hold the position of "absolute activism"? What sort of relativism in thinking are we talking about when - on the political level - it would concur with "absolutism" in political action?



We have our beliefs and convictions that we either do or do not share with others. "Absolute activism" entails refusal of any procedural restrictions, enforced in its own "truth", i.e., one's beliefs and convictions. If such activism is confronted with any other convictions, it dismisses them as worthless, repugnant and destructive. The moral, political and physical liquidation of anyone who holds a different view is the result; the logical consequence of the doctrine of "absolutist activism".

A liberal democrat, on the contrary, hails a world where nothing of that sort threatens him. His relativism is based on openness and respect for the views of others. He does not confine himself within his own truth but rather enters into a dialogue from which no one is a priori excluded or expelled. Hence, more than pushing the contents of his truth he stresses its procedural implementation, correctness and the civility of all involved in the dialogue.

### RICHARD RORTY

The issue which separates Professor Pangle from Samuel Abraham and myself is about as basic, and as hard to argue, as a philosophical issue can get. Pangle believes that what he calls "relativism" is a moral and political danger, and that opposition to relativism is important to the defense of democratic institutions. He is certainly right that Jefferson and others who were important to the development of modern democratic societies believed in something like "natural law" and "natural rights". They believed, in other words, that there were objects of knowledge which, once grasped, dictated forms of government and of public life.

Philosophers of my sort, who call ourselves "pragmatists" but are typically called "relativists" by our opponents, deny that there are any such objects of knowledge. We think the only good argument for democratic institutions is the probability that adopting such institutions will, in the long run, increase human happiness. We have no answer to the question of whether human beings should be happy, or have the right to be happy. Nor do we have an answer to the question why we think that all members of the biological species, rather than merely members of certain races or nations, should have their happiness increased. We cannot imagine what it would be like to have a non question-begging answer to these questions. We have no idea of how we might deduce our favored answers from some more evident premises.

We deny the existence of the objects of knowledge believed in by Plato, Jefferson and Pangle because we do not see how to counter the arguments of those who, like Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*, think that ideas like "natural rights" are simply inventions of the weak, inventions intended to make the strong think that they will be punished by some non-human force if they use their strength to oppress the weak. We do not think that Plato's Socrates, or Kant, or anyone since, has managed to "demonstrate" the existence of something like a moral law, or an Idea of the Good, or the Will of a benevolent Deity, which would serve as a sort of backup for our convictions that governments should be democratic, that torture should not be practised, that incomes should be leveled out, and the like.

I take it that Professor Pangle believes that there is a big difference between philosophers and intellectuals because he believes that Plato and others have in fact demonstrated the existence of such a backup. The philosophers are the people who grasp this demonstration, the intellectuals are those who have not yet done so. It seems unlikely that he and I (or, more generally, the Straussians and the pragmatists) will ever agree about whether such a demonstration has in fact been given.

But there is a second issue on which we disagree; the practical question of whether, if the belief in a religious or metaphysical sort of backup should ever disappear entirely, and if most citizens of democratic societies became utilitarian and pragmatist in their philosophical views, this would bring about a change from democratic to undemocratic institutions. I see no basis for predicting such a result. That is, I see no reason to think that a transition from a metaphysical to a pragmatic/utilitarian way of thinking would be more dangerous to democracy than a transition from a religious to a secular outlook. Both such transitions are moves from saying "We cannot do it without backup" or "We have no reason to do it without backup" to saying "We can do it on our own, no matter what the ultimate nature of reality may be". They are

moves from saying "Temporal progress presupposes a relation to an atemporal, ahistorical, measure of progress" to saying "We must pursue progress by our own lights, fallible as they are."

Saying the latter does indeed, as Professor Pangle says, express a disagreement with Jefferson and "the entire secular Western tradition of natural right". I am not so sure that it takes a stand against "all serious religious traditions", since this claim begs the question of whether a merely agapistic, non-authoritarian, version of Christianity (the kind urged by the so-called "Social Gospel" theologians, and by Paul Tillich) should count as "serious". I am inclined to argue, as John Dewey did, that utilitarianism and pragmatism are secularized versions of such a merely agapistic Christianity, and inherit all that was best in the Jewish and Christian religious traditions.

I am surprised to find that Professor Pangle thinks that Schumpeter and I advanced an "aggressive and intolerant, not to say fascistic, form of relativism". What is aggressive and intolerant about thinking that Plato's and Kant's arguments do not work, and then going on to defend the democratic institutions which Professor Pangle also defends by other means? Surely an inability to be convinced by certain arguments is not an index of irresponsibility? We who are not convinced have to argue for our moral and political convictions as best we can, even though this means becoming what Professor Pangle would call "intellectuals" rather than "philosophers".

### PETER ŠYKORA

Perhaps it is our long experience of Communist dogmatism that makes us respond to anti-relativism with great doubt. You claim that the editors of this journal "stand[s] against the entire secular Western tradition of natural rights, as well as against all serious religious traditions." In truth the editors are not proponents of relativism but of critical thinking in the true Socratic tradition.

There are no proscribed topics or views for a true critical mind. Controversial topics and views often generate a whole range of opinions about a single issue; which can shatter the sacred beliefs of some. Yet, such critical thinking does not lead to epistemological and ethical relativism along the lines of "everything goes and everything is permitted". Postmodernists are often accused of holding this view because it embraces radical pluralism. However, the understanding and acceptance of many views does not mean that "anything goes", as Wolfgang Iser reminds us, but on the contrary, it anchors "plurality as an ethical and political value".

I admit that a superficial understanding of postmodern thinking can lead to nihilism or cynical relativism of Mussolini's variety nor do I underestimate this danger. Perhaps Socrates had the same concern when he criticized the Sophists. Like the Sophists, Socrates was aware of the vulnerability of "self-evident truths", and the possibility of their misuse due to this vulnerability. He immersed himself in the depths of reality to find a solid foundation for the truths that appear on the surface. Both he and the Sophists eventually realized that there are no solid foundations lurking directly below the surface. This might be why some of Socrates's contemporaries considered him to be a Sophist.

Socrates believed in the existence of solid foundations deep below. This distinguishes him from the Sophists, who were content with their finding that solidly based "self-evident truths" do not exist directly below the surface and misused this knowledge. We know that Socrates was unable to explore these great depths, and that Plato immersed himself further in these depths. Plato believed he had discovered the foundations Socrates had searched for. However, after Plato there were many others, who in true Socratic tradition, immersed themselves deeper and deeper and eventually shattered his notion of solid foundations of reality. At present we are in a state where we question whether such foundations are but a horizon, which recedes as we approach it.

The Socratic position lies somewhere between the relativism of the Sophists and the anti-relativism of Plato. In fact relativism and anti-relativism are the extremes of a wide spectrum, Scylla and Charybdis, within which intellectuals who espouse the Socratic tradition must manoeuvre.