

STUDIES IN

*Burke*  
AND HIS TIME

**JOHN G. GROVE**

*The Consecrated State*

**MADELEINE ARMSTRONG**

*Edmund Burke's 'Age of Chivalry'*

**NOBUHIKO NAKAZAWA**

*Burke's Nuanced Praise of Smith's Moral Sentiments*

**E. WESLEY REYNOLDS, III**

*London's Coffeehouse Literati*

**HAIMO LI**

*A Burkean Reading of Late Jefferson's Legal Theory*

---

**THE 2020 ESTORIL POLITICAL FORUM**

*New Authoritarian Challenges to Liberal Democracy*

---

REVIEWS OF

**GREGORY M. COLLINS**, *Commerce and Manners*  
*in Edmund Burke's Political Economy*

**EMILY JONES**, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern*  
*Conservatism, 1830–1914: An Intellectual History*

**GREG WEINER**, *Old Whigs*

VOLUME 30

2021

STUDIES IN  
*Burke*  
AND HIS TIME

EDITORS

Elizabeth R. Lambert  
*Gettysburg College*

Michael Brown  
*University of Aberdeen*

EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Ian Crowe  
*Belmont Abbey College*

PUBLISHER

Annette Y. Kirk  
*Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal*

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Bruce P. Frohnen  
*Ohio Northern University*

Frederick G. Whelan  
*University of Pittsburgh*

FOUNDING EDITOR

Peter J. Stanlis†

EDITOR EMERITUS

Joseph Pappin III  
*University of South Carolina*

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

Steven Blakemore *Florida Atlantic University*

David Bromwich *Yale University*

H. Lee Cheek, Jr. *East Georgia State College*

J. C. D. Clark *University of Kansas*

L. M. Cullen *Trinity College, Dublin*

Sean Patrick Donlan *Thompson Rivers University*

John Faulkner *Ohio University–Lancaster*

Mark C. Henrie *Arthur N. Rupe Foundation*

F. P. Lock *Queen's University, Ontario*

Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. *Harvard University*

Steven P. Millies *Catholic Theological Union, Chicago*

Jeffrey O. Nelson *Intercollegiate Studies Institute*

Jennifer Pitts *University of Chicago*

David Willetts *King's College, University of London*

## CONTENTS

- 2 *Editor's Introduction*  
6 *Notes on Contributors*
- 7 The Consecrated State  
**JOHN G. GROVE**
- 42 Burke's 'Age of Chivalry': The Foundation of Civilized Liberty  
**MADELEINE ARMSTRONG**
- 72 Burke's Nuanced Praise of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*:  
the Religious Character of Burke's Notion of the Sublime in his  
*Philosophical Enquiry*  
**NOBUHIKO NAKAZAWA**

---

### KIRK CENTER SEMINAR SERIES

- 85 London's Coffeehouse *Literati* and the Rise of the Public Man in the  
Eighteenth Century  
**E. WESLEY REYNOLDS, III**

---

### IN BRIEF

- 113 A Burkean Reading of Late Jefferson's Legal Theory  
**HAIMO LI**

---

### THE ESTORIL POLITICAL FORUM, OCTOBER 2020

- 129 Edmund Burke's Narrow Line between Toleration and Slavery  
**IAN CROWE**
- 134 A View on Burke's Elitist Doctrine of Political Representation  
**IVONE MOREIRA**
- 140 Edmund Burke and Pluralism in the Thought of Robert Nisbet  
**LUKE SHEAHAN**

---

### BOOK REVIEWS

- 149 Gregory M. Collins, *Commerce and Manners in Edmund Burke's  
Political Economy*  
**PATRICK WALSH**
- 162 Emily Jones, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism,  
1830–1914: An Intellectual History*  
**ANDRÉ GUSHURST-MOORE**
- 171 Greg Weiner, *Old Whigs: Burke, Lincoln, and the Politics of Prudence*  
**WILLIAM JASON WALLACE**

## *Editor's Introduction*



SOME YEARS AGO, IN AN INTERVIEW for *Salon.com*, the American intellectual Camille Paglia observed that “[a]ll the great world religions contain a complex system of beliefs regarding the nature of the universe and human life that is far more profound than anything that liberalism has produced.” She followed up with a warning that our current generation of the young have been raised to “see nothing but politics,” whereas, in reality, “politics is tiny. Politics applies only to society. There is a huge metaphysical realm out there that involves the eternal principles of life and death.”<sup>1</sup>

*Politics is tiny.* While it might be a stretch to apply such an adage to Burke’s writings, it is surely the case that we enter into Burke’s thought most productively and receptively when we acknowledge that he did not see politics in the overarching way that we do nowadays. This may be, in part, because we have imbibed in the centuries since his death a more deeply materialistic mindset that seeks to expose everything that once seemed to belong in a non-political realm as infused with the politics of power. Alongside that, within the Western liberal tradition, a decline in belief in eternal principles has imprisoned concepts such as justice and law within a self-referential domain of the secular state. That first of Russell Kirk’s six conservative canons, “belief in a transcendent order ... which rules society as well as conscience,” could be said now to hang barely by a thread, as we ride the accelerating centripetal force

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.salon.com/2015/07/29/camille\\_paglia\\_takes\\_on\\_jon\\_stewart\\_trump\\_sanders\\_liberals\\_think\\_of\\_themselves\\_as\\_very\\_open\\_minded\\_but\\_that%E2%80%99s\\_simply\\_not\\_true/](https://www.salon.com/2015/07/29/camille_paglia_takes_on_jon_stewart_trump_sanders_liberals_think_of_themselves_as_very_open_minded_but_that%E2%80%99s_simply_not_true/)

of material progress into an uncertain future where political saviors are sought and feared in equal measure.

This crisis of faith in the transcendent, and the accompanying impact on state power, is the broad connecting theme of the contributions to this issue of *Studies in Burke and His Time*. What formed the context and parameters of Burke's politics, and how might those markers assist us nowadays?

John Grove provides a meticulous examination of the Anglican context to Burke's understanding of the relationship between church and state. The author's grounding of this examination in the "traditions within which the thinker immediately wrote and operated" throws revealing light not only upon Burke's religion, but is also suggestive of the endurance of "latent religious understandings" in the liberal traditions of more recent times. Madeleine Armstrong's important reconsideration of Burke's understanding of the term "chivalry" employs a similarly clarifying method in presenting that concept not as an atavistic move toward a more stable past, but a continuing way of articulating the goal of a concept of liberty that was "truly attainable within the bounds of civilization."

Any examination of Burke's thought on such matters best proceeds through the language and intellectual assumptions of his own time, and such an approach will almost certainly lead us to his earlier writings as suggestive of interpretations worth carrying into in his later, more "mature" political writings. This point is well illustrated in Nobuhiko Nakazawa's short but penetrating article on an aspect of the relationship between Burke and Adam Smith that predated Burke's own parliamentary career and Smith's publication of *Wealth of Nations*. The author's argument here rests in large part on "the religious character of Burke's notion of the sublime," finding value in an overlap of disciplines that, unfortunately, is rare in the modern academic mindset. Similarly, a transcendent perspective on the development of law, reflected in a persistent adherence to the legal thought of Sir Edward Coke, is seen by Haimo Li to underpin an unexpected but highly plausible connection between Burke and Thomas Jefferson, one which survived even the years of the French Revolution.

We have devoted a section of this issue to papers delivered at the Estoril Political Forum in October 2020. The Forum is an annual event organized through the Institute for Political Studies at the Catholic University of Portugal, and conference themes, since the event's inception in 1993, have been devoted to the study and exploration of the Western liberal democratic tradition, represented by figures such as Burke and Tocqueville. The Edmund Burke Society of America presented a panel entitled "Edmund Burke and the Limits of Toleration," under the conference theme of "New Authoritarian Challenges to Liberal Democracy in a Global World."

For twenty-five years, the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal has itself introduced programs relating to the tradition of liberty and order in society. In 2020, the Center launched a three-part online seminar series engaging audiences on the role of coffeehouses in that tradition. Discussion centered upon the London coffeehouse club to which Edmund Burke, Samuel Johnson, James Boswell, Adam Smith, Joshua Reynolds, and so many other definitive thinkers of the eighteenth century belonged. The first session laid the groundwork for sociability, the public sphere, and the place of the gentleman within London society. The second addressed Burke's view of politics and Reynolds's view of art. In the third and final session, attention turned toward the American Founding generation and addressed the problems of eighteenth-century empire through the minds of Johnson, Burke, and Boswell. That seminar series was organized and led by Wesley Reynolds, director of the Wilbur Fellows Program at the Center, whose study *Coffeehouse Culture in the Atlantic World, 1650–1789* will be published by Bloomsbury Academic in the spring of 2022. We are delighted to include in this issue an article by Wesley Reynolds on the subject of his forthcoming book.

Our regular book review section rounds out the theme of this issue with reviews of three highly significant publications on Burke that have appeared recently: Gregory M. Collins's extensive and seminal study *Commerce and Manners in Edmund Burke's Political Economy*, Emily Jones's influential examination on *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism*, and *Old Whigs: Burke, Lincoln, and the Politics of Prudence*, authored by Greg Weiner, one of the participants in our panel presentation for the Estoril Political Forum.

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

*Studies in Burke and His Time*, as many readers will know, evolved out of the *Burke Newsletter*, first published in 1959. Periodic changes of name and breaks in continuity have meant that few university libraries have readily accessible, complete runs of issues that appeared before the journal went “online” in 2013. We are most grateful to the family of John Burke Shipley for their generous donation of copies of the journal from 1969–79 from the private library of Dr. Shipley, who passed away in May this year. John B. Shipley was a professor of English at the University of Illinois Chicago and a former editor of *Abstracts of English Studies*. He stopped researching for his own pleasure less than a month before his death, at the age of ninety-seven. *Requiescat in pace.*

IAN CROWE

## Notes on Contributors



**JOHN G. GROVE** is associate editor of *Law & Liberty*. He holds a PhD in political theory from Northern Illinois University, and his work has appeared in *Polity*, *American Political Thought*, *National Affairs*, and other journals.

**MADELEINE ARMSTRONG** is a PhD Candidate in Intellectual History at Trinity College, Cambridge, writing her dissertation on the subject of the family in Edmund Burke's political thought. She completed her undergraduate degree at the University of St Andrews, where she was the recipient of the Alan Robertson Memorial Prize for best undergraduate dissertation in Modern History.

**NOBUHIKO NAKAZAWA** is Professor of the History of Economic Thought at Kansai University, Osaka, Japan, where he has taught since 1998. His research interests lie in the fields of the history of economic thought and methodology, particularly issues relating to Edmund Burke, Thomas Robert Malthus, and British conservatism. He is former president of the Japanese Society of Malthus (2009–2011). He has published papers in *Studies in Burke and His Time*, *Modern Age*, *History of Economics Review*, and the *Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics*, among other journals.

**HAIMO LI** is Assistant Professor at the School of International Relations and Public Affairs at Fudan University, Shanghai. He received his doctoral degree in Political Science from the University of Houston. He has published several studies on Burke (in Chinese) in the *Journal of Social Theory*, *The Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences*, and *Foreign Theoretical Trends*. The title of his dissertation is *The Burkean Theme in the Late Jefferson's Political Writings (1809–1826)*.

**E. WESLEY REYNOLDS, III** teaches in the Department of History at Northwood University, Midland, MI, and is Director of the Wilbur Fellows Program at the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal. He received his doctorate from Central Michigan University, and his book *Coffeehouse Culture in the Atlantic World, 1650–1789* is due for publication by Bloomsbury Academic (London) in spring 2022.



# *The Consecrated State*



JOHN G. GROVE

*Liberty Fund, Inc.*

Shortly after the publication of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, caricaturist James Gillray published a cartoon depicting Burke's attack on Richard Price found in that work. In the image, Price sits in a dark room writing a "Treatise on the Ill Effects of Government and Society and on the Absurdity of Serving God and Honoring the King." Burke's enormous, bespectacled face emerges from the mists behind him, exposing the "Atheistical Revolutionist" with light emanating from two objects: A crown in one hand and a cross in the other.<sup>1</sup>

These two sources of light were both prominent in *Reflections*, but the relationship between them in Burke's eyes remains a matter of considerable debate. Burke's religion has been described as orthodox

---

<sup>1</sup> James Gillray, *Smelling out a Rat; —or— The Atheistical-Revolutionist disturbed in his Midnight "Calculations."* *Vide. A troubled-conscience*, 1790. New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed October 8, 2017. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/8bd4411c-63e0-cf2e-e040-e00a1806207e>

Anglican,<sup>2</sup> latitudinarian,<sup>3</sup> crypto-Catholic,<sup>4</sup> and even completely feigned.<sup>5</sup> Along with such biographical disagreements, there has long been disagreement over the extent to which religion informed Burke's political thought. Frederick Dreyer claimed that Burke's religious belief was shallow and that he spoke of religion "entirely in utilitarian terms."<sup>6</sup> Andrea Radasanu, in elaborating upon Leo Strauss's interpretation of Burke, specifically rejects the idea that religion served to ground political life in Burke's thought: Religion, while serving as a societal "super-glue," is "subjected to the good of the state, and the good of the state is determined according to the worldly well-being of the citizens or subjects."<sup>7</sup> David Bromwich further claims that "concerning the place of religion in politics, Burke is a doubter through and through." While he encouraged the indulgence of the "instinct by which people exalt a more-than-human power above themselves," he believed it ought never to "take a political form."<sup>8</sup> These interpretations are often one part of a broader observation that Burke's thought lacked any grounding in tran-

---

2 F. P. Lock, *Edmund Burke, Volume II: 1784–1797* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 303–04; Nigel Aston, "A 'lay divine': Burke, Christianity, and the Preservation of the British State, 1790–1797," in *Religious Change in Europe 1650–1914: Essays for John McManners*, ed. Nigel Aston (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 198–200; J. C. D. Clark, "Introduction," in *Reflections on the Revolution in France: A Critical Edition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 27; Samuel Burgess, *Edmund Burke's Battle With Liberalism* (London: Wilberforce Publications, 2017), 22–24.

3 James Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler: Edmund Burke and the Politics of Progress* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 64–65; Ian Harris, "Burke and Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, ed. David Dwan and Christopher J. Insole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 92–103, see pp. 98–99.

4 Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Garrett Ward Sheldon, "Burke's Catholic Conservatism," *Modern Age* (Summer 2014): 16–24.

5 Harvey C. Mansfield, "Introduction," in *Selected Letters of Edmund Burke*, ed. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 128; David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime to the Beautiful to American Independence* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 16.

6 Frederick Dreyer, "Burke's Religion," *Studies in Burke and His Time* 17 (1976): 205.

7 Andrea Radasanu, "The Modern Foundations of Burke's Conservatism," *Perspectives on Politics* 40 (2011): 21–22.

8 Bromwich, *Intellectual Life*, 20.

scendent conceptions of justice, right, or virtue because of his tendency to understate the capabilities of human reason.<sup>9</sup>

One alternative to this utilitarian approach has been to understand Burke as a natural law thinker operating essentially within a scholastic tradition.<sup>10</sup> According to this view, Burke's thought was, indeed, undergirded in transcendent values and did not devalue reason. In fact, he regularly appealed to a natural law, discernible by human reason which has its existence outside particular times and places and which provides general principles for moral action. While contemporary scholars have largely given up the attempt to prove that Burke was a Thomist simply, the idea that there is some natural law component to Burke's thought, among other influences, continues to be convincing.<sup>11</sup>

Eschewing both the utilitarian and scholastic interpretations, historians of the eighteenth century have situated Burke within an orthodox Anglican tradition. J. C. D. Clark offered an extensive treatment of Burke's Anglican context, concluding that the major achievement of Burke's later works "was to give eloquent but unoriginal expression to a theoretical position largely devised by Anglican churchmen."<sup>12</sup> Clark demonstrates that Burke's view of the church (and its teaching on the state) colored his understanding of politics and ought to inform inter-

9 Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Radasanu, "Modern Foundations"; Beau Shaw, "The God of this Lower World': Leo Strauss's Critique of Historicism in *Natural Right and History*," *Review of Politics* 81 (2019): 47–76.

10 Peter J. Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958); Peter J. Stanlis, *Edmund Burke: The Enlightenment and Revolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991); Francis Canavan, *Edmund Burke: Prescription and Providence* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1987); Joseph L. Pappin III, *The Metaphysics of Edmund Burke* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993).

11 Christopher J. Insole, "Two Conceptions of Liberalism: Theology, Creation, and Politics in the Thought of Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36 (2008): 447–89; Joseph L. Pappin III, "Edmund Burke and the Thomistic Foundations of Natural Law," in *An Imaginative Whig: Reassessing the Life and Thought of Edmund Burke*, ed. Ian Crowe (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 203–27; Burgess, *Edmund Burke's Battle*, 20–22; Gregory M. Collins, "Edmund Burke, Strauss, and the Straussians," *Perspectives on Political Science* 48 (2019): 192–209, see p. 203.

12 J. C. D. Clark, *English Society: 1688–1832*, 1st edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 249.

pretations of his concept of prescription and the social contract. Nigel Aston elaborated on this connection and traced the development of Burke's relationship to the Anglican establishment, concluding that by the end of his life, Burke had as much in common with high-church Anglicans as he did with latitudinarians, though neither label is fully appropriate.<sup>13</sup> In his definitive biography, F. P. Lock recognizes that Burke's religion was sincere and integrated into his thought in important ways.<sup>14</sup> Though it is not a prominent theme in his work, Richard Bourke has also noted the importance of Anglican influences on Burke.<sup>15</sup>

It is interesting that historians, especially those focused on eighteenth-century English religious and social history, recognize the importance of Burke's Anglican context, while political theorists almost universally understate it, preferring rather to integrate his thought into broader historical paradigms.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps it is an outgrowth of the underlying tension between historical and theoretical analysis. Clark suggests as much by chiding those who study Burke's ideas "as if they sprang, fully armed, from his unaided imagination."<sup>17</sup> Political theorists, he suggests, tend to undertake purely "textual" studies, looking for a "usable" Burke, rather than seeking to understand the one which existed historically.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps those whose examination focuses more exclusively on the substance of political ideas are less inclined to embrace an interpretation which might seem to bind Burke too heavily to his historical time and place. But this distinction need not be the case. Burke's thought itself suggests that historical particularity and general understanding are not mutually exclusive, and that the former may aid the latter.<sup>19</sup>

13 Aston, "A 'lay divine,'" 195.

14 F. P. Lock, *Edmund Burke, Volume II: 1784–1797* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 303–04.

15 Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 717–27.

16 Other such historians include Robert M. Andrews, *Lay Activism and the High Church Movement of the Late Eighteenth Century: The Life and Thought of William Stevens, 1732–1807* (Boston: Brill, 2015), 52–55; Robert Hole, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order in England 1760–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 151–59; B. W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

17 Clark, *English Society*, 249.

18 Ibid.

19 See Hampsher-Monk, "Rhetoric and Opinion," 457.

In that spirit, this study will undertake a more historically informed textual analysis, demonstrating how central the Anglican concept of the state was to Burke's ideas. It will demonstrate that, while religion constitutes an essential and foundational element of his thought, Burke did not simply parrot theological positions, but used them as a foundation on which he built many of his unique contributions to political thought, which continue to draw scholarly attention today. It also calls into question whether scholastic natural law is the best lens by which to view the religious component of Burke's thought, as his Anglican underpinning emphasized the mysterious nature of divine justice, the inability of the individual to fully comprehend it, and the necessity of a well-formed state as an intermediary between individuals and God's divine justice.

A few qualifications are in order: First, there was a degree of development in Burke's ideas on these issues throughout his life.<sup>20</sup> The focus here is on Burke's later writings, from which his most significant contribution to political thought is generally seen as flowing. I draw on earlier writings when they serve to enlighten this later understanding, but this is not to suggest that there was no evolution during his lifetime. Second, in the spirit of viewing Burke as a political theorist, the study is not concerned with precisely situating his churchmanship within the Anglican categories of his day, but in demonstrating how a basic religious understanding informed his political ideas. Finally, it should be clear that the argument here is not that Burke was a theologian in any sense; it is simply that a certain theological understanding of providence and the state served as a starting point from which Burke developed several political and social conclusions.

### *The Background of Anglican Church-State Theory*

While Protestant views of the state were never uniform, there were several broad areas of agreement among the magisterial reformers of the continent which would be influential on the Anglican understanding.

---

<sup>20</sup> Burke's position on several religious issues was more liberal prior to 1790, though he saw the kinship between religion and civil society even in his earliest writings and called man a "religious animal" as early as 1773. *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, 9 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981–2015), 3:389; See Clark, *English Society*; Aston, "A 'lay divine'," 188–89.

Most importantly, the state was seen as a divinely ordained institution, established for the purpose of punishing sin and promoting virtue.<sup>21</sup> Second, the state was not subordinated to the church, because Protestants differentiated between the physical church on earth and the spiritual church of all believers. As such, both church and state were seen as coordinate institutions with different purposes, both of which were earthly substitutes for the direct governance of God.<sup>22</sup>

English reformers, most importantly Richard Hooker, adapted this general view of the divinely ordained state to English circumstances. In a civil state made up predominately by Christians, Hooker maintained, the temporal church and the civil realm overlapped. While both maintained separate purposes—the one to promote outward peace and justice, and the other to spread the gospel and save souls—they were nevertheless both made up of the same people, and both required temporal leadership. As such, the monarch may be the head of both elements of the same society, with the important caveat that the King’s authority over the church extended only to its “external frame,” not to the souls of believers themselves.<sup>23</sup> It is also important to note that this understanding of the church and state was not necessarily tied to the divine right of kings, but was derived from a belief in the providential working of God through history. It did not specifically serve to justify the rule of a particular person or even a particular form of government, but to justify government in general.<sup>24</sup> For instance, Bishop John Overall’s *Convocation Book*, an essential account of early Anglicanism, was initially suppressed by James I because it proposed that any “new Forms

21 See Philip Melancthon, *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession* Article XVI in *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, ed. Timothy McCain (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 281; John Calvin, “On Secular Authority,” in *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, ed. Harro Höpfl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54; David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 57–58.

22 See Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 125–26; Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers: Revised Edition* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2013), 139; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought Volume 2: The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 13–14.

23 Richard Hooker, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 8.4.5; See W. J. Torrance Kirby, *Richard Hooker’s Doctrine of the Royal Supremacy* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1990), 53–58; 92–98.

24 See Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 724.

of Government” which become “thoroughly settled” attain the divinely sanctioned authority of the old government.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the contemporary of Burke, Robert Lowth, Bishop of London, explained, “Government in general is the ordinance of God: the particular Form of Government is the ordinance of man ... all are lawful; all have even the sanction of Divine authority.”<sup>26</sup>

This flexibility allowed the general theological understanding of the state to survive after the Restoration, the Glorious Revolution, and the end of the age of divine right.<sup>27</sup> It became deeply rooted in Anglican belief and practice. It was reflected in the Litany in the *Book of Common Prayer*, was expressed in the Thirty-Nine Articles, and preached regularly from pulpits on coronation days, Restoration Day, and the feast day of the martyred Charles I.<sup>28</sup> While it was challenged by Anglicans

25 John Overall, *Bishop Overall's Convocation-Book*, Bk. I, Can. 28.

26 Robert Lowth, *Sermons and other Remains of Robert Lowth, D.D. Some Time Lord Bishop of London* (London: J. G. & F. Rivington, 1784), 117–18; See Hole, *Pulpits*, 19–21. Cf. Clark, *English Society*, 224–25. Some high churchmen did argue for a divine sanction for monarchy in particular, but the general tradition did not demand such specificity, leaving room for Burke's more moderate use of it.

27 1688 presented a unique challenge to Protestant political orthodoxy, one that it might not have ever satisfactorily accounted for on a theoretical level. A deliberate exchange of monarchs sat uneasily with the inherent conservatism of its political teaching—and, of course, even more uneasily (and for a longer time) with Catholics in Ireland for both theoretical and practical reasons. Jacobite sentiment would have been alive and well in Burke's formative years, even if it was no longer being translated into effective political action. By the time of his political career, however, Burke would have nearly a century of relative constitutional stability (what the magisterial tradition could see as the working out of providence) to fall back on. This allowed him to present Jacobitism, perhaps unfairly, as a doctrine of personal, absolute rule, unmoored from constitutional realities, even while appreciating the noble sentiment of attachment it made use of (See “Speech on Civil Establishment Bill,” *WC&S* 3:555). If, as O'Brien argued in his Introduction to *Reflections*, Burke was “emotionally in sympathy” with Irish Catholic Jacobites, it was purely a psychological influence—not a political or theoretical one. (See Clark, “Religious Affiliation and Dynastic Allegiance in Eighteenth-Century England: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine and Samuel Johnson,” *ELH* 64:4, 1030).

28 *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, ed. Brian Cummings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 261, 684; See John Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England: 1646–1689* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 166; and Hole, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order*, 19–21.



and dissenters alike during the eighteenth century, it remained prevalent in Burke's time.<sup>29</sup>

This mainstream Protestant view may be contrasted not only with the views of dissenters inherited from the Radical Reformation, urging a total and complete separation of church and state, but also with moderate supporters of establishment. Most importantly for our purposes is the view espoused by William Warburton, who considered the establishment to be "an Alliance" between two distinct societies, not only pursuing different aims, but of different natures.<sup>30</sup> The two came together only as the result of a conscious, contractual alliance, both drawing on the other for support. Warburton denied the divine origin of civil power, but nevertheless held that it was convenient for the church to make use of the state, and for the state to make use of religion. This view gained considerable traction in eighteenth-century England, but was by no means universal. As we shall see, Burke would explicitly align himself with the forces of Anglican orthodoxy against Warburton's views.

Particularly relevant to Burke are the leaders of the Oxford High Church movement of his day, most notably George Horne, Bishop of Norwich and Samuel Horsley, Bishop of Rochester.<sup>31</sup> Both, like Burke, were powerful critics of the French Revolution. Burke had a brief and cordial correspondence with Horne, in which he praised the latter's anti-revolutionary defense of orthodoxy, the "Charge to the Clergy of Norwich," as "full of Wisdom, and piety, and of doctrine not only sound in itself, but for the time most seasonable."<sup>32</sup> Horne echoed the long-es-

---

29 Several representative examples include Edmund Gibson, *Religion, the Best Security to Church and State: A Sermon Preached at the Assizes* (London: Black Swan, 1715); Gloucester Ridley, *Constitution in Church and State, Three Sermons Preached on Occasion of the Present Rebellion at St. Ann's Limehouse, and the Chapel of Poplar, in Sept. and Oct. 1745* (London, 1746), 78–79; Thomas Hayter, *A Sermon Preached Before the Honourable House of Commons, at St. Margaret's Westminster, on Wednesday, June 11, 1746. Being the Anniversary of His Majesty's Happy Accession to the Throne* (London, 1746), 10–12.

30 William Warburton, *An Alliance Between Church and State: Or, The Necessity and Equity of an Established Religion and Test Law Demonstrated in Three Books* (London: A. Millar and J. & R. Tonson, 1766); See Young, *Religion and Enlightenment*, 176–78.

31 For a more complete assessment of these and other exponents of orthodox Anglican views of the state see Clark, *English Society*, 216–35.

32 Burke, *Correspondence*, 6:455; Burke's intellectual affinity with Horsley, however, did not translate into outward praise, as Horsley was a staunch defender of Warren Hastings in the House of Lords.



tablished view of the state as the agent of divine justice: “God being ... the supreme Lawgiver, and the fountain of all Justice, he that executes the laws of this justice, judges for him who is the judge of all.”<sup>33</sup> Horne, more clearly than most, tended to situate government within a cosmic view of God’s providential concern for human well-being: “Society, which implies government, is the natural state of mankind; all are born under it; and it is happy for them that they are so; they could not otherwise be reared from infancy to manhood or partake in security of any of those blessings now poured in such profusion around us.”<sup>34</sup> The providential establishment of government allows for the satisfaction of all human needs—physical and spiritual—for without peace, security, and virtue, none of the “blessings” could be enjoyed: “By government vigorously administered, order is maintained in the world; then piety and virtue take root downwards, and bear fruit upwards; then the kingdom of heaven is established, and extends itself upon earth.”<sup>35</sup>

Horsley particularly emphasized the providential character of government, claiming that belief in a world providentially ordered by God was the “only solid foundation of civil society.”<sup>36</sup> In an unpublished sketch, he presents civil government as the “approximation” of the “common measure of moral conduct universally applicable” and useful for promoting “happiness and welfare.”<sup>37</sup> To directly know and apply this divine moral standard “[exceeds] the natural power of the Human Mind.” Yet life in civil government provides the citizen a certain “apprehension” of it. As such, in a turn of phrase similar to Burke’s famous depiction of the social contract, discussed below, he characterizes all governments as “Provinces of the great and universal Kingdom to which all Men owe their first and highest Allegiance.” Moreover,

---

33 George Horne, *A Charge Intended to be Have Been Delivered to the Clergy of Norwich At the Primary Visitation of George, the Bishop of that Diocese* (Norwich: Yarrington and Bacon, 1791), 31.

34 George Horne, *Discourses on Several Subjects and Occasions* (Oxford, 1795), 189.

35 *Ibid.*, 187.

36 Samuel Horsley, *The Speeches in Parliament of Samuel Horsley, Late Lord Bishop of St. Asaph* (Dundee, 1813), 37.

37 Samuel Horsley, “Thoughts on Civil Government,” in *From Cranmer to Davidson: A Church of England Miscellany*, ed. Stephen Taylor (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1999), 208–09.

these “provinces” serve to “elevate [Man] to the Perfection, to which his Nature aspires.”<sup>38</sup>

Two general observations are in order. First, this view of the state allowed for prescribed rights and limitations on government, though it denied any abstract standard by which these could be established. Horne, for instance, acknowledged that the inherent obligation to obey the “powers that be” does not obviate the prescribed rights of citizens, or demand absolute government. Rather, it enjoins obedience to “the laws and constitution of our country.”<sup>39</sup> There was no definitive formula for determining the circumstances in which resistance to oppressive rule may be justified. The relatively conservative Whig and latitudinarian Thomas Hayter, in particularly Burkean style, concluded that resistance to government is justified only in “a case of extreme necessity” arising from a ruler who rejects the divine trust. While it cannot be clearly articulated, the right “will always explain itself, when it comes; but neither can, nor ought, to be precisely pointed out, and defined beforehand.”<sup>40</sup> Even the Tory Horne claimed that the obligation of obedience was attached to the “government settled according to the constitution of the country in which it subsists,” leaving open a narrow window for resistance to unconstitutional usurpation.<sup>41</sup>

Second, this conception of the state was not necessarily tied to the state’s adherence to completely true religion. Because the state’s purpose was emphatically not the salvation of souls, but the preservation of peace and promotion of virtue, its divine mandate could be pursued without true religion. Thus, Horne notes, “The Jews even when captives in Babylon, were commanded to pray for the prosperity of their oppressor and his city, for the same reason, that ‘in it’s [*sic*] peace they might have peace.’”<sup>42</sup> Early Christians, likewise, were to submit peacefully to the Roman government which fulfilled its duty to maintain peace and order despite its false religion.<sup>43</sup> It should not be surprising, then, to see an inheritor of this tradition like Burke offer a degree of praise for

---

38 Ibid., 209.

39 Horne, *Discourses*, 364.

40 Hayter, *Sermon*, 14.

41 Horne, *Discourses*, 362–63.

42 Horne, *Discourses*, 190.

43 Ibid., 366–67.

well-established laws that emerge from religious traditions he thought to be false.<sup>44</sup>

We may, therefore, outline a broad tradition of religious thought concerning civil government originating in the Magisterial Reformation, adapted to the unique characteristics of England, and continuing to Burke's day, though increasingly challenged on many fronts: civil power was divinely ordained as an authority established to punish the inherently sinful impulses of man's fallen nature, and thereby promote justice and earthly virtue. Those possessing political power, therefore, ought to sense that they hold a divine trust. Such authority, however, was not the product of direct appointment by God or descent from Adam, as divine-right theories had posed, but was the providential provision of the human need for earthly order and moral virtue. As such, no specific form of government was demanded and no specific individual possessed an abstract title to rule. The state was distinct from the church insofar as its purpose was to provide for peace, order, and lawfulness, rather than the salvation of souls, but their complementarity and common source of authority bound them together.

### *Burke's Theological Underpinnings*

Approaching Burke with this background in mind may help us better understand the role of religion in his thought. His ideas reflected this common outlook, but he also developed a more systematic account of how the awareness of the religious foundations of government impacted the beliefs and attitudes of citizens when it comes to justice, rights, and obligations.

Burke's Christianity was ecumenical, and the argument here is not intended to suggest that his particular attachment to Anglicanism was more fervent than it was. His family's Catholic background and his friendship with Protestant dissenters taught him both moderation and toleration, so that he did not follow some of those defenders of establishment who would brook no toleration of those who did not conform. Indeed, toleration, within limits, was a consistent theme of his career.

---

<sup>44</sup> See *Writings and Speeches*, 6:304–05, 353.

He seemed to be describing his own sentiments when he noted that the descendants of the Reformers “have retained the same zeal; but, (as less engaged in conflict) with more moderation. They do not forget that justice and mercy are substantial parts of religion.”<sup>45</sup> Moreover, as we shall see, the conceptual link between church and state to which he subscribed did not make the state a functionary of the church, so a generally ecumenical view of Christian divisions does not foreclose real Anglican influences.

*Reflections on the Revolution in France* and his other anti-revolutionary writings were written with religion in the forefront of Burke’s mind. The National Assembly’s seizure of church property had raised Burke’s ire against the revolutionaries just as much as the assault on the king and queen. The revolution also came at a time when dissenters in England were again pushing for a repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. Burke had long wrestled with this issue, and while he regularly expressed sympathy for honest religious minorities, he had come to believe, not without cause, that the dissenters sought more than mere toleration. Rather, they sought the end of the establishment and the radical separation of religion from the state. It should not be forgotten that it was a dissenting universalist preacher, Richard Price, who drove home for Burke the danger the revolution posed to Great Britain.<sup>46</sup>

Burke opened his discussion of religion in *Reflections* with a bold assertion, heavy with implications: “We know, and what is better we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good and comfort.”<sup>47</sup> We first observe that Burke calls religion the “basis” of civil society, not merely an important element or a vital means to an end. This ought to indicate that religion’s place in society extends beyond its utility to the maintenance of that society. Rather, it offers some purpose or grounding for civil life. The last clause of the sentence, in turn, may point us in the direction of that purpose: the promotion of “good” and “comfort.” From the outset of this discussion, then, Burke seems to situate political life within a framework of ultimate human ends. He later continues: “Every sort of moral, every sort of

---

<sup>45</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 320–21.

<sup>46</sup> See Lock, *Edmund Burke Volume II*, 252–53.

<sup>47</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 254.

civil, every sort of politic institution, aiding the rational and natural ties that connect the human understanding and affections to the divine are not more than necessary, in order to build up that wonderful structure, Man.<sup>48</sup> Again, it is not religious attitudes which build up the “structure” of society or government, as a utilitarian view of religion might suggest, but political institutions which build up the human being by connecting him, in some way, to the divine.

An inherent tension in the moral life of the human being underlies Burke’s elevated opinion of civil society. “Man,” he observed, is “in a great degree a creature of his own making.”<sup>49</sup> What he meant by this, however, was not that man has the prerogative to make himself into whatever he pleases. Rather, he meant that man is tasked with improving himself while aiming at his ultimate perfection; he must strive to make himself “as he ought to be made.”<sup>50</sup> Moreover, civil society, with its salutary restraints on the human will, is fundamental to the creation of men as they ought to be: “... without [...] civil society man could not by any possibility arrive at the perfection of which his nature is capable, nor even make a remote and faint approach to it.”<sup>51</sup> Therefore, we are bound to conclude that “He who gave our nature to be perfected by our virtue, willed also the necessary means of its perfection—He willed therefore the state ...”<sup>52</sup> So human beings are tasked with constructing the world around them with an eye toward ultimate moral purposes, but they cannot fully grasp these purposes or perfect themselves unless that very world they create properly restrains their will and molds their character.<sup>53</sup> Civil society, therefore, stood like the church, in the nexus between everyday life and the infinite.<sup>54</sup> Administered by human beings,

---

48 Ibid., 257.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.; See Francis Canavan, *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1960), 88.

51 Burke, *Reflections*, 262; See Byrne, *Burke for Our Time*.

52 Ibid.; See Canavan, *Prescription and Providence*, 108, who notes that “there is an entire metaphysics implicit in this passage.” Canavan, however, seems to overstate just how clear Burke believed this metaphysics was to the human mind.

53 Burke identified the attempt to liberate the personal will as the most destructive disease of the “Parisian Philosophers,” see *Correspondence*, 6:269.

54 Burke’s early *Vindication of Natural Society* reflects this essential parallel between church and state.

it was nevertheless providentially ordained to direct them toward certain ends, though, unlike the church, its purposes were limited to this life. Politics, then, is a continual struggle to direct civil society toward moral ends which we vaguely and inwardly sense are true, but which we can see only through a glass darkly.<sup>55</sup>

In following this difficult path, it is impossible to construct any systematic account of the limits and objects of government, which must be free and empowered to adjust itself to the “infinite modifications” of circumstance.<sup>56</sup> Two conclusions can be drawn, however: government must be a stable source of authority for citizens to restrain the individual appetite and will. As such, it was not to be made and remade according to the will of the present majority. Second, it must not be directed by the personal will of those who hold positions of authority. The sense of sublimity associated with political authority, Burke believed, was key to both of these imperatives, and it was maintained at least in part by the sacred link provided by the established church.

#### A SUBLIME POLITICS

Burke’s aesthetic understanding has increasingly come to be seen as a conceptual key to his political thought.<sup>57</sup> This is certainly true when it comes to understanding its religious component. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* was one of his earliest writings, published prior to his entry into politics. Many have noted, however, that his concepts of the sublime and beautiful presented in that work continued to animate his political observations. The sublime, originating in the sense for self-preservation, has a tendency to stunt human faculties and instill a sense of smallness and powerlessness. Sublime feelings, including awe, reverence, and respect, are triggered by those things which are large, powerful, infinite, and obscure. The sublime,

55 See Burgess, *Edmund Burke’s Battle*, 24.

56 Burke, *Reflections*, 219.

57 Steven K. White, *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics and Aesthetics* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994); Rob Goodman, “The Deliberative Sublime: Edmund Burke on Disruptive Speech and Imaginative Judgement,” *American Political Science Review* 112 (2): 267–79; Terry Eagleton, “Aesthetics and Politics in Edmund Burke,” *History Workshop Journal* 28:53–62; William F. Byrne, *Edmund Burke for Our Time: Moral Imagination, Meaning and Politics* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Press, 2011), 98–109.

moreover, has an undeniably religious component. Burke presented the unfathomable power of God as the paramount example of the sublime: “Whilst we contemplate so vast an object, under the arm, as it were, of almighty power, and invested upon every side with omnipresence, we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him.”<sup>58</sup> God is all-powerful, infinite, and obscure to human understanding. These characteristics impress upon us a sense of smallness and humility. Burke believed such characteristics of religious belief served as essential foundations of social order, which required the humbling of personal will and the cultivation of moderation.

Given the severe strains that this Magisterial tradition had been under during the eighteenth century, Burke observed that it was vital to defend that state not only through theological arguments (which he himself was not apt to develop in any detail, but which he praised when articulated by others), but also through those sublime characteristics of the state that create a distinct sense of one’s own smallness next to the weighty and grave task of the state in administering justice. We might recall the opening of his discussion of religion in *Reflections*: “We know, *and what is better we feel inwardly ...*”<sup>59</sup>

While Burke did expect these sublime characteristics of the state to inculcate a healthy respect for authority on the part of citizens, they were equally a force that served to restrain those who exercised state authority: “By this wise prejudice we are taught to look with horror on those children of their country who are prompt rashly to hack that aged parent in pieces, and put him into the kettle of magicians ...”<sup>60</sup> Likewise, particularly echoing Anglican divines, “All persons possessing any portion of power ought to be strongly and awefully impressed with an idea that they act in trust; and that they are to account for their conduct in that trust to the one great master, author and founder of society.”<sup>61</sup>

---

58 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 1:239.

59 Burke, *Reflections*, 254. [Italics added]

60 *Ibid.*, 260.

61 *Ibid.*, 257. This idea that the divine nature of political life should instill caution and humility in rulers was articulated by earlier exponents of orthodox Anglican theory of the state. See Richard Hutchins, *Ten Sermons by Richard Hutchins, D.D., Late Rector of Lincoln College in Oxford* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1782), 197–98; Hayter, *Sermon*, 11.

At the opening of the Warren Hastings impeachment, he similarly remarked that conquest was merely “a more immediate designation of the hand of God” and the victor in war “only succeeds to all the painful duties and subordination to the power of God which belonged to the Sovereign that held the country before.”<sup>62</sup>

Only broad-based acceptance of this consecrated status of the state could avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of unrestrained, brute power on the one hand and the anarchy of perpetual revolution on the other. Only “a power out of themselves” could exert the kind of salutary restraint on the inclinations and passions both of the average citizens and of those in power.<sup>63</sup> In his letter to the Chevalier de Rivarol, he specifically notes that humane, social feelings for others (what he identified as the origin of the beautiful in *Sublime and Beautiful*) are insufficient to restrain the personal will and encourage lawfulness, suggesting, perhaps, that a sublime restraint may be necessary.<sup>64</sup>

Overawed by the divine character of the state, ruler and ruled alike sense that they play but a small part in a great cosmic order and are thereby disinclined to blindly obey their personal will. This is accomplished less by acceptance of a set of doctrines, than by the inculcation of a certain sense of awe which informs one’s attitudes about power and cultivates moderation. When Burke observes that the “spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion” are responsible for holding up European civilization, it is the effect religion has on attitudes and manners that he has in mind more than any specific doctrine.<sup>65</sup> Religion and belief in providence restrain pride and ambition, and explain the latent wisdom ingrained in the human heart.<sup>66</sup> One may note the similarity to Robert Lowth’s “Martyrdom Sermon” of 1767, in which Lowth urged the House of Lords to “cultivate in ourselves and others a deep sense of the over-ruling Providence of God ... and to guard with all possible care and attention those important out-works of respect and reverence which our laws have wisely raised about the throne, as their

---

62 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 6:351.

63 Burke, *Reflections*, 219.

64 Burke, *Correspondence*, 6:269.

65 Burke, *Reflections*, 241.

66 *Ibid.*, 242–43.



own best safeguard and defense.”<sup>67</sup> Lowth is of particular interest here, as his discussion of the sublime in *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum* may have influenced the examples Burke included in the second edition of *Sublime and Beautiful*.<sup>68</sup> In that work, Lowth examined the use of sublime imagery as a way to give the human mind a sense of divine omnipotence, which is incapable of being grasped by reason. The language of the sublime was able to make an “ideal shadow” into “an object of our senses.”<sup>69</sup>

Recognition of the sublime, divine origin of government, Burke believed, was most important in governments in which a portion of power is exercised by the common people, who are more apt than a class or a single individual to see themselves as a supreme authority. In his age, belief in the “sovereignty of the people” had eclipsed the theological perspective on the origins of government, and the people were therefore apt to “imagine that their will ... is the standard of right and wrong.”<sup>70</sup> The leaders of the Revolution, moreover, were “intoxicated with admiration at their own wisdom and ability.”<sup>71</sup> Religion, he says, is the only means by which men rid themselves of this “lust of selfish will,” and is therefore a necessary part of the exercise of governing power: “When they are conscious that they exercise, and exercise perhaps in a higher link of the order of delegation, the power, which to be legitimate must be according to that eternal immutable law, in which will and reason are the same, they will be more careful how they place power in base and incapable hands.”<sup>72</sup>

In *Reflections*, then, we can see Burke clearly reflecting the orthodox Anglican theory of the state and developing his political theory around that belief. Divinely sanctioned, the state was a necessary hierarchy of authority intended to promote divine justice on earth. It did so by restraining the human will and appetites, which were apt to lead the individual away from his moral perfection. It is true, as many interpreters note, that Burke “emphasized the social benefits of Christianity

67 Lowth, *Sermons*, 122.

68 See Ian Crowe, *Patriotism and Public Spirit: Edmund Burke and the Role of the Critic in Mid-18th-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 171.

69 Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (London, 1816 [1753]), 357.

70 Burke, *Reflections*, 258.

71 *Ibid.*, 303.

72 *Ibid.*, 258.

rather than its truth.”<sup>73</sup> But this would not at all be out of step with mainstream Protestant views of the state. Even in confessional states where church and state were considered integrated parts of a whole, there was still a division in terms of their purpose. The state was to promote civil peace and outward virtue, and it ought to promote religion to the extent to which it was necessary to meet this goal. So while it is accurate to say that Burke emphasized social good rather than religious truth, it is somewhat misleading to place these two in contradistinction with one another. It was precisely the truth of religion which Burke believed to be of great social utility: that all authority derived ultimately from the creator of the universe, and was to be used in pursuit of the justice which is sewn into the nature of creation.<sup>74</sup> Belief in this sublime truth, Burke believed, was what stood between politics and barbarism; it was the only effective check on selfish will which did not, in turn, empower some other selfish will. It subjected ruler and ruled alike.<sup>75</sup>

## CHURCH AND STATE

The sublime character of the state was impressed upon hearts and minds by its clear linkage with that institution which was more generally acknowledged to stand in the same nexus between God and man: the church. Just as God willed the state, so “He willed its connexion with the source and original archetype of all perfection.”<sup>76</sup> So Burke defended the Anglican establishment on the grounds that it promoted the necessary parallel between the social structure which provides man’s spiritual fulfillment, and that which promotes the moral fulfillment attainable on earth. “Human society” was that for which both “church and state are made,” he remarked in a 1790 letter.<sup>77</sup>

When a group of Unitarians sought greater formal toleration of non-Trinitarian views, Burke defended the civil-religious linkage: Since

73 Ian Harris, “Burke’s Religion”; See also Michael Freeman, *Edmund Burke and the Critique of Political Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 17–18; and Radasanu, “Modern Foundations,” 21.

74 See Byrne, *Edmund Burke for Our Time*, 105–06.

75 See Burke, “Speech on Toleration Bill” (1772), in *Writings and Speeches*, 2:388 on the degraded condition of man without religion.

76 Burke, *Reflections*, 262.

77 Burke, “Letter to Captain Thomas Mercer,” *Correspondence*, 6:94.

religion aimed at “the supreme good, the ultimate End and *Object* of man himself,” civil leaders could not simply ignore it, even if their goals were more earthly: “The Magistrate, who is a man, and charged with the concerns of men, a man to whom *very specially* nothing human is remote and indifferent, has a right and a duty to watch over it with an unceasing Vigilance To protect, to promote, to forward it by every rational, just and prudent means.”<sup>78</sup> The magistrate is to support religion, however, not wield it. As he had noted long ago in his youthful reflections, if religion were to be used for *purely* worldly purposes—simply as a “state engine”—it would lose the very effect that was intended.<sup>79</sup> As a side effect of a faith which points men’s eyes upward, religion serves a useful political purpose. To focus exclusively on that side effect however, undermines it by again turning eyes downward.

In the Unitarian speech, Burke strikes an emphatically Hookerian note: “in a *Christian* commonwealth,” he stated, “the *Church and the State* are one and the same thing.”<sup>80</sup> His claim was specifically made in such a way to reject Warburton’s conception of an “alliance between Church and State” mentioned above:

An alliance between *Church and State* in a Christian commonwealth is in my opinion an idle and fanciful Speculation. An *alliance* is between *two* things, that are in their nature *distinct and independent*, such as between *two Sovereign States*. But in a *Christian* commonwealth, the *Church and the State* are one and the same thing; being different *integrant parts* of the *same whole*, which is the Church. For the Church has been always divided into *two* parts, the *Clergy* and the *Laity*, —of which the Laity is as much an *essential integrant part*, and has as much its *duties and privileges*, as the Clerical Member; and in the Rule order and government of the Church, has its share.<sup>81</sup>

He goes so far as to liken civil government to the laity of the church organizing itself for the purposes of civil peace and justice. When one

---

78 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 4:491.

79 Burke, “Religion of no Efficacy Considered as a State Engine,” *Note-Book*, 67–68.

80 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 4:491.

81 *Ibid.*, 490–91.

recognizes his context (Warburton was also defending the establishment), Burke's reasoning seems all the more striking. A more Whiggish position was open to him and could have been used to the same end, yet he chose to assert the more conservative and orthodox position. He used "the accents . . . of the Magisterial Reformation," as B. W. Young notes, to push against contemporary trends to separate the worldly from the divine.<sup>82</sup>

Interestingly, those who consider Burke's view of religion as purely a matter of civil utility essentially ascribe to him the Warburton position which he explicitly rejects in this speech. The established church, according to Warburton, was the product of a compact from which both parties derived benefits. The church sought establishment so as to gain the protection of the civil law; the state sought establishment to benefit from the social cohesion which religion can bring to bear. Clark describes Warburton's defense of the Church of England thus: The church possessed its privileges "because its establishment was expedient, not because its doctrine was true."<sup>83</sup> The same phrase might be used word for word by the social-utility interpreters of Burke. Yet he explicitly rejects the view. He does so because the Warburton position makes the state an entirely secular institution, failing to place it in that vital nexus between man and the divine that Burke believed it occupied.

Burke did acknowledge an active, corporate social unit which may reform the social and governmental forms to best meet the material and moral needs of the people in a manner that may very broadly be termed utilitarian, and he often used material prosperity as a rough indicator of a just state. But it is deceptive to reduce this teaching to a theory of voluntary, human-directed progress toward certain material goods like commerce, art, or refined morals.<sup>84</sup> This interpretation suffers from a misunderstanding of the distinction between church and state which existed in Anglican thought, failing to recognize that the belief in a divinely sanctioned state meant only that the *origin* of the state, not necessarily its *purpose*, was spiritual. There was nothing impious about the suggestion that the state served to promote the worldly good—

---

82 B. W. Young, "Burke and Unitarianism," *Studies in Burke and His Time* 26 (2016–2017): 97.

83 Clark, *English Society*, 273.

84 Cf. Conniff, *Useful Cobbler*, 64–65; Radasanu, "Modern Foundations," 22.

material and moral—of human beings. Likewise, this reading misinterprets Burke’s utilization of material standards, suggesting that the use of such standards implied that they were the *ultimate* standard. Burke specifically denies this, however. When assessing whether the *ancien régime* was worth reforming, he points to its wealth and fertility, adding the caveat, “I do not like to compliment the contrivances of men, with what is due in a great degree to the bounty of Providence.”<sup>85</sup> While this may be little more than a pious qualification, it is indicative of a more general approach which, in keeping with belief in a kind providence, held that the effective enforcement of justice would generally lead to prosperity and material flourishing.

The related misreading of Burke, which overemphasizes his latitudinarian sentiments, highlights that he often expressed a broad religious sentiment and suggested that his Anglicanism was as much a matter of local attachment as it was zealous belief.<sup>86</sup> As noted, Burke did, indeed, express greater religious attachment to Christianity writ large than to the Anglican church. However, in line with the Protestant views described here, Burke was always quick to note that the political relevance of religion was related more to the core “substance” of belief (i.e. the belief in an omnipotent, providential, and just God), than the doctrinal differences of specific sects.<sup>87</sup> “The body of all true religion consists ... in obedience to the will of the sovereign of the world.”<sup>88</sup> He believed all religions that possessed this substance were capable of moderating the individual will and inculcating a sense of the sublimity of a providential God upon their followers.

Moreover, because of the pivotal distinction between the purpose of church and state, the latter’s authority was not generally to be directed

---

85 Burke, *Reflections*, 297.

86 Conniff, *Useful Cobbler*, 101.

87 Burke, *Reflections*, 320. This also helps explain his language when discussing Catholicism and the Protestant Ascendency in Ireland, as he regularly argued that the Catholic faith possessed all the substance of the Protestant, and it was merely that the Protestant negated certain elements of the Catholic. As such, he saw Catholicism as a valid source of social order in Ireland. See *Correspondence*, 9:261; see also his discussion of the four major divisions of Christianity, which all “stand upon one common bottom,” *Correspondence*, 8:130.

88 Burke, *Reflections*, 330; note the connotations of rulership in the use of the term “sovereign.”

by the dogmas of the former, but by the prudential management of human affairs. Thus, Burke can without blasphemy call prudence “the God of this lower world.”<sup>89</sup>

## SELF-PRESERVATION AND THE SUBLIME

Given this interpretation’s reliance on Burke’s sense of the sublimity of religion, a note on the sublime and self-preservation is also in order. In *Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke sees the sense of the sublime as arising from the idea of self-preservation, while the sense of beauty arises from the idea of society with others.<sup>90</sup> Political theorists, therefore, may reasonably seek to make a connection between a Burkean politics of the sublime and a Hobbesian politics of self-preservation.<sup>91</sup> But this mistakes the origin of the sublime with the end of the sublime. Those things which we call sublime are not simply those things which we directly fear and avoid. For Hobbes, the primacy of self-preservation logically led to the avoidance of violent death at all costs. Burke’s sublime, however, is not as simple as the idea of the sword hanging over one’s head. Rather, it is the sense of those things which inspire terror and awe because of their greatness in relation to ourselves. Sublime things, then, have the ability to “delight” us, when they do not directly threaten us by exercising those faculties of the mind which sense our vulnerability, and they can create a range of feelings between astonishment and awe.<sup>92</sup> The sublime and beautiful, Burke even notes, may be mixed together (and Christian revelation, he adds, is a specific example of such blending).<sup>93</sup> Indeed, the sense of the sublime informs our imagination and allows us to apprehend things which our “naked reason” alone cannot understand.<sup>94</sup>

Burke’s politics of the sublime, then, is not at all centered on the avoidance of death, nor does it exclude the incorporation of “beautiful” social feelings. Rather, the sublime sense of our relationship to the

89 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 3:316.

90 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 1:216.

91 See David Womersley, “The Role of Friendship in the Political Thought of Edmund Burke,” in *Love and Friendship: Rethinking Politics and Affection in Modern Times*, ed. Eduardo A. Velasquez (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 267; Radasanu, “Modern Foundations,” 23–24.

92 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 1:287–89.

93 *Ibid.*, 1:282, 241.

94 *Ibid.*, 1:208; See his broader discussion of taste, 205–07.

infinite serves as one of the great untaught prejudices so prominent in Burke's thought, informing us of our duties and moral limits even when our judgment fails. Lastly, Burke can most obviously be distinguished from Hobbes in that he adamantly denied that human beings can or ought to create their own sublime. As White convincingly shows, Burke saw the creation of a human-created "false sublime" as one of the greatest abominations of the French Jacobins.<sup>95</sup> Hobbes's politics was built on the belief that man can, indeed, "draw out leviathan with an hook."<sup>96</sup> Burke's politics was built on the belief that he cannot.

*Applications: The Social Contract, Rights, and Natural Law*

These theological underpinnings can help us understand many of Burke's most famous political teachings. Their relevance should be obvious in some cases, such as his preference for gradual change over revolution, and his distrust of abstract systems of government. Here, we will examine how they may enlighten our understanding of three contested issues in Burke's thought: his unique conception of the social contract; his theory of rights; and his assessment of the natural law.

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

Burke's use of contractarian language may seem to complicate this interpretation. However, his conception of a social contract is nuanced and fits comfortably within his broader theological understanding. "If civil society be the offspring of convention, that convention must be its law," he asserts at one point. "Government is a contrivance of human wisdom," he continues.<sup>97</sup> Such language seems to desacralize the state by making it the product of human creation.<sup>98</sup> But this reading overlooks the essential tension noted above between man as a creature of his own making on the one hand, and man as morally directed to certain ends on the other. Political life is dominated by institutions that

---

<sup>95</sup> White, *Modernity*, 75.

<sup>96</sup> Job 41:1.

<sup>97</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 218.

<sup>98</sup> See Clark, ed., in Burke, *Reflections*, 219n237.

are ultimately changeable conventions, created by particular societies for particular circumstances. Yet they exist for the purpose of pursuing objective human goods, material and moral.<sup>99</sup> As such, Burke describes political reason as a “computing principle; adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing, morally and not metaphysically or mathematically, true moral denominations.”<sup>100</sup> His language makes the most sense within his Protestant context in which the state, though administered by human beings, has a providential purpose to promote justice and provide for earthly human goods.

This broader context is most obvious in his well-known discussion of the state as a contract extending through the generations. By seeing political authority in the context of divine justice, the people of the current generation, who are but “temporary possessors and life-renters,” must recognize that their authority is not plenary; that, on the one hand, the society they have inherited is a gift to be cherished, and on the other, that they are morally obligated to pass that gift to the next generation.<sup>101</sup> The revolutionary spirit, which affirms and empowers the personal will, encourages the idea that political authority ought to reflect the immediate will of those who possess it. Given that the gift of government was meant as a restraint on the governed, such a view would destroy all that was valuable in it. The first among those threatened gifts was jurisprudence, which synthesized “the principles of original justice with the infinite variety of human concerns.”<sup>102</sup> Without this, “no certain laws ... would keep the actions of men in a certain course, or direct them to a certain end.”<sup>103</sup>

The consecration of society requires that one see the civil power as an established, permanent authority meant to promote the good of mankind, not the immediate will of the current generation. As he famously described it, “[I]t is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection.” He continued:

---

99 E.g., “Men have no right to what is not reasonable, and to what is not for their benefit,” *Reflections*, 221.

100 Burke, *Reflections*, 221.

101 *Ibid.*, 259.

102 *Ibid.*, 259–60.

103 *Ibid.*, 260.



[I]t becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primæval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place.<sup>104</sup>

This extremely well-known passage is far from the simple Whig contractarian theory of pre-political individuals creating the state for human purposes, but unmistakably places human contrivances within a theological context.

To understand this social contract, one should not overlook an unmistakable parallel between this famous contract passage and the Protestant conception of the “visible” church as a temporal (and therefore imperfect) representation of the “invisible” church of all believers. Just as each “visible,” temporally distinct church body (national or otherwise) was connected to the “eternal,” “higher,” and “invisible” church, so each society is but one “clause” in the “primaeval” contract. Like specific church bodies, its particular forms and traditions are not, in and of themselves, sacred. Yet they are the means by which an individual may partake in the sacred justice.

It is this almost sacramental view of the state that allows Burke to describe many of the venerable traditions, sympathies, and emotional attachments associated with the state as “pleasing illusions.”<sup>105</sup> To many contemporary critics, he seemed to have an excessive focus on symbolism, imagery, and sentiments.<sup>106</sup> Such things cultivated what he called the “moral imagination” in minds and hearts. Our conception of and attachment to the good, to beauty, to justice, and to other such desirable concepts was shaped and empowered by our interaction with the tangi-

---

104 Ibid., 261.

105 Ibid., 239; See also “Philosophy and Learning,” in *Note-Book*, 91; cf. Radasanu, “Modern Foundations,” 21.

106 See Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*; Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (Gainesville, FL, 1960), 114–16.

ble world around us, which teaches us these things, if imperfectly.<sup>107</sup> In using the word “illusions,” he did not mean to suggest that this is a pure fantasy that merely happens to have a pleasing effect. He sardonically mocks this view several lines later—“On this scheme of things, a king is but a man; a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal . . . Regicide, and parricide, and sacrilege, are but fictions of superstition . . .”<sup>108</sup> He clearly did not believe this to be the case. Such prejudices were “illusions” in that they were not in and of themselves the substance of justice and obligation. They were, however, a kind of temporal host through which we might vaguely and imperfectly participate in the pure, “invisible” justice.

If the promotion of the earthly virtues, especially justice, is the ultimate purpose of the state, we discern the demands of these virtues through interactions with social and political institutions and the sentiments such interactions engender. An instructive personal example can be found in Burke’s felt sense of his own duty which taught him restraint and limits: “I find it is not easy for a man who has deeply interested himself in the affairs of the world,” he wrote in an unsent letter in his retirement, “totally to extinguish all the Sentiments and all the emotions they have produced. These very emotions may be Notices of our Duty. A reviving Sympathy with the State of the Country may possibly be a call to serve it.”<sup>109</sup> Indeed, Burke often spoke of his own political position in terms of this sense of duty. Writing to Captain Thomas Mercer at the outset of the French Revolution, he noted that, unlike the idle philosopher, he was

obliged to *act*, and am therefore bound to call my principles and sentiments to a strict account. As far as my share of a public trust goes, I am in *trust* religiously to maintain the rights and properties of all descriptions of people in the *possession* which legally they hold. . . . I do not find myself at liberty . . . to take a *vested* property from one man, and to give it to another,

---

<sup>107</sup> See Byrne, *Edmund Burke for Our Time*, 95–116.

<sup>108</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 240.

<sup>109</sup> Burke, “To Unknown,” *Correspondence*, 8:364.

because *I* think that the portion of one is too great, and that of another too small.<sup>110</sup>

Such a sense of duty, drawn from the sentiments of social and political life, however, makes sense only with a theological and providential understanding of the social order, as he made clear in his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*:

I allow, that if no supreme ruler exists, wise to form, and potent to enforce, the moral law, there is no sanction to any contract, virtual or even actual, against the will of prevalent power. On that hypothesis, let any set of men be strong enough to set their duties at defiance, and they cease to be duties any longer. We have but this one appeal against irresistible power—[“If you despise the human race and mortal arms, still trust the gods who will remember right and wrong”] ... We have obligations to mankind at large, which are not in consequence of any special voluntary pact. They arise from the relation of man to man, and the relations of man to God, which relations are not matter of choice. On the contrary, the force of all the pacts which we enter into with any particular person or number of persons amongst mankind, depends upon those prior obligations.<sup>111</sup>

If there is no ultimate lawgiver, Burke claims, there can be no morally binding social obligations. Contractarian theories merely dodge the issue, as there would be no moral obligation to fulfill contracts if they are not seen within a broader moral context.

#### RIGHTS

Burke’s conception of rights is another element of his thought that is much contested, and which is impossible to understand without first grasping his theological presuppositions. Like his version of the social contract, his theory of rights was tied intimately to the moral imagination. Rights are not merely human creations. They have an inherent

<sup>110</sup> Burke, “Letter to Captain Thomas Mercer,” *Correspondence*, 6:93–94.

<sup>111</sup> Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 4:442–43. We might note that, in keeping with the thesis presented here, Burke points to God the lawgiver, not the redeemer, as relevant to the state, underscoring the distinction of purpose between church and state.

moral content. Yet natural rights become relevant to us only as they are reflected in the immediate institutions, social structures, and traditions around us and as they are adapted to particular circumstances:

These metaphysic rights entering into common life, like rays of light which pierce into a dense medium, are, by the laws of nature, refracted from their straight line. Indeed in the gross and complicated mass of human passions and concerns, the primitive rights of men undergo such a variety of refractions and reflections, that it becomes absurd to talk of them as if they continued in the simplicity of their original direction.<sup>112</sup>

Hall's analysis of rights in Burke's thought is particularly instructive, explaining the manner in which emotional attachments to particular circumstances serve to translate natural rights for practical use.<sup>113</sup> But one might go a step further and note that this conception of rights is reasonable only insofar as one assumes that we generally *ought* to be emotionally attached to our particular social and political circumstance, as Burke's Christian underpinnings indicated.

When it comes to the protection of personal rights, then, Burke put the greatest emphasis on the rule of law rather than any systematic program of specific rights. The rule of law is a product of stable, accepted, and respected institutions of governance, and is a principle which demands the eschewal of absolute, arbitrary rule: "... Man is born to be governed by law," he stated at the opening of the Hastings impeachment, "and he that will substitute will in the place of it is an enemy to God."<sup>114</sup>

This general conception of rights applies equally to a corporate right of resistance. As we have seen, Anglican theories of the state, responding to the Glorious Revolution and constitutional settlement, saw resistance to authority as inherently questionable but not necessarily illegitimate in every circumstance. Burke shared this view. Entirely rejecting the claim that the people possess any abstract right to resist or remove their rulers, he did nevertheless believe in a right to resistance if and when the state

---

<sup>112</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 220.

<sup>113</sup> Lauren Hall, "Rights and the Heart: Emotions and Rights Claims in the Political Theory of Edmund Burke," *Review of Politics* 73 no. 4 (Fall 2011): 609–31.

<sup>114</sup> Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 6:351.

ceased to carry out its duty to provide for human goods: “Kings, in one sense, are undoubtedly the servants of the people, because their power has no other rational end than that of the general advantage.”<sup>115</sup> Yet no theoretical limit to the duty of obedience could be identified: “The speculative line of demarcation, where obedience ought to end, and resistance must begin, is faint, obscure, and not easily definable ... Governments must be abused and deranged indeed, before it can be thought of.” And in determining when such resistance to authority was justified, it is the sentiments formed out of the moral imagination which inform us more than reason: “Times and occasions, and provocations, will teach their own lessons. The wise will determine from the gravity of the case; the irritable from the sensibility to oppression; the high-minded from disdain and indignation at abusive power in unworthy hands; the brave and bold from the love of honorable danger in a generous cause.”<sup>116</sup>

His assessment of a right to resistance is a prime example of Burke’s preference for practical over theoretical wisdom in politics. But it also flows directly from his conception of the state, which may explain such a preference. The state has a definitive and limited role to play in human affairs, and the duty to obey springs from that role. But as a necessary source of authority it cannot be subject to any formula of obedience. The justice of resistance is to be found in the heart which is capable of perceiving this purpose of the state and recognizing when it has been abandoned, even if the head is incapable of articulating any formula which captures this right.

Perhaps the most unique element of Burke’s theory of rights is his inclusion of duty and personal restraints: “Society requires ... that even in the mass and body as well as in the individuals, the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection. This can only be done *by a power out of themselves* ... In this sense the restraints on men, as well as their liberties, are to be reckoned among their rights.” This sentiment is completely out of step with contemporary liberal conceptions of rights, which would limit the individual will only insofar as it threatens the liberty of others. Burke’s conception is informed by a broader understanding of human

---

<sup>115</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 179.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 181. Note the extreme similarity to the language of Thomas Hayter, quoted above (n. 40).

good centered on the promotion of moral virtue for its own sake. In this sense, limitations imposed on the will are not only conducive to the material good of others, but conducive the one's own moral good.

## NATURAL LAW

Finally, Burke's use of the natural law may also be understood more clearly within the Protestant context. Most interpreters who recognize the importance of religion in Burke's thought associate him with a Thomistic natural law tradition.<sup>117</sup> There can be little doubt that Burke believed in some form of natural law. But belief in a natural law may not necessarily make Burke a natural law *thinker* in the Thomistic tradition. Burke's references to the natural law, in keeping with typical Protestant usage, often emphasized the heart over human reason, prioritized God as lawgiver (as opposed to the order of nature itself), and were nearly always intertwined with other sources of authority, such as revelation, long-established usage, or civil law.<sup>118</sup>

In the same passage from the *Appeal* quoted above, Burke raises questions as to how much we may ever know about the ultimate origins of our political obligations, though we can perceive those obligations within a particular context: "Dark and inscrutable are the ways by which we come into the world. The instincts which give rise to this mysterious process of nature are not our making. But out of physical causes, unknown to us, perhaps unknowable, arise moral duties, which *as we are able perfectly to comprehend*, we are bound indispensably to perform" (emphasis added).<sup>119</sup> Duties arise from an "unknowable" process, but speak to us through the mediation of specific circumstances, even as we are unable to perceive the ultimate order of nature which knits these duties together: A parent may not be able to identify the metaphysical

---

117 Pappin, "Edmund Burke and the Thomistic Foundations of Natural Law"; Peter Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003). Sheldon, "Burke's Catholic Conservatism," 16.

118 See Johnathan Stonebraker and Sarah Irving, "Natural Law and Protestantism: A Historical Reassessment and its Contemporary Significance," *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 4 no. 3 (Oct. 2015): 421-41.

119 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 4:443; See also Burke, "Several Scattered Hints Concerning Philosophy and Learning Collected Here from My Papers," in *A Note-Book of Edmund Burke*, ed. H. V. F. Somerset (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 93.

origin of his or her duty to protect and rear a child, but may nevertheless sense clearly that such a duty exists when placed in the situation.

This is but the most vivid of many such statements on Burke's part, and it raises questions as to whether the religious element of his thought is best understood in terms of a discernible natural law which stands clearly and intelligibly apart from the civil and revealed law.<sup>120</sup> An acknowledgment of ultimate mystery does not contradict with natural law theory, of course.<sup>121</sup> Thomistic natural law did not claim that the universe was completely intelligible to human minds, and it certainly cannot be equated to the rationalism of Burke's immediate opponents. Mystery, however, often seems to take priority over intelligibility as the principal component of his thought.<sup>122</sup> Rather than emphasize the need to conform one's actions to an intelligible law, he often prefers to base his argument on the need to simply humble one's own will, which leads to moderation, the bedrock of all virtue. "The schemes of God are inscrutable; his ways are not our ways, nor his thoughts our thoughts. We must fall down prostrate in reverential silence, nor presume to question his dispensations, nor ask him why dost thou so?"<sup>123</sup> This is evident even in his earliest writings. In his preface to *Vindication*, Burke notes in his own voice: "[A] mind which has no Restraint from a Sense of its own Weakness, of its subordinate Rank in the Creation ... may very plausibly attack every thing the most excellent and venerable."<sup>124</sup> Later, in a satirical voice, he quips, "A good Parson once said, that where Mystery begins, Religion ends. Cannot I say, as truly at least, of human Laws, that where Mystery begins, Justice ends?"<sup>125</sup>

While he believed in a natural law, his intellectual exertions were not primarily aimed at articulating or explaining the dictates of that law. Rather, as our discussion of the moral imagination demonstrates,

<sup>120</sup> See, for instance, Stanlis's treatment of Burke's speeches on the Hastings impeachment in *Enlightenment and Revolution*, 29–36.

<sup>121</sup> Christopher J. Insole, "Two Conceptions of Liberalism: Theology, Creation and Politics in the Thought of Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 36 (Sep. 2008): 468.

<sup>122</sup> See White, *Edmund Burke*, 26–27.

<sup>123</sup> Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 2:362.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:135; See also Burke, "Philosophy and Learning," in *Note-Book*, 88–89; Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 82–83.

<sup>125</sup> Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 1:176.

he believed that law was “writ on the heart” and showed itself in our responses to the concrete reality before us. An early example of this application comes in a letter to a Bristol iron merchant worried that Burke’s support for freer Irish trade would hurt business. Defending the justice of the measure, he appeals to the natural law: “The Author of our Nature has written it strongly in that Nature, and has promulgated the same Law in his written Word, that Man shall eat his Bread by his Labour; and I am persuaded, that no man ... can, without great impiety, undertake to say, that he *shall not* do so; that they have no sort of right either to prevent the Labour, or to withhold the Bread.”<sup>126</sup> His appeal to the natural law was an appeal to the well-formed conscience and to revelation. Moreover, the primary effect he hoped his appeal would have would be to moderate and restrain selfish “Jealousies.”<sup>127</sup>

It is noteworthy that the concept of the state as a link to the divine often appears when Burke cites the natural law. Such is the case in his speech on the opening of impeachment. His comments warrant an extended quotation:

Arbitrary power is a thing which neither any man can hold nor any man can give away. No man can govern himself by his own will, much less can he be governed by the will of others. We are all born in subjection, all born equally, high and low, governors and governed, in subjection to one great, immutable, pre-existent law ... by which we are knit and connected in the eternal frame of the universe, out of which we cannot stir.

This great law does not arise from our conventions or compacts. On the contrary it gives to our conventions and compacts all the force and sanction they can have. It does not arise from our vain institutions. Every good gift is of God; all power is of God; and He who has given the power and from whom it alone originates, will never suffer the exercise of it to be practiced upon any less solid foundation than the power itself. Therefore, will it be imagined, if this be true, that He will suffer this great gift of Government, the greatest, the best that was ever given by

---

<sup>126</sup> Burke, *Correspondence*, 3:442.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 442, 444.



God to mankind, to be the play thing and the sport of the feeble will of a man, who, by a blasphemous, absurd, and petulant usurpation, would place his own feeble, contemptible, ridiculous will in the place of the Divine wisdom and justice?<sup>128</sup>

This speech is often cited as evidence of Burke's reliance on natural law, and not unreasonably so. But it is important to also recognize that his citation of natural law, (in which the will of God is as or more prevalent than His reason and intelligibility), comes packaged with the argument that the authority of government is instituted as the executor of divine justice and that we perceive it best within the framework of a settled, constitutional state. This is also the case in his discussion of the "eternal immutable law" in the *Reflections*.<sup>129</sup>

In his early *Note-Book* entry, "Philosophy and Learning," Burke suggests that providence provides the means of satisfaction for earthly needs: "I have too much reverence for our nature to wish myself divested even of the weak parts of it. I would not wish, as I have heard some do, that I could live without eating or sleeping. I rather thank providence that has so happily united the subsistence of my body with its satisfaction."<sup>130</sup> As there is an inherent law sewn into the fabric of creation which requires our obedience, so there is an authority created to clarify, promote, and effectuate that law. The passage on Hastings might be read as a suggestion that every individual has access to the natural law and must consciously guide his actions by it, but it seems more plausible to read it as an entreaty to recognize the sublime moral context in which all governors act and which gives "force and sanction" to the established order of a society. One is reminded of a passage of Job which Burke quoted in *Sublime and Beautiful*: "Fear came upon me and trembling, which made all my bones to shake. Then a spirit passed before my face. The hair of my flesh stood up. It stood still, but I could not discern the form thereof; an image was before mine eyes; there was silence; and I heard a voice, —Shall mortal man be more just than God?"<sup>131</sup> Recognition of the insignificance and weakness of oneself when compared to

<sup>128</sup> Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 6:350.

<sup>129</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 258.

<sup>130</sup> Burke, "Philosophy and Learning," in *Note-Book*, 92.

<sup>131</sup> Job 4:14–17, quoted in Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 1:235.

the divine authority which authorizes all power through an ultimately unfathomable law demands moderation and humility in every action, even when the precepts of that law are not always clearly intelligible. Thus, while invoking an inherent law, he does not suggest man avert his gaze from the concrete reality which providence sets before him. Burke, as a believer in a divinely ordered universe, believed in a natural law. But his use of it might simply indicate that Burke reflected Protestant orthodoxy—not that he was a Thomist.<sup>132</sup>

For those who doubt a religious underpinning to Burke's thought, these three applications could conceivably be explained as Burke's attempt to develop "pleasing illusions" of his own: noble lies which would effectively hold together a society that he believed best promoted the utilitarian, material justice that he used as his true guide. This interpretation is problematic, however. First, it would require one to dismiss the ideas that Burke is most famous for as little more than an elaborate con, something few if any scholars seem inclined to do. Second, Burke's personal life and correspondence evince genuine belief in the workings of providence in political life, a belief in the truly sublime characteristics of the divine justice, and in the moral order of nature.<sup>133</sup> His personal engagement with such ideas is powerfully demonstrated by his reaction to his son's untimely death. Describing his grief in "Letter to a Noble Lord," he took solace in his faith in the awesome, but nearly unintelligible justice of God: "I am torn up by the roots, and lie prostrate on the earth! There, and prostrate there, I must unfeignedly recognize the Divine justice, and in some degree submit to it."<sup>134</sup> His published work and private letters alike lead one to the conclusion that Burke's religious language was both genuine and foundational to his understanding of politics.

---

132 See Christopher J. Insole, "Burke and the Natural Law," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, ed. David Dwan and Christopher J. Insole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 117–30; see p. 120.

133 See *Correspondence*, 6:37; 7:273–74; 7:568; 8:80; 8:100; 8:216; 8:364; 9:67.

134 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 9:169.

*Conclusion*

Political theorists inevitably seek to place the objects of their study into conceptual traditions. And while there may be value in finding trans-historical commonalities which link thinkers across generations and centuries, it is most reasonable to identify those traditions within which the thinker immediately wrote and operated. Burke's thoughts have often been situated in these grand traditions which stretch out before and after his own time: the natural law tradition, utilitarianism, conservatism, or enlightenment modernity. But when it comes to Burke's use of religion, the traditional Anglican teaching about the state is an obvious and immediate source from which to improve our understanding of several contested areas of Burke's thought. While this link is historically clear, one cannot fully agree with Clark's conclusion that Burke's engagement with these ideas was "eloquent but unoriginal."<sup>135</sup> Rather, Burke developed this understanding of the state in several ways, including his unique understanding of the social contract and his conception of political rights.

Given that the religious core to many of Burke's ideas has been easily overlooked by able scholars, looking back on him may serve to reinforce Burke's own belief that his lifetime was witnessing a "revolution in manners" which would fundamentally alter the way in which social life was understood. It may also encourage consideration of the latent religious understandings which underwrote seemingly secular conceptions of the state in early modernity, and which may unknowingly continue to inform contemporary views.

---

<sup>135</sup> Clark, *English Society*, 249.

# *Edmund Burke's 'Age of Chivalry'*

THE FOUNDATION OF CIVILIZED LIBERTY



MADELEINE ARMSTRONG

*University of St Andrews*

## *I. 'Pure Foppery':*

### *The Historical Reception of Burke's Tribute to Chivalry*

At the heart of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), there is one reflection that may be more famous than the entire work itself:

It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France, then the dauphiness, at Versailles; and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision ... glittering like the morning-star, full of life, and splendor, and joy. Oh! what a revolution! ... I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. — But the age of chivalry is gone. — That of sophisters, economists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. C. D. Clark (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 237–38.

This sparkling memorial to the queen of France and a lost "age of chivalry" was included in the manuscript draft of the *Reflections* that Burke sent to his friend Philip Francis for review in February 1790. Francis did not hesitate to express his disapproval: "remember that this is one of the most singular, that it may be the most distinguished and ought to be one of the most deliberate acts of your life," he warned in a letter to Burke. "In my opinion all that you say of the Queen is pure foppery." Burke was disappointed by Francis's review, and insisted on his sincerity, for the misfortunes that befell the queen and her country "did draw Tears from me and wetted my Paper." He continued, "You do not believe this fact, or that these are my real feelings, but that the whole is affected, or as you express it, 'downright Foppery.' My friend, I tell you it is truth."<sup>2</sup> This was perhaps the end of Burke's friendship with Francis, but the beginning of a controversy that would surround Burke's infamous passage for centuries. As William Dowling observes, "[T]he idea that the *Reflections* is all rhetoric and no substance ... goes back almost to the moment the work appeared," and "it may serve to explain just why the 'age of chivalry' passage has from that moment seemed to live a separate life of its own."<sup>3</sup> Thomas Paine believed that the passage was a discredit to the entire publication: "[W]hen we see a man dramatically lamenting in a publication intended to be believed, that, 'The age of chivalry is gone!' ... and all this because the Quixote age of

2 Edmund Burke to Philip Francis, 20 February 1790, in Thomas W. Copeland (ed.), *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, 10 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958–70), 6:88–92. According to Copeland, this letter was enclosed in one from Burke's son, Richard, reproaching Francis for his unfriendly review of Burke's *Reflections* and asking him "not to draw him [Burke] aside from the many and great labors he has on hand, by any further written communications of this kind." Richard earnestly defended his father against Francis's accusation of "foppery": "[t]here is one thing of which I must inform you, and which I know from an intimate experience of many Years — It is, that my father's opinions are never hastily adopted; and that even those ideas, which have often appeared to me only the effect of momentary heat or casual impression, I have afterwards found, beyond a possibility of doubt, to be either the result of the systematick meditation perhaps of Years, or else if adopted on the spur of the occasion, yet formed upon the conclusions of long and philosophical experience, and supported by no trifling depth of thought ... I tell you, his folly is wise than the wisdom of the common herd of able men." (Addendum to the letter printed in Copeland, p. 92).

3 William C. Dowling, "Burke and the Age of Chivalry," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 12, *Heroes and the Heroic Special Number* (1982): 110.

chivalry nonsense is gone, What opinion can we form of his judgment, or what regard can we pay to his facts?"<sup>4</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft detected something more sinister in Burke's writings, and bitterly remarked that "your tears are reserved . . . for the downfall of queens" while "the distress of many industrious mothers . . . and the hungry cry of helpless babes, were vulgar sorrows that could not move your commiseration."<sup>5</sup> Joseph Priestley expressed his "very sensible regret" that he could no longer include Burke "among the friends of what I deem to be *the cause of liberty, civil or religious*."<sup>6</sup> Burke's romantic outburst for the *ancien régime* had, in the eyes of many of his friends as well as his adversaries, irrevocably damaged his reputation.

Much of the current scholarship on Burke's *Reflections* reflects its historical reception. Stephen K. White, for example, argues that "Burke's idealization of the past and women *obliterates his better judgment*, even if it provides for some of his most colorful imagery" (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup> Many historians characterize Burke's writings as pure nostalgia, or a reaction against the modern world: in Steven Stryer's view, "[W]hen confronted with the contemporary dangers in England and Europe, Burke remembered the better aspects of the medieval past, and held them up as a standard from which the present was in danger of falling away."<sup>8</sup> Reed Browning insists that "Burke's nostalgic exaltation of 'the unbought grace of life' is comprehensible as the old Court Whig aversion to innovation," and "the appropriate concomitant to his rejection of modernity."<sup>9</sup> Much like Burke's contemporaries, modern historians often interpret Burke's

4 Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr. Burke's Attack on the French Revolution*, 2nd ed. (London: J. S. Jordan, 1791), 15.

5 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, occasioned by his Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 2nd ed. (London, 1790), 12.

6 Joseph Priestley, *Letters to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, occasioned by his Reflections on the Revolution in France, &c* (Birmingham: Thomas Pearson, 1791), cited in J. C. D. Clark, "Introduction" to Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. C. D. Clark (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 2001), 37.

7 Stephen K. White, "Burke on Politics, Aesthetics, and the Dangers of Modernity," *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (August 1993): 519.

8 Steven Stryer, "Burke's Vehemence and the Rhetoric of Historical Exaggeration," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 195.

9 Reed Browning, "The Origin of Burke's Ideas Revisited," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1984): 69.

sigh for the eclipse of chivalry as evidence that he was either willfully ignorant of the modern world, or actively opposed to it.

This misconception likely arises from Burke's widely disputed yet enduring reputation as the "father of conservatism." Burke is associated with conservatism in two ways: first, by the notion that there is a coherent ideology that we might call "Burkean conservatism"; second, by his fantastical portrayal among capital-C Conservatives as the founder of their cause. Emily Jones has recently shown that these two associations originated in the same process of political myth-making, as political Conservatives from the late nineteenth century onward attempted to systematize Burke's thought into a "political philosophy of conservatism." Jones observes that the concepts central to "Burkean conservatism," according to Conservative politicians and scholars in the last two hundred years, include an apparent "hostility to constitutional change," an emphasis on "the importance of continuity with the historical past," and a stubborn insistence on "making any change as gradual and with as slight dislocation as possible."<sup>10</sup> The retrospective positioning of Burke in support of political Conservatism has claimed authority from scholars such as Russell Kirk, who wrote that "if conservatives would know what they defend, Burke is their touchstone; and if radicals wish to test the temper of their opposition, they should turn to Burke."<sup>11</sup> Corey Robin also places Burke at the center of his book, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin*, thereby associating him with radical manifestations of political Conservatism in our time.<sup>12</sup> These interpretations rely heavily upon Burke's *Reflections*, considered by many to be the point at which Burke became a great Conservative thinker.<sup>13</sup>

There is certainly a strong element of conservatism in Burke's political thought, even though Burke was not a capital-C, political Conservative in the modern sense. Throughout his life in politics, Burke emphasized the importance of preserving ideas and institutions that

<sup>10</sup> Emily Jones, "Conservatism, Edmund Burke, and the Invention of a Political Tradition, c. 1885–1914," *The Historical Journal* 58, no. 4 (2015): 1115, 1123–35.

<sup>11</sup> Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Jones, "Conservatism," 1116.

withstood the test of time, and he was highly averse to ideological abstractions that sought to transcend or demolish historical precedent. Nevertheless, Burke's tendency to think conservatively must be clearly distinguished from an association with political Conservatism. David Bromwich reminds us that while Burke was essentially a conservative thinker, "no serious historian would repeat the commonplace that Burke was the father of *modern* conservatism" (emphasis added).<sup>14</sup> Even the notion of "Burkean conservatism" is problematic, having been constructed to support Burke's canonization among political Conservatives. In "What is conservatism? History, ideology, and party," Richard Bourke examines the beliefs that are often attributed to "Burkean conservatism," which include "prudent management of change," devotion to "immemorial custom," and reverence for the authority of tradition. Bourke argues that most of these standpoints were developed long after Burke's time: "Burke had no conception of disseminating conservative dogma," he insists, "still less of being a Conservative in the tradition of Robert Peel."<sup>15</sup> Burke's tendency to think conservatively must not be misinterpreted as a commitment to modern, capital-C Conservatism.

The most formidable obstacle in the way of Burke's dissociation from modern political Conservatism is the confusion surrounding his "rousing hymn" to an ancient system of manners.<sup>16</sup> So impressive was this particular passage of Burke's *Reflections* that it has become a touchstone for those who revere, and revile, him as the imputed father of conservatism. In order to redeem Burke from his association with the oppressions of the *ancien régime*, many historians have focused upon re-evaluating his tribute to chivalry. J. G. A. Pocock insists that in Burke's *Reflections* "there is no neo-medievalist programme for reactivating an age of chivalry or an age of faith," but a desire to uphold the foundations of "society in its modern character."<sup>17</sup> Seán Patrick Donlan

<sup>14</sup> David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 19.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Bourke, "What is conservatism? History, ideology and party," *European Journal of Political Theory* 17, no. 4 (2018): 461.

<sup>16</sup> Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 707.

<sup>17</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 210.



also argues that Burke's "rhetoric of 'chivalry'" was "not a defence of the past, but of his present, of a social order he perceived as being more progressive and enlightened perhaps than any in history."<sup>18</sup> Since the greater part of Burke's reputation stands and falls upon this infamous passage of his *Reflections*, it is important that historians very carefully examine what he meant by chivalry, and why he regretted its decline.

Burke's support for the chivalric manners of the *ancien régime* has also confused many of his readers because it appears to contradict his earlier, more "progressive" writings.<sup>19</sup> In his younger years, Burke greatly sympathized with the grievances of the Americans and condemned the abuses of imperial authority in India; yet he dedicated the final years of his life to suppressing the flames of revolutionary fervor emanating from France. Historians are perhaps overly concerned with resolving this dichotomy. We ought to remember that no human being, let alone a writer so intimately engaged with the political vicissitudes of his time, can ever be entirely consistent throughout his lifetime; nor is consistency an ideal to which writers necessarily aspire. Naturally, Burke's ideas changed as he navigated the course of his life and the upheavals of his time, and while we may acknowledge inconsistencies in his thought, there is no need for us to *resolve* them. Those who have tried to do so have created more confusion than clarity: as Bourke observes, "[A]ttempts to reconcile this dichotomy have led to the suggestion that there were in fact two Burkes, an early advocate of popular rights and a later apostate from progressive principles."<sup>20</sup> The better solution, I believe, is to ask whether or not such a dichotomy exists. Burke's tribute to an ancient system of manners may, in fact, align with the principles often associated with his more progressive years, such as the protection of the weak and persecuted, and the preservation of constitutional rights and freedoms; in which case, there would be nothing in his political thought to reconcile.

The Scottish Enlightenment forms a crucial and underappreciated part of the explanation for Burke's preoccupation with chivalry. While

---

18 Seán Patrick Donlan, "Language Is the Eye of Society": Edmund Burke on the Origins of the Polite and the Civil," *Eighteenth-Century Ireland* 18 (2003): 95–96.

19 Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 16.

20 *Ibid.*

the argument that the Scottish Enlightenment holds a key to Burke's thought is not entirely new, it has not received the attention it deserves. John Pocock, George McElroy, and Daniel O'Neill all strongly support the view that "it was Burke's basic affinity for the Scottish approach" to moral and political problems "that would ultimately provide the framework for his overarching critique of the French Revolution."<sup>21</sup> But the Scots remain peripheral to Burke scholarship; major biographies of Burke by historians such as F. P. Lock, David Bromwich, and Richard Bourke offer little sustained analysis of the role the Scots played in Burke's intellectual development.<sup>22</sup> Recently, historians have expressed renewed interest in the Scottish context of Burke's life and thought: in his study of the ideology of party in the eighteenth century, Max Skjonsberg includes a chapter on Burke and the Scottish Enlightenment in which he argues that Burke's real and intellectual encounters with Scottish philosophers made a forceful impression upon his political ideas.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, I will argue that Burke was participating in a wider conversation about the relationship between commerce and manners among his friends and correspondents in Scotland. While many Scottish philosophers proposed that commerce gave rise to manners, and manners to civilization, it was Burke's inversion of this view that led him to consider ancient manners as the foundation of modern society.

Drawing connections between Burke and the Scottish Enlightenment also has the advantage of challenging Burke's reputation as a leader of the "Counter-Enlightenment."<sup>24</sup> When Burke condemns the "new-conquering empire of light and reason" in his *Reflections* for

21 Daniel O'Neill, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 53; J. G. A. Pocock, "The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution," *The Historical Journal* 25, no. 2 (June 1982): 335–37, and George McElroy, "Edmund Burke and the Scottish Enlightenment," *Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 11 (1992): 171.

22 Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*; F. P. Lock, *Edmund Burke Volume 1: 1730–1784* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

23 Max Skjonsberg, *The Persistence of Party: Ideas of Harmonious Discord in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 309.

24 See Alfred Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century: A Study of the Political and Social Thinking of Burke, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey* (1929).

eclipsing the manners of the *ancien régime*, he appears to be in revolt against a self-referentially enlightened age; yet his ideas about chivalry were inspired in many ways by the writings of Scottish philosophers to whom we now refer as leaders of an Enlightenment. The very notion that there was such a thing as the Scottish Enlightenment is debatable, but when I employ the term I will refer broadly to a range of inquiries and debates led by eighteenth-century Scottish intellectuals who shared a desire for human betterment and progress.<sup>25</sup> The contributors to this intellectual movement were connected through their associations with the Scottish universities and an extensive literary network, through which they corresponded with writers from England and continental Europe as well as Scotland.<sup>26</sup> Burke was installed as Lord Rector of Glasgow University in 1784 and 1785, and the time he spent in Scotland on both occasions is vividly recorded in James Boswell's journals.<sup>27</sup> Burke also reviewed the works of many Scottish writers in the *Annual Register*, and corresponded with Adam Smith, William Robertson, and Adam Ferguson, among others.<sup>28</sup> I will examine the extent of Burke's participation in these far-reaching academic, literary, and social circles, and how they influenced his ideas.

In support of recent challenges to Burke's misleading association with modern political Conservatism, and his unsolicited reputation as a "Counter-Enlightenment" thinker, this article will argue that Burke's tribute to the lost "age of chivalry" was not the result of mere nostalgia, an antipathy to progress, or a plot against freedom; on the contrary, Burke sincerely believed that upholding chivalry was the only way to achieve liberty without destroying the pillars of modern civilization. I will investigate the role of "manners" in Burke's political thought to reveal that manners, and by extension, chivalry, were in his mind the foundation of civil society and civil liberties; I will then determine why

25 This interpretation is based upon the ground-breaking work of John Robertson. See Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680–1760* (Cambridge, 2005), 28–34.

26 *Ibid.*, 42.

27 Irma S. Lustig and Fredrick A. Pottle (eds.), *Boswell: the applause of the jury* (London, 1982).

28 Thomas Copeland, "Edmund Burke and the Book Reviews in Dodsley's *Annual Register*," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 57:2 (June, 1942): 446–68; Copeland (ed.), *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*.

Burke believed it was chivalry, in particular, that supported modern civilization; finally, I will examine the connection between chivalry and liberty in Burke's political thought. Above all, my aim is to position Burke's passage on chivalry within the context of the Scottish Enlightenment in order to show that this apparently reactionary, regressive defense of the manners of the *ancien régime* was in fact aligned with ideas that we would now call "enlightened." By praising chivalry, Burke was not turning against the progressive principles that he had supported in his younger years; rather, he was trying to uphold a civilization that, to his mind, enjoyed the greatest freedom the world had ever known.

\* \* \*

Before proceeding, we ought to form a preliminary understanding of what precisely Burke is referring to when he writes about chivalry. Chivalry is a term open to multiple different interpretations, and Michele Cohen insists "it is important therefore to acknowledge plural meanings and resist the temptation to reduce it to a coherent phenomenon."<sup>29</sup> There are, however, a number of shared assumptions about chivalry in the eighteenth century that may help us to form a broad definition of the word as it was understood in Burke's time. It is especially important to understand, as Mark Girouard does, that "[c]hivalry is not the same as feudalism, although the two concepts are clearly related." Girouard explains that chivalry was "the code of conduct evolved for the knights of the Middle Ages" which, in a world of violence, "set out to soften its potential barbarity by putting it into the hands of men committed to high standards of behaviour."<sup>30</sup> The principles of this code of behavior were transmuted and transformed over the ages, but the enduring characteristics of chivalry that most eighteenth-century writers could agree upon were honor, gallantry, the voluntary submission of the strong to the weak, and devout Christianity.<sup>31</sup> When Burke described the "age of

29 Michele Cohen, "Manners make the man': Politeness, Chivalry, and the Construction of Masculinity," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (April 2005): 315–16.

30 Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 16.

31 Dowling, "Burke and the Age of Chivalry," 112. Richard Hurd, in his *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, Vol. III 3rd edn. (London, 1765), 212–13, stated that the key characteristics of chivalry were "prowess, generosity, gallantry, and religion." Similarly,

chivalry," he referred to "a nation of gallant men," and praised the "chastity of honour which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity," as well as "that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart," which he believed were chivalry's defining qualities.<sup>32</sup> In this way, Burke understood chivalry to mean a certain set of moral principles and a corresponding system of manners which originated in the Middle Ages but had evolved over time, retaining a high valuation of "honour," "gallantry," "submission," and "loyalty" above all. The meaning of chivalry in the eighteenth century is so rich and complex as to merit an article in and of itself, but this preliminary understanding will provide a waypoint by which to navigate Burke's writing. Understanding Burke's precise meaning with regard to chivalry will also be one of the objectives of the following article.

*II. 'Manners are of More Importance than Laws':  
The Role of Manners in Burke's Political Thought*

In order to determine why Burke was so preoccupied with chivalry in his *Reflections*, it is necessary that one understands the place of manners in his political thought. Far from the superficial graces with which we associate the term today, the concept of manners carried political weight in the eighteenth century. J. G. A. Pocock explains that with the revival of the "civic humanist" tradition of thought at the turn of the century, the concept of "manners" took the place of both laws and the more traditional "virtues" in modern, commercial society as the foundation of civil liberties. The third earl of Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison, and Richard Steele, as well as Scottish philosophers such as David Hume and William Robertson, all argued that polished manners were the hallmark of commercial societies, and foundational to liberty. Likewise, in his

---

William Robertson, in his *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V, With A View of the Progress of Society in Europe, From the Subversion of the Roman Empire, to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century*, Vol. I (London, 1769), 70-71, described chivalry as a "singular institution, in which valour, gallantry, and religion, were so strangely blended."

<sup>32</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 238.

*Letters on a Regicidal Peace* (1795–97), Burke declared that “manners are of more importance than laws. Upon them, in great measure the laws depend.”<sup>33</sup> Yet Burke differed from his contemporaries in a crucial way: rather than arguing that manners were the product of the commercial world, he insisted that manners preceded commerce, and therefore served not only as the basis of liberty, but the driving force behind civilization as a whole. The extraordinary political and historical importance that Burke assigned to manners suggests that he would not have extolled the values of chivalry without careful thought. Burke believed that chivalry was the system of manners that best supported the edifice of modern civilization.

The significance of manners in Burke’s time was heightened by the revival of what Pocock calls the “civic humanist” tradition. The civic humanist tradition of political thought, the origins of which Pocock traces to later medieval Italy, suggested that a nation’s liberty was rooted not in laws or rights, but in the virtue of its citizens.<sup>34</sup> This paradigm became particularly useful in early eighteenth-century England as a platform on which to criticize the “Whig oligarchy.” Those who opposed the post-revolutionary Whig commercial regime raised the specter of the classical republican citizen, an exemplar of stoic and agrarian virtue, to argue that liberty could only be sustained if society moved away from the corrupting forces of commerce.<sup>35</sup> In response, writers supportive of the Whig party began to reformulate the civic tradition to make it compatible with a commercial society. According to Pocock, the classical concept of “virtue” was too austere for the “increasingly transactional universe of ‘commerce and the arts’”; therefore, “virtue was redefined ... with the aid of a concept of ‘manners’”—a kind of virtue best cultivated by the multiplying social interactions of a commercial society.<sup>36</sup> This meant that, as Lawrence Klein observes, “the concern with virtue and

33 Paul Langford *et al.* (ed.), *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, 9 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981–2015), 9:242.

34 Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, History*, 38–41.

35 J. G. A. Pocock, “Cambridge paradigms and Scotch philosophers: a study of the relations between the civic humanist and the civil jurisprudential interpretation of eighteenth-century social thought” in Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (eds.), *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 237.

36 Pocock, *Virtue*, 49.

liberty modulated, at least in England, into a concern with the phenomenon of manners"; subsequently, "correct or virtuous manners are required for liberty to be sustained."<sup>37</sup> In this way, manners were reconceived as the foundation of civil liberties.

Some of most influential proponents of this view of manners were Burke's Whig predecessors, the third earl of Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison, and Richard Steele. Lawrence Klein notes that Shaftesbury made a powerful connection between liberty and manners in his *Characteristicks* (1711) when he wrote that "[a]ll Politeness is owing to Liberty. We polish one another, and rub off our Corners and rough Sides by a sort of *amicable Collision*."<sup>38</sup> Shaftesbury was suggesting that the free and diverse associations of the commercial world would polish manners which, in turn, would support liberty by facilitating easy and "amicable" interactions between people. Addison and Steele advanced Shaftesbury's argument in the *Spectator* by insisting that polite sociability was necessary for the preservation of liberty in post-revolutionary, and newly unified Britain, because it would curb that dreadful "Spirit of Faction" which had thrown society into turmoil in the previous century.<sup>39</sup> In the writings of Shaftesbury, Addison, and Steele, manners became an essential component of British freedoms.

Burke was strongly influenced by his Whig predecessors, and his thought can be understood within the "civic humanist" paradigm. As Seán Patrick Donlan observes, Burke was a founding member of a polite debating society at Trinity College, Dublin, called the "Trinity Club," whose purpose was "the formation of ... minds and manners for the functions of Civil Society," and whose minute-book records lively discussions of Shaftesbury and the *Spectator*. Donlan also points out that "numerous works of Addison and Shaftesbury are to be found in Burke's library catalogues."<sup>40</sup> Their influence is visible throughout Burke's writ-

37 Lawrence Klein, "Liberty, Manners, and Politeness in Early Eighteenth-Century England," *The Historical Journal* 32, no. 3 (1989): 590–93.

38 Lawrence Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 197.

39 Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator: with notes and illustrations, in six volumes*. Vol. 1, no. 9, ed. I. Walker (London, 1822): 36.

40 Donlan, "Language is the Eye of Society," 84.



ings: in his *Reflections*, Burke argued that liberty must be combined with “civil and social manners,” for “without them, liberty is not a benefit whilst it lasts, and is not likely to continue long.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, in his *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), he insisted that “men are *qualified for civil liberty*, in exact proportion to their disposition to put *moral chains* on their appetites” (emphases added). Burke was convinced that “society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without.”<sup>42</sup> While laws could impose restraint from without, the “moral chains” to be found within were forged by manners. As Burke declared in his *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, “manners are of more importance than laws,” for they pervade our whole lives like “the air we breathe in,” and “[a]ccording to their quality, they aid morals, they supply them, or they totally destroy them.”<sup>43</sup> Burke’s thought clearly falls within the parameters of the civic humanist paradigm in which sociable manners supported civil liberties.

The emphasis that Burke placed upon manners would have come as no surprise to the Scottish philosophers of his time. Burke was well connected with intellectual life in Scotland—in 1784 he was made Lord Rector of the University of Glasgow, and when he was reinstalled the following year he spent a month in Scotland socializing with its leading members (although, unfortunately, this was after David Hume’s death).<sup>44</sup> Nicholas Phillipson notes that, even more than the English, the Scots saw manners as “a matter of cardinal importance,” for “as far as Scotsmen were concerned, their liberties were founded on the manners of the people.” This was a view with which David Hume, in particular, “greatly sympathized.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, manners were a major preoccupation of Hume’s *Essays* (1758). Hume suggested that polite manners, the great offspring of “commerce,” were more important to civil society than laws when he wrote, “good laws may beget order and moderation in govern-

41 Burke, *Reflections*, 152.

42 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 8:332.

43 *Ibid.*, 9:242.

44 Daniel O’Neill, *The Burke–Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 54.

45 Nicholas Phillipson, “Hume as Moralizer: A Social Historian’s Perspective” in S. C. Brown (ed.), *Philosophers of the Enlightenment* (Brighton: Harvester, 1979), 143.



ment, where the manners and customs have instilled little humanity or justice in the tempers of men," but laws, while effective, should be a second resort.<sup>46</sup> In light of this, Burke's declaration that "manners are of more importance than laws" reveals his sympathy with the views of Scottish writers such as Hume, who gave weight to manners as the guardians of civil liberties.

Burke, however, made a crucial alteration to the relationship between manners, commerce, and liberty, which rendered his view of manners distinct from that of other eighteenth-century writers. Adam Smith, for example, had proposed that commerce was a civilizing force: "[W]henver commerce is introduced into any country, probity and punctuality always accompany it," Smith declared in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, and "these virtues in a rude and barbarous country are almost unknown."<sup>47</sup> Burke argued the inverse: rather than suggesting that commerce gave rise to manners, which then supported the rise of liberty, Burke argued that manners *preceded* commerce. Crucially, this would mean that liberty, commerce, and civilization were upheld by the manners of the pre-commercial world. As J. G. A. Pocock observes, Burke was unique in arguing "that commerce is not the sole force generating manners in history. On the contrary, a foundation in manners must be laid before commerce is possible."<sup>48</sup> Burke made this clear in his *Reflections* when he wrote,

If, as I suspect, modern letters owe more than they are always willing to own to ancient manners, so do other interests which we value full as much as they are worth. Even commerce, and trade, and manufacture, the gods of our oeconomical politicians, are themselves perhaps but creatures; are themselves but effects, which, as first causes, we choose to worship.<sup>49</sup>

By "our oeconomical politicians," Burke was likely referring to the political economists of the Scottish Enlightenment who had characterized

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>47</sup> Gregory M. Collins, *Commerce and Manners in Edmund Burke's Political Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 499.

<sup>48</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, "Introduction" to Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), xxxiii.

<sup>49</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 242.

commerce as the driving force behind the progress of civilization.<sup>50</sup> He argued that they had mistaken the order of things by placing commerce before manners; indeed, it was “*ancient manners*,” in Burke’s view, that were to be thanked for the growth of commerce, and all the good things usually associated with commerce. As Gregory Collins recently argued, “public opulence derived not simply from the wheel of exchange but from a code of manners. This argument is *the* moral core of Burke’s theory of political economy.”<sup>51</sup>

This is why Burke was so distraught by the “revolution in sentiments, manners, and moral opinions” that he witnessed in France. Since ancient manners were the source of liberty and prosperity, “with you,” he wrote, “for the present at least, they all threaten to disappear together.” He observed that “Europe, undoubtedly, taken in a mass, was in a flourishing condition the day on which your Revolution was completed,” and argued that the greatest part “of that prosperous state was owing to the spirit of our old manners and opinions.”<sup>52</sup> He warned that once these standards of social conduct were cast away, “laws are to be supported only by their own terrors,” and liberty would fall to the “precautions of tyranny.”<sup>53</sup> European civilization had been built upon ancient standards of behavior that had gradually conditioned people to behave civilly toward one another, and thereby prepared them for the liberty they had come to enjoy. When baser instincts were no longer subdued by the steady influence of manners, Burke believed it would become necessary to subdue people by fear.

In Burke’s intellectual circles, manners would not have been considered a trivial distraction from serious political concerns. Burke believed that manners—specifically ancient manners—were the safeguard of liberty and the driving force behind modern European civilization. Burke would not have promoted chivalry out of mere nostalgia, but out of a strong conviction that chivalry was the system of manners which fulfilled these vitally important political functions. The next two sections of

---

50 Pocock, *Virtue*, 199.

51 Collins, *Commerce and Manners*, 487.

52 Burke, *Reflections*, 241.

53 *Ibid.*, 240.

this article will support this claim, and uncover why Burke thought that chivalry, in particular, was to thank for modern prosperity and freedom.

### III. *A Credit to the Present Age*:

#### *Chivalry and the Origins of Modern Civilization*

Many of Burke's contemporaries believed that "the age of chivalry" was, at best, a laughable moment in human history. Philip Francis, in his reply to Burke's draft of the *Reflections*, insisted it was "pure foppery," and David Hume, in his magisterial *History of Great Britain* (1761), had dismissed the age of chivalry as "the most signal and durable monument of human folly that has yet appeared in any age or nation."<sup>54</sup> For this reason, as Ryu Susato notes, historians generally assume that chivalry "was considered a negative or even ridiculous ideology until its rehabilitation by the pre-Romantic movement." Susato contends that "there has been scant recognition of the broader interest in the topic of chivalry" in the eighteenth century, particularly "among the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers."<sup>55</sup> As Michele Cohen notes, chivalry was taken up by "a number of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers," who "were inquiring into the origins and development of civil society, developing schemes to explain the history of progress as a series of successive stages from rough and simple to refined and civilized."<sup>56</sup> Likewise, David Duff argues that the Scottish historians had already instigated the "rehabilitation of chivalry," and from their perspective "the chivalric system, previously discredited as a gothic absurdity, came to be seen as an important stage in the transition from the barbarism of the 'dark ages' to the civilised manners of modern times."<sup>57</sup> By examining the ways in which Scottish historians redefined "chivalry," how they came to associate chivalry with the progress of civil society, and how Burke was influenced by their views, I will reveal that Burke's ode to chivalry was inspired in great part by what we now call the Scottish Enlightenment.

54 Girouard, *The Return to Camelot*, 19.

55 Ryu Susato, "The Idea of Chivalry in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Case of David Hume," *Hume Studies* 33, no. 1 (April 2007): 155.

56 Cohen, "Manners make the man," 318.

57 *Ibid.*

By the time that Burke was writing his *Reflections*, there was already a definition of chivalry available that was distinct from the more negative connotations to which the term was prone. As Susato notes, the Scottish historians still “maintained a critical attitude towards the barbarous and warlike aspects of chivalry,” but in their search for the origins of civil society they began to separate the admirable qualities of chivalry from those that could be considered ridiculous or destructive.<sup>58</sup> This project had already been undertaken by Richard Hurd in his *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762), in which he argued “that *prowess*, *generosity*, *gallantry*, and *religion*, which were the peculiar and vaunted characteristics of the purer ages of chivalry,” were enough to prove “that Chivalry was no absurd and freakish institution, but the natural and even sober effect of the feudal policy.”<sup>59</sup>

It was this “sober” account of chivalry that the Scottish historians, and later Burke, rose to defend. As William Robertson made clear, there were still aspects of chivalry that could be rightly dismissed: “[T]he wild exploits of those romantic knights who sallied forth in quest of adventures, are well known,” he writes, “and have been treated with the proper ridicule.” But “this singular institution, in which valour, gallantry, and religion, were so strangely blended ... had a wonderful influence on manners and conduct.”<sup>60</sup> Even David Hume, so contemptuous toward chivalry at first, came to distinguish between the “folly” that he associated primarily with the crusades in his *History*, and the admirable effects of notions such as gallantry, which he recognized in his *Essays*: “[N]othing ... can proceed less from affectation than the passion of gallantry. It is natural in the highest degree,” and even a “credit to the present age.”<sup>61</sup> In these writings, a clear distinction had been made between the notions of chivalry that could be considered “ridiculous,” and those which had value in the modern world.

58 Susato, “The Idea of Chivalry,” 163.

59 Richard Hurd, *Moral and Political Dialogues on Chivalry and Romance*, Vol. III, 3rd edn. (London, 1765), 212–13.

60 William Robertson, *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V, With A View of the Progress of Society in Europe, From the Subversion of the Roman Empire, to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century*, Vol. I (London, 1769), 70–71.

61 David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 38–40.

Burke's appraisal of chivalry is very similar to that of Robertson and Hume, and there are many ways in which he was likely to have been influenced by their writings. William Robertson in particular was an old friend and correspondent of Burke's.<sup>62</sup> We also know from a letter that Burke wrote to Robertson in 1777 that he had read and admired Robertson's *History*.<sup>63</sup> Like Robertson, Burke singled out the principles of gallantry and honor, calling forth "a nation of gallant men," and praising the "chastity of honour which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity." He writes that "[t]his mixed system of opinion and sentiment had its origin in the antient chivalry; and the principle, though varied in its appearance by the varying state of human affairs, subsisted and influenced through a long succession of generations, even to the time we live in."<sup>64</sup> This suggests that when Burke promoted chivalry he was not referring to the crusading mentality or the romantic excesses of chivalry *per se*, but to the enduring principles of gallantry and honour, modified and updated over the ages.

It was in this broad conception of the word that "chivalry" became relevant to the progress of civilization. William Robertson argued that the "liberal and generous" sentiments "inspired by the spirit of Chivalry ... had a very serious influence in refining the manners of the European nations."<sup>65</sup> Hume, too, observed that even after feudal institutions had declined, "they left modern *gallantry*, and the *point of honour*, which still maintain their influence, and are the genuine offspring of those ancient affectations."<sup>66</sup> But the most forceful case for the progressiveness of chivalry came from Adam Ferguson in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), in which he argued that "whatever was the origin of notions, often so lofty and so ridiculous, we cannot doubt of their lasting effects on our manners." Pointing specifically to "the point of honour, the prevalence of gallantry in our conversations," he concluded that "chivalry, uniting with the genius of our policy, has probably suggested

62 O'Neill, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate*, 54.

63 Burke, *Correspondence*, 3:350–52.

64 Burke, *Reflections*, 238.

65 Robertson, *History*, 69.

66 David Hume, *Life and Correspondence of David Hume: From the Papers Bequeathed by his Nephew to the Royal Society of Edinburgh; And Other Original Sources*, Vol. I, ed. John Hill Burton (Edinburgh, 1846), 47.

those peculiarities in the law of nations, by which modern states are distinguished from the ancient.”<sup>67</sup> In these works, chivalry was imagined to be crucial to the development of European civilization.

Burke’s tribute to the “age of chivalry” was largely inspired by the arguments made by these Scottish historians. Indeed, it is likely that Burke had actually read and admired Ferguson’s *History*, because there is a positive review of this work in Robert Dodsley’s *Annual Register* for the year 1767. Burke was appointed first editor of the *Annual Register* in 1758, and likely maintained some involvement with it for many years thereafter.<sup>68</sup> The similarities between the arguments of Burke and Ferguson are striking: just as Ferguson argued that it was chivalry “by which modern states are distinguished from the ancient,” Burke insisted “[i]t is this which has given its character to modern Europe. It is this which has distinguished it under all its forms of government, and distinguished it to its advantage, from the states of Asia, and possibly from those states which flourished in the most brilliant periods of the antique world.”<sup>69</sup> It is clear from this passage that Burke was in agreement with the Scottish historians, particularly Ferguson, that chivalry had been key to the progress and prosperity of modern Europe.

Burke, however, made an argument about manners which went beyond those of the Scottish historians, and which provides an even more compelling explanation for his conviction that the principles of chivalry upheld modern civilization. In his *Reflections*, Burke wrote:

Nothing is more certain, than that our manners, our civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners, and with civilization, have, in this European world of ours, depended for ages upon two principles; and were indeed

---

67 Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 5th edn. (London, 1782), 147.

68 “Review of Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*,” in Robert Dodsley (ed.), *Annual Register, or a view of the history and politics and literature for the year 1767* (London, 1768), 307–13. Richard Bourke notes in his *Empire and Revolution* that “[t]he review is attributed to Burke in Thomas Copeland, ‘Edmund Burke and the Book Reviews in Dodsley’s *Annual Register*,’ *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 57:2 (June 1942), pp. 446–68, though the attribution cannot be certain” (*Empire and Revolution*, 704).

69 Burke, *Reflections*, 239.

the result of both combined; I mean the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion.<sup>70</sup>

Burke believed that these combined “spirits” of aristocracy and religion formed the pillars of civil society, and that they must be protected at all costs. Preserving the sentiments of “ancient chivalry,” which instilled a deep respect for aristocracy and religion, was the best hope for their survival. Indeed, it was through this “sensibility of principle,” passed down through the ages, that “we know, and what is better we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good and of all comfort.”<sup>71</sup> Chivalry also instilled “that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience” which kept aristocracy in their vaunted place.<sup>72</sup> Burke mourned the downfall of the “age of chivalry” because the fundamental tenets of this system of manners were to cherish and protect aristocracy and religion—institutions that Burke believed were essential to civil society.

The renovated manners of revolutionary France, by contrast, threatened to dismantle the edifice of civil society completely:

I hear on all hands that a cabal, calling itself philosophic, receives the glory of many of the late proceedings; and that their opinions and systems are the true actuating spirit of the whole of them ... whom the vulgar, in their blunt, homely style, commonly call Atheists and Infidels ...<sup>73</sup>

By supporting atheism and spurning the social hierarchy, the revolutionaries were sweeping away those chivalric “sensibilities” which upheld the aristocratic and ecclesiastical foundations of civil society. These “philosophical fanatics” sought “the utter abolition ... of the Christian religion,” and they completely degraded the aristocracy, “exploding” aristocratic custom as “ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion” and claiming that “[r]egicide, and parricide, and sacrilege, are but fictions of superstition.”<sup>74</sup> Burke insisted that this “attempt to destroy within

---

70 *Ibid.*, 241.

71 *Ibid.*, 238, 241.

72 *Ibid.*, 238.

73 *Ibid.*, 253.

74 *Ibid.*, 253, 240.

us every principle of respect” would lead to nothing less than a nation of “sordid barbarians, destitute of religion, honour, or manly pride, possessing nothing at present, and hoping for nothing hereafter.”<sup>75</sup> In short, without the principles of chivalry to support them, the foundational institutions of civil society would fall to pieces.

By revealing how chivalry came to be associated with modern civilization in the writings of the Scottish historians, and how this influenced Burke’s thought, I wish to show that, in Burke’s view, chivalry was not just a “gothic absurdity.” Burke was able to conceive of the ways in which the principles of chivalry had endured over time and worked to Europe’s advantage. Moreover, Burke could see that the qualities which characterized chivalry in the writings of Hurd, Robertson, Ferguson, and Hume, such as “gallantry” and “religion,” had actively protected the aristocratic and ecclesiastic foundations of civil society. Indeed, it was in reference to the way that chivalry had been rehabilitated by the Scottish historians, and how this was reflected in Burke’s writings, that Thomas Goold argued in his *Vindication of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke’s Reflections* (1791) that the “ridicule” Burke had garnered from his opponents “for lamenting that the age of chivalry is gone” was “ill founded.” Goold also observed that the Scottish historians had “attributed the change from ferocious to polished manners, and of course the glory of Europe” to “the spirit of chivalry,” and that Burke was making a similar argument. Therefore, he wrote, “where is the absurdity in supposing that when the cause is destroyed, the effect may also be destroyed?”<sup>76</sup>

#### *IV. In Servitude Itself, the Spirit of an Exalted Freedom’: Chivalry and Burke’s Vision of Liberty*

We have thus far followed the train of thought that led Burke to the conclusion that chivalry underpinned modern European civilization. The next challenge is to determine why, in Burke’s view, the principles of chiv-

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>76</sup> Thomas Goold, *Vindication of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke’s Reflections*, (London, 1791), cited in Frans De Bruyn, “Edmund Burke the Political Quixote: Romance, Chivalry, and the Political Imagination,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 16, no. 4 (July 2004): 712.



alry were conducive to liberty. The idea that a restrictive and antiquated code of conduct could be compatible with freedom is paradoxical; indeed, Joseph Priestley decided upon reading Burke's tribute to chivalry that he could no longer include Burke "among the friends of what I deem to be *the cause of liberty*."<sup>77</sup> But by carefully investigating what Burke considered to be the meaning of "liberty," and how exactly the system of "chivalry" operated upon social behavior, this section will reveal that the two concepts worked together in remarkable harmony. In contrast to the radical Lockean proponents of liberty, who argued that liberty existed as a principle beyond the bounds of society, Burke believed that true liberty had to be created within society through the restraint of power and authority, the softening of relations between social ranks, and maintenance of respect for historical institutions. Chivalry achieved each of these three objectives by encouraging those with power to show deference to the weak and powerless, inspiring affection between people of different ranks, and preserving a tangible continuity with the past. Burke's promotion of chivalry was not unfavorable to liberty; on the contrary, Burke believed that chivalry was the only way to achieve liberty in a world in which authority, inequality, and history itself persisted.

Burke's vision of liberty differed greatly from that of his more radical contemporaries. In Burke's mind, liberty was not an abstract concept that existed outside of, or in conflict with, society; rather, liberty was a condition that had to be grounded in social reality. As H. T. Dickinson notes, Burke presented "a powerful attack on the Lockean principles" of liberty "which underpinned so many radical claims."<sup>78</sup> The radical interpretation of "Lockean principles" was that men had been endowed with a natural liberty and equality which had been compromised when man entered into the artificial arrangements of civil society—a belief epitomized by the famous opening sentence of Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762): "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains." Burke's contention was, in Jeffrey Hart's words, that this pre-social conception of

---

77 Priestley, *Letters to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, cited in Clark, "Introduction" to Burke, *Reflections*, 37.

78 H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-century Britain* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1977), 291.

freedom was “the freedom of man as an essence, not as an existence.”<sup>79</sup> Indeed, Burke writes, “I cannot stand forward, and give praise or blame to any thing which relates to human actions, and human concerns ... as it stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction.”<sup>80</sup> In Burke’s mind, “[m]en are never in a state of *total* independence of each other. It is not the condition of our nature.”<sup>81</sup> Men had always existed in some form of civil society, according to Burke, and it was impossible to achieve liberty by denying or attempting to destroy immutable social conditions. It was necessary, Burke believed, to find a way to manage the pre-existing social and political relationships between men so that they might be conducive to freedom.

Burke believed that a condition of liberty had to be created through the restraint, rather than the removal, of authority and power in society. As H. T. Dickinson notes, the post-Revolutionary English state still granted considerable authority to the crown and the executive powers of government, so conservative defenders of the constitution such as Burke “adhered to a restricted concept of liberty” which supported “liberty under the law and within the framework of a stable political order.”<sup>82</sup> In his *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol* (1777), Burke insisted that “[t]he *extreme* of liberty (which is its abstract perfection, but its real fault) obtains no where, nor ought to obtain any where ... Liberty too must be limited in order to be possessed.”<sup>83</sup> Therefore, the power of government had to be preserved so that liberty might be prevented from degenerating into anarchy. Conversely, this also meant that power had to be restrained so as not to become tyrannical. This was the guiding principle of England’s constitution that Burke so adamantly defended: as Mark Goldie notes, England’s celebrated form of “mixed government” achieved liberty by combining monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, which prevented arbitrary power by keeping one another in check.<sup>84</sup> It

79 Jeffrey Hart, “Burke and Radical Freedom,” *Review of Politics* 29 (1967), reprinted in Ian Hampsher-Monk (ed.), *Edmund Burke: International Library of Essays in the History of Social and Political Thought* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 261.

80 Burke, *Reflections*, 151.

81 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 9:249.

82 Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, 285.

83 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 3:318.

84 Mark Goldie, “The English System of Liberty” in Mark Goldie, Robert Wokler (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge:

was by placing restrictions on authority and power in society that Burke believed true liberty was achieved.

Chivalry was the ideal system of manners to support this view of liberty because it strongly incentivized the restraint of power. Burke believed that “one of the greatest controlling powers on earth” was “the sense of fame and estimation.”<sup>85</sup> Personal ambition was kept in check, Burke believed, by an overwhelming desire for approval.<sup>86</sup> The chivalric notions of “honour” and “esteem” had a similar, but even greater force than “fame and estimation,” because their value was based upon an inherent sense of morality, rather than a calculation of personal gain. Indeed, chivalry was characterized for Burke by “that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity,” and this deeply rooted sense of pride and aversion to the censure of others would prevent men from becoming excessively forceful or overbearing.<sup>87</sup> Burke wrote:

It was this opinion which mitigated kings into companions, and raised private men to be fellows with kings. Without force, or opposition, it subdued the fierceness of pride and power; it obliged sovereigns to submit to the soft collar of social esteem, compelled stern authority to submit to elegance, and gave a domination vanquisher of laws, to be subdued by manners.<sup>88</sup>

In this way, the principles of chivalry provided an effective “check” upon power and authority in society without removing it altogether. Honour and esteem would compel sovereigns to bow, but not kneel, before the opinion of their subjects, and to act with that sense of restraint which was so fundamental to the English constitution.

Burke also believed that social inequality was a natural and inevitable fact of life which had to be managed if true liberty were to be attained. In his view, absolute equality was a “monstrous fiction, which, by inspiring false ideas and vain expectations into men destined to travel in the obscure walk of laborious life, serves only to aggravate and imbit-

---

Cambridge University Press, 2008), 40–50.

85 Burke, *Reflections*, 257–58.

86 Bourke, “Enlightenment Sociability,” 642.

87 Burke, *Reflections*, 238.

88 *Ibid.*, 239.

ter that real inequality, which it never can remove.”<sup>89</sup> Moreover, it was in man’s nature to feel attached to the order he belonged to in society: “To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind.”<sup>90</sup> For these reasons, it was impossible to attain liberty by leveling ranks in society, or even by claiming freedoms as an individual regardless of class. As Richard Bourke notes, to Burke “dependence was a fact of social and political life, based on various gradations of authority and prestige,” so “equalisation across these differences meant moderating their severity.”<sup>91</sup> In order to create real and lasting freedom, it was necessary to find a way of fostering the spirit of liberty and equality within the confines of a society of orders.

Chivalry ameliorated the natural condition of inequality by encouraging mutual respect and admiration between people of different ranks. It was through these chivalric principles, Bourke observes, that “the pride of the great bowed down before the esteem of their admirers; the resentment of the aspiring succumbed to the elegance of the powerful.”<sup>92</sup> By creating a sense of mutual respect, Burke suggested it was “[t]his mixed system of opinion and sentiment ... which, without confounding ranks, had produced a noble equality, and handed it down through all the gradations of social life.” Furthermore, the grace and dignity of chivalric manners would endear people to the social hierarchy so that it would not be imposed upon them by force. Indeed, Burke condemned the French revolutionaries for stripping away “[a]ll the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle, and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life,” because it was these “illusions” which reconciled people to the inevitable state of inequality in society, and softened the relations between ranks.<sup>93</sup> Along with the lost “age of chivalry,” Burke lamented the decline of “that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of

89 Ibid., 189.

90 Ibid., 202.

91 Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 702.

92 Ibid., 705.

93 Burke, *Reflections*, 238–39.

an exalted freedom," because the alternative would have been a kind of subjection and degradation in which people were "enslaved through any illiberal or servile disposition."<sup>94</sup>

The manners which had their origins in "ancient chivalry" were also conducive to freedom because, in Burke's view, English liberty was deeply rooted in history. As J. G. A. Pocock notes, Burke was deeply influenced by the common-law tradition of thought which encouraged Englishmen to view "liberty as an inheritance from their ancestors," rather than "a thing rooted in abstract reason."<sup>95</sup> Indeed, Burke argued that "[t]he Revolution was made to preserve our *antient* indisputable laws and liberties, and that *antient* constitution of government which is our only security for law and liberty." He claimed it was the mark of an Englishman "to derive all we possess as *an inheritance from our forefathers*."<sup>96</sup> What's more, Burke believed in the existence of a "great primeval contract," in which liberty depended upon an eternal and all-encompassing partnership between the past, present, and future: "society is indeed a contract," he wrote, but it is "a partnership *in every virtue and in all perfection*," and "a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born" (emphasis mine).<sup>97</sup> In this way, the maintenance of liberty required a great "reverence to antiquity," and a strong resistance to change not only in the laws, but also in the "virtues" and "perfections" which had upheld liberty for generations.

Upholding the principles of chivalry was the best way to support this system of liberty, according to Burke, not merely because "fidelity, honour, and loyalty" would encourage respect for existing institutions, but also because doing so would maintain a tangible continuity with the past.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, just as the English Revolution had sought to "preserve" liberties rather than create them, it had also avoided a "revolution in sentiments, manners, and moral opinions," and Burke believed that

---

94 Ibid., 238, 188.

95 J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 241.

96 Burke, *Reflections*, 181.

97 Ibid., 261.

98 Ibid., 188.

this was key to its success.<sup>99</sup> English liberty was secured not only by the conservative approach to political change, but also by the remarkable persistence of English mores:

Four hundred years have gone over us; but I believe we are not materially changed since that period. Thanks to our sullen resistance to innovation, thanks to the cold sluggishness of our national character, we still bear the stamp of our forefathers. We have not (as I conceive) lost the generosity and dignity of thinking of the fourteenth century; nor as yet have we subtilized ourselves into savages ... we think that no discoveries are to be made, in morality; nor many in the great principles of government, nor in the ideas of liberty, which were understood long before we were born ...<sup>100</sup>

The “ancient constitution” had been preserved not merely by a “sullen resistance to innovation” among Englishmen, but also by the fact that they still lived by the same moral principles as their ancient “forefathers.” The “age of chivalry” was not just a chapter in history, but an enduring way of life that connected generation after generation in a great chain, and passed forth the wisdom which guided and preserved England’s laws. For this reason, to do away with chivalric manners in favor of a “modern” standard of conduct would be to undercut the very foundations of English freedom. By promoting chivalry, Burke was not advocating for a return to the feudal age or trying to halt the progress of liberty; rather, he believed that upholding the manners of his ancestors in the modern world would strengthen the links of that “great primeval contract” which upheld, and would continue to uphold liberty in past, present, and future generations.

Burke found liberty within limitation. He believed that the unfettered liberty cried out for by the revolutionaries in France was a delusion, and that pursuing it would only lead to the destruction of the regulating institutions and traditions which preserved liberty in the real world. Unrestrained liberty was, in fact, not liberty at all: people could only be truly free, according to Burke, when their actions and ambitions

---

99 *Ibid.*, 243.

100 *Ibid.*, 249–50.

were moderated by the influence of social esteem. Without such moderation, liberty would degenerate into license, and consume everything in its path. Burke regretted the decline of chivalry because he believed that this ingenious system of self-restraint had supported the liberty that was truly attainable within the bounds of civilization.

V. *'The Man that will Mark this Age':*

*Reflections on Burke's Legacy*

It is perhaps easier in light of these discoveries to understand why Burke was so distraught by Philip Francis's criticism that all he said regarding chivalry was "pure foppery." Burke believed it was exactly this dismissive attitude toward the legacy of ancient manners that would lead to the downfall of modern Europe. The fact that many historians today share Francis's view that Burke's tribute to the lost "age of chivalry" was a moment of indulgence or a distraction from serious political concerns would have been a confirmation of his worst fears, and a sign that our world was headed for ruin. As I have attempted to show, Burke's fixation on chivalry was not the result of an aversion to progress, or a desire to preserve an archaic and oppressive regime. When the *Reflections* is set within its proper intellectual context, particularly that of the Scottish Enlightenment, Burke's passage on chivalry appears to be a highly considered defense of the social conditions that supported liberty and equality within civilized society.

Burke was overcome by dread as he watched the French Revolution devolve into terror, just as he predicted, in the years following the publication of his *Reflections*. By the time that he was writing his *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1795–97), the revolutionaries had created something of a nightmare: "[T]hey have constructed their Republick on three bases, all fundamentally opposite to those on which the communities of Europe are built. It's foundation is laid in Regicide; in Jacobinism; and in Atheism," but the most disturbing fact was that "it has joined to those principles, a *body of systemattick manners* which secures their operation"

(emphasis mine).<sup>101</sup> Burke insisted that “[w]hen to these establishments ... you add the *correspondent system of manners*, no doubt can be left on the mind of a thinking man, concerning their determined hostility to the human race.” In complete contravention of chivalric principles, “[t]he noblest passions, the love of glory, the love of country, have been debauched”—their manners are “the most licentious, prostitute, and abandoned that ever has been known, and at the same time the most coarse, rude, savage, and ferocious.”<sup>102</sup> The French had completed that “revolution in sentiments, manners, and moral opinions” which Burke raised the alarm for in his *Reflections*, and in doing so they had dealt a considerable blow to the aristocratic and ecclesiastical foundations of modern Europe, the moral principles which upheld them, and even “the human race” as a whole.

It was principally for this reason that Burke spent his dying days promoting a war against the French Republic. As Emma Vincent MacLeod notes, Burke was the “first in Britain publicly to advocate a war against revolutionary France,” and he continued to do so despite the mounting opposition to the war in Britain, and his own rapidly declining health.<sup>103</sup> More than an invading army, he wrote, “[i]t is with an *armed doctrine* that we are at war,” and one that had already breached Britain’s borders: “To us it is a Colossus which bestrides our channel. It has one foot on a foreign shore, the other upon the British soil.”<sup>104</sup> At the core of this doctrine was a fundamental perversion of the chivalric principles which upheld modern civilization. “It is the concern of mankind,” Burke insisted, “that the destruction of order should not be a claim to rank: that crimes should not be the only title to pre-eminence and honour.”<sup>105</sup>

Burke’s political allies sought to prolong his life as long as possible so that he could continue to combat the growing sympathy in Britain for a peace settlement with France, a nation that was corrupt in both ideology and character. Some of his friends even whisked him away to

101 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 9:240.

102 *Ibid.*, 242.

103 Emma Vincent MacLeod, *A War of Ideas: British Attitudes to the Wars Against Revolutionary France, 1792–1802* (Surrey: Ashgate, 1998), 5.

104 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 9:199.

105 *Ibid.*, 9:208.



a pump-room in Bath in an attempt to revive his spirits, and the Whig statesman William Windham urged in a letter to Burke on January 22, 1797, "your life ... is at this moment of more consequence than that of any other man now living."<sup>106</sup> But after spending four months at Bath, to little effect, Burke returned to his home in Beaconsfield, and died six weeks later. George Canning wrote in despair to a member of the British embassy in France, "Burke is dead! ... He is the man that will mark this age, marked as it is in itself by events, to all time."<sup>107</sup>

Burke has in many ways become a man of our own time, resurrected by politicians to be praised or condemned as the defender of historical precedent.<sup>108</sup> His impassioned memorial to the "age of chivalry" lives on as one of the most definitive statements of his political viewpoint, though perhaps the least understood. But when Burke's *Reflections* are contextualized within the major intellectual traditions and developments of the eighteenth century, particularly the Scottish Enlightenment, what at first appears to be a romantic outburst emerges as an intricate design for the preservation of liberty and equality. Burke's ambitions for liberty and equality were perhaps limited, from a modern perspective, by his conviction that social hierarchy was immutable, or ought to be altered as gradually as possible. But in light of the essential role that ancient manners had to play in his vision of modern civilization, and the freedom that he believed was truly attainable within the bounds of order, we ought to consider Burke's promotion of chivalry as a serious attempt to preserve what he perceived to be the foundation of civilized liberty.<sup>109</sup>

---

106 E. J. Payne, "Introduction" to Edmund Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, ed. Francis Canavan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 45.

107 *Ibid.*, 45–46.

108 Jones, "Conservatism, Edmund Burke," 1123–35.

109 I would like to take this opportunity to thank my undergraduate supervisor at the University of St. Andrews, Dr. David Allan, for a wonderful introduction to the History of Political Thought, and for his continuing support.

# *Burke's Nuanced Praise of Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments*

THE RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF BURKE'S  
NOTION OF THE SUBLIME IN HIS *PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY*



NOBUHIKO NAKAZAWA

*Kansai University, Osaka*

## *Introduction*

The friendship between Adam Smith and Edmund Burke has attracted much scholarly attention; but the precise nature of any intellectual affinities and differences shared by these two great thinkers still remains difficult to determine, despite a considerable amount of previous research.<sup>1</sup> In order to push the frontiers of research on this theme, this paper attempts a close examination of Burke's praise for *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*<sup>2</sup> (hereafter, *TMS*), Smith's first book, published in early 1759, with special reference to Burke's aesthetic treatise published two years

---

1 For a useful survey of this subject, see Donald Winch, "The Burke-Smith Problem and Late Eighteenth-Century Political and Economic Thought," *The Historical Journal*, vol. 28, no. 1 (1985): 231-47.

2 Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

earlier, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (hereafter, *Enquiry*).<sup>3</sup>

The paper is organized as follows. Section I reviews the construction and argument of the *Enquiry*. Section II explores the moral aspect of the *Enquiry*, especially in relation to Burke's notion of sympathy. Finally, Section III examines the extent to which the author of the *Enquiry* praised *TMS* through a careful reading of his first letter to Smith in 1759 and the review that followed.

### I. *The Construction and Argument of the Enquiry*

Burke, best known as a member of parliament and political thinker in eighteenth-century Britain, began his intellectual life as a man of letters and as an aesthete. The main questions in the field of aesthetics have traditionally been: "What makes people apprehend beauty?" and "Does the basis for the impression of beautiful things reside within the external object or inside us?" Besides including lucid answers to these questions, Burke's *Enquiry* was the first work to theorize "the beautiful" and "the sublime" as a pair of aesthetic categories, making the work particularly important in the history of aesthetic thought.<sup>4</sup>

The 1757 first edition of the *Enquiry* comprises five parts and can broadly be divided into two main sections: the first four parts (1–4) discuss the difference between "the sublime" and "the beautiful,"<sup>5</sup> and the

3 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford et al., 9 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981–2015), 1:185–320.

4 Strictly speaking, the first full-scale discussion of the sublime and beautiful was given mainly in terms of rhetoric by an anonymous author (conventionally referred to as Longinus or Pseudo-Longinus) of the first century. Centuries later, in Burke's *Enquiry*, the sublime and beautiful were no longer presented in terms of rhetoric, but rather were redefined as a pair of aesthetic categories. Burke consciously broke with these conceptions indebted to Longinus when he wrote in the preface to the first edition of the *Enquiry*: "Even Longinus, in his incomparable discourse upon a part of this subject, has comprehended things extremely repugnant to each other, under one common name of the *Sublime*. The abuse of the word *Beauty*, has been still more general, and attended with still worse consequences" (ibid., 188).

5 The first part analyzes human inner feelings, the second and third parts analyze the attributes of external things that stimulate the feelings, and the fourth part exam-

last part (5) considers the characteristics of linguistic art in contrast to visual art.<sup>6</sup>

The starting point of Burke's argument is a criticism of the standards of classical aesthetics, that "beauty is based on the proportion of external objects." Burke proposes instead that the basis for the apprehension of beautiful things resides within us, and that the anatomical features of the body structure common to all people provides a universal standard for aesthetic judgment (or judgment of taste).<sup>7</sup> Proceeding from this, then, how do we actually form an aesthetic judgment?

Burke takes "society" and "self-preservation" as the two main "ends" of human passions.<sup>8</sup> The "positive pleasure" relating to the former is simply called "pleasure" and is associated with "the beautiful," while the "relative pleasure" relating to the latter (and resulting from the "removal or diminution of pain") is called "delight"<sup>9</sup> and is associated with "the sublime." According to Burke, the "beautiful" has feminine characteristics such as "clearness," "smallness," "smoothness," "gradual variation," and "delicacy," which engender in humans feelings of joy, such as satisfaction and peace. This is a process in which a relaxation of the nerves is said to occur. In contrast, "the sublime" has various masculine charac-

---

ines the laws of nature, according to which the emotions of external things through their impact on the body stimulate the feelings.

6 A new "Introduction on Taste" and a new chapter on "Power" were added in the 1759 second edition of the *Enquiry*.

7 "[C]ritics ... have generally sought the rule of the arts in the wrong place; they sought it among poems, pictures, engravings, statues, and buildings. But art can never give the rules that make an art.... The true standard of the arts is in every man's power" (ibid., 228).

8 "Most of the ideas which are capable of making a powerful impression on the mind, whether simply of pain or pleasure, or of the modifications of those, may be reduced very nearly to these two heads, *self-preservation*, and *society*; to the ends of one or the other of which all our passions are calculated to answer" (ibid., 216; italics in original).

9 "[T]he feeling which results from the ceasing or diminution of pain does not bear a sufficient resemblance to positive pleasure to have it considered as of the same nature, or to entitle it to be known by the same name.... This feeling, in many cases so agreeable, but in all so different from positive pleasure, has no name which I know; ... Whenever I have occasion to speak of this species of relative pleasure, I call it *Delight*; ..." (ibid., 213-14; italics in original). Here Burke bears in mind John Locke's views: "Mr. Locke [essay on human understanding, I. 2. c. 20. sect. 16.] ... thinks that the removal or lessening of a pain is considered and operates as a pleasure, and the loss or diminishing of pleasure as a pain" (ibid., 212; bracketed insertion in original).

teristics such as “obscurity,” “privation,” “infinity,” “succession,” “uniformity,” and “vastness,” which strike fear into the human heart as a first impression, and engender an elevation of the spirit.<sup>10</sup> This is a process in which tension of the nerves occurs, leading to their activation.<sup>11</sup> The fear felt in this way is rather uplifting to our spirit (as long as we are observing from a safe distance). Moreover—a point that has been relatively neglected or not studied systematically enough—Burke relates the fearful sublime described above to religious or spiritual experiences when one is seized in the moment of “encountering” God.<sup>12</sup> Passing

10 In his famous study of the sublime, Monk notes that “the foundation of his [Burke’s] theory of sublimity is the emotion of terror” (Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* [New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1935], 87). In fact Burke himself remarked that terror, or the fear of pain or death, “is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime” (*ibid.*, 230–31).

11 According to Burke, the cause of the sublime and the beautiful consists in the body’s physiological response of the nerves to external stimuli: “It is Mr. Locke’s opinion, that darkness is not naturally an idea of terror; and that, though an excessive light is painful to the sense, the greatest excess of darkness is no ways troublesome. He observes indeed in another place, that a nurse or an old woman having once associated the ideas of ghosts and goblins with that of darkness, night, ever after, becomes painful and horrible to the imagination. The authority of this great man is doubtless as great as that of any man can be, and it seems to stand in the way of our general principle.... / It may be worth while [sic] to examine, how darkness can operate in such a manner as to cause pain. It is observable, that still as we recede from the light, nature has so contrived it, that the pupil is enlarged by the retiring of the iris, in proportion to our recess. Now instead of declining from it but a little, suppose that we withdraw entirely from the light; it is reasonable to think that the contraction of the radial fibres of the iris is proportionably greater; and that this part may by great darkness come to be so contracted, as to strain the nerves that compose it beyond their natural tone; and by this means to produce a painful sensation.... I believe any one will find, if he opens his eyes and makes an effort to see in a dark place, that a very perceivable pain ensues” (*ibid.*, 294–97). Thus, Burke laid the universal standard of aesthetic judgment (or judgment of taste) on the commonality of the body structure of all human beings.

12 For this topic, see Andrew Chignell and Matthew C. Halteman, “Religion and the Sublime,” in *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Timothy M. Costelloe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 186–87; Emily Dumler-Winckler, “Romanticism as Modern Re-Enchantment: Burke, Kant, and Emerson on Religious Taste,” *Journal for the History of Modern Theology / Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte*, vol. 22, issue 1 (2015): 1–22; and Richard White, “The Sublime and the Other,” *The Heythrop Journal*, vol. 38, issue 2 (1997): 136. For a theological understanding of the *Enquiry*, see Ian Harris, “Introduction,” in *Edmund Burke, Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. Ian Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University

through the fearful sublime, we are ultimately led to the splendor and greatness of God's power. Analogous to this are instances where humans who have witnessed steep Alpine mountains and Gothic cathedrals are aware not only of an overpowering fearfulness but also of a reverence and awe that make them conscious of the smallness of their own existence before a holy God.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, Burke discovered and formulated that fear, which generally is an unpleasant emotion for humans, can create some sort of aesthetic impression that can be a major effect of art. An example of the application of theoretical considerations as described above to art genre theory is the comparison of the relative merits of painting and poetry developed in Part 5 of the *Enquiry*. Burke privileges "the sublime" over "the beautiful" predicated on the strength of the aesthetic excitement they bring,<sup>14</sup> and concludes that poetry (as a linguistic art) representing "the sublime" is superior to painting (as a visual art) representing "the beautiful."<sup>15</sup>

---

Press, 1993), xviii–xxiii; and F. P. Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998–2006), 1: 97–100. For eighteenth-century English critics' continuing interest in the religious sublime, see David B. Morris, *The Religious Sublime: Christian Poetry and Critical Tradition in 18th-Century England* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1972).

- 13 The growing significance of Burke's stress on the connection between religion and "the sublime" can be clearly observed in the newest and longest chapter on "Power" that he added to the 1759 second edition. In this chapter Burke states that "true religion has, and must have, so large a mixture of salutary fear" and that "false religions have generally nothing else but fear to them" (Burke, *Enquiry*, 241). This statement is as if Burke were trying to restate the central claim of his 1756 debut work, *A Vindication of Natural Society*, which is a satire of Lord Bolingbroke's style of the philosophy of deism that denies revealed religion.
- 14 Janowitz demonstrates that "Smith's essay [on the history of astronomy] ... is, ... in part, a polemic against the unruly or un-masterable imagination of the Romantic sublime" and that "The sublime, for Smith, is not so much in opposition to beauty as it is an aberration from of beauty" (Anne Janowitz, "Adam Smith's Campaign against the Sublime," *The Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2004): 11–13; bracketed insertion mine).
- 15 For Burke, the distinction between "the sublime" and "the beautiful" and the superiority of the former over the latter not only corresponds to the distinction between the linguistic and visual arts and the superiority of the former over the latter, but also appears to correspond to the distinction between religious and secular knowledge, and the superiority of the former over the latter.

## *II. The Moral Aspect of the Enquiry*

This treatise on aesthetics by Burke can also be read as a book that discusses the moral nature of human beings from the viewpoint of aesthetics. This section will explore the moral aspect of this aesthetic treatise, especially in relation to Burke's notion of sympathy.

Sympathy, which is usually seen as the core notion of Adam Smith's *TMS*, is also discussed in the *Enquiry*. In *TMS*, as its first chapter, "Of Sympathy," demonstrates, human beings are naturally endowed with the powerful instincts of self-interest and sympathy. In the *Enquiry*, on the other hand, "society" and "self-preservation" are determined as the two main "ends" of human passions, with sympathy merely occupying one of the three subordinate social passions—"sympathy," "imitation," and "ambition."<sup>16</sup> In this respect, there is not an insignificant difference between the two works. Nevertheless, what should attract readers' attention more strongly is that both works share almost the same problem setting and problem approach in an attempt to oppose apriorism and rationalism in morals and to elucidate the mechanisms of morally motivated self-regulation within a civil and civilized society in relation to human nature—more specifically, the workings of the emotions of people living there. The following passage portrays a situation where the sympathy that should originally be related merely to society crosses over to the domain of self-preservation; and furthermore, where, through the action of sympathy thus understood, the sublime eventually brings us a real understanding of the pain and danger affecting others from which we have escaped, driving us to act to remove the same from those other persons:

It is by the first of these passions that we enter into the concerns of others; that we are moved as they are moved, and are never suffered to be indifferent spectators of almost anything which men can do or suffer. For sympathy must be considered as a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected;

---

<sup>16</sup> "[T]he passions [that belong to society] are of a complicated kind, and branch out into a variety of forms agreeable to that variety of ends they are to serve in the great chain of society. The three principal links in this chain are *sympathy*, *imitation*, and *ambition*" (Burke, *Enquiry*, 220; bracketed insertion mine, italics in original).

so that this passion may either partake of the nature of those which regard self-preservation, and turning upon pain may be a source of the sublime; or it may turn upon ideas of pleasure; ... / ... [A]s our Creator has designed that we should be united by the bond of sympathy, he has strengthened that bond by a proportionable delight; and there most where our sympathy is most wanted, in the distresses of others ... there is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity; ... This is not an unmixed delight, but blended with no small uneasiness. The delight we have in such things hinders us from shunning scenes of misery; and the pain we feel, prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer.<sup>17</sup>

Humans feel delight in observing other people suffering; at the same time, they feel pain through the act of expressing sympathy and so are naturally guided towards relieving others' suffering in order to expel that pain for the sake of self-preservation. In other words, the act of helping alleviate others' suffering is not due to pure altruism, which may be regarded as secondary to one's own interests.

Thus, even two years before he read *TMS*, Burke, too, had discussed the moral nature of man in relation to self-preservation (or self-interest) and sympathy from an aesthetic point of view, and had concluded, as seen in the *Enquiry*, that sympathy was one of the three "principal links" that formed "the great chain of society."<sup>18</sup>

### *III. To What Extent did Burke Praise TMS?*

Given the aforementioned understanding of the *Enquiry*, it is no wonder that Burke welcomed Smith's moral theory in *TMS*; in fact, most academic studies, with a few exceptions, have reached similar conclusions regarding Burke's assessment of *TMS*.<sup>19</sup> Here is a typical interpretation:

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 220–22.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>19</sup> Notable among them are Stanley Ayling, *Edmund Burke: His Life and Opinions* (London: John Murray, 1988), 16; Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Polit-*



Scholars are well acquainted with the ringing letter of endorsement Burke wrote to Adam Smith in 1759 concerning *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in which he embraced Smith's approach to moral philosophy as well as his broad conclusions. This allegiance makes obvious sense, as Smith's arguments in the *Moral Sentiments* were extremely close to those Burke was drawing at roughly the same time in the *Enquiry*. Burke's letter was followed by a similarly laudatory review of Smith's book in the *Annual Register*. / Of course, the key to Smith's moral theory was sympathy. . . . The crucial concept of sympathy, as understood by both men, was identical. / In fact, Burke's letter to Smith and the review that followed enable us to place him quite specifically with respect to internal Scottish Enlightenment squabbles regarding moral philosophy.<sup>20</sup>

---

*ical Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 139–40; William F. Byrne, *Edmund Burke for Our Time: Moral Imagination, Meaning, and Politics* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011), 69–70; James Conniff, "Burke on Political Economy: The Nature and Extent of State Authority," *The Review of Politics*, vol. 49, no. 4 (1987): 496; James Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler: Edmund Burke and the Politics of Progress* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 35–36; Seán Patrick Donlan, "Law and Lawyers in Edmund Burke's Scottish Enlightenment," *Studies in Burke and His Time*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2005): 37; William Clyde Dunn, "Adam Smith and Edmund Burke: Complementary Contemporaries," *Southern Economic Journal*, vol. 7, no. 3 (1941): 341; Rodney W. Kilcup, "Reason and the Basis of Morality in Burke," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 3 (1979): 280–81; Jesse Norman, *Edmund Burke: The Visionary Who Invented Modern Politics* (London: William Collins, 2013), 44; Dennis O'Keeffe, *Edmund Burke* (New York and London: Continuum, 2010), 41; Burleigh Taylor Wilkins, *The Problem of Burke's Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 64–65; and Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 170. Notable exceptions include David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence* (Cambridge, Mass and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 40; Koen Vermeir and Michael Funk Deckard, "Philosophical Enquiries into the Science of Sensibility: An Introductory Essay," in *The Science of Sensibility: Reading Burke's Philosophical Enquiry*, ed. Koen Vermeir and Michael Funk Deckard (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 20. These last two pioneering studies have greatly inspired me in the writing of this article.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel I. O'Neill, *The Burke–Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 64–65.

In short, Burke's and Smith's robust commitments to "sympathy" as the basis of morality are seen to be almost identical. While in no way rejecting this prevailing view out of hand, this paper asserts that such an assessment falls short of complete accuracy. A close examination of two early sources penned by Burke goes some way towards questioning this original assessment: these are Burke's first private correspondence with Smith, and his subsequent review of *TMS*. Certainly, on a cursory reading, both documents are seen to contain much flattery and appreciation. However, on closer inspection, one can see that Burke also includes some not insignificant reservations in his praise of *TMS*.

In his first letter to Smith (10 September 1759), Burke apologized for the delay in acknowledging the gift of a copy of *TMS* passed on by David Hume, and then wrote:

When I received the Theory of Moral Sentiments [sic] from Mr Hume, I ran through it with great eagerness; ... I am not only pleased with the ingenuity of your Theory; I am convinced of its solidity and Truth; and I do not know that it ever cost me less trouble to admit so many things to which I had been a stranger before. I have ever thought that the old Systems of morality were too contracted and that this Science could never stand well upon any narrower Basis than the whole of Human Nature.... A theory like yours founded on the Nature of man, which is always the same, will last, when those that are founded on his opinions, which are always changing, will and must be forgotten. I own I am particularly pleased with those easy and happy illustrations from common Life and manners in which your work abounds more than any other that I know by far.... Besides so much powerful reasoning as your Book contains, there is so much elegant Painting of the manners and passions, that it is highly valuable even on that account. The stile is every where lively and elegant, and what is, I think equally important in a work of this kind, it is well varied; it is often sublime too, particularly in that fine Picture of the Stoic Philosophy towards the end of your first part which is dressed out in all the grandeur and Pomp that becomes that magnif-

icent delusion. I have mentioned something of what affected me as Beauties in your work. I will take the Liberty to mention too what appeared to me as a sort of Fault. You are in some few Places, what Mr Locke is in most of his writings, rather a little too diffuse. This is however a fault of generous kind.<sup>21</sup>

Here, Burke did indeed express his praise of *TMS* for its fidelity to human nature and its unusual combination of originality and truth; but to what extent was he being sincere? If you note that “sublime” and “Beauties” appearing in the same passage are not used contrastively but rather for the common purpose of praising *TMS*, then you may conclude that Burke was writing to Smith as a friend, not as a reviewer, and hence that this praise is not a back-handed compliment but a most sincere one. However, what has often been overlooked or imperfectly grasped by many scholars is that Burke audaciously let slip a critical remark even in this first written communication with the author: “You are in some few Places ... rather a little too diffuse.”<sup>22</sup> This inconspicuous remark appears to imply that Burke’s admiration for *TMS* was not absolute.

This letter was followed by a similarly favorable review of *TMS* in the *Annual Register* for 1759 (published in 1760), where Burke wrote:<sup>23</sup>

[T]he work is so well methodized, the parts grow so naturally and gracefully out of each other ... / [T]his author has struck out a new, and the same time a perfectly natural road of speculation on this subject [moral theory]... We conceive, that here the theory is in all its essential parts just, and founded on truth and nature.<sup>24</sup>

21 Edmund Burke, “Letter from Edmund Burke to Adam Smith, 10 September 1759,” in *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. Thomas W. Copland *et al.*, 10 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958–78), 1:129–30.

22 See John Leeder, “Introduction,” in *On Moral Sentiments: Contemporary Responses to Adam Smith*, ed. John Leeder (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1997), x; and Lock, *Burke*, 1:186–87.

23 This review was written anonymously, but is almost certainly by Burke. *The Annual Register*, a chronicle of current politics with extensive reviews, appeared from 1758, under his editorship. For a brief survey of the problems regarding the authorship of the anonymous book reviews of the early years of the *Annual Register*, see Aris Sarafianos, “Hyperborean Meteorologies of Culture: Vital Sensations and Medical Environmentalism in Arbuthnot, Burke and Barry,” in *The Science of Sensibility*, 73, note 8.

24 Leeder, *On Moral Sentiments*, 51 (bracketed insertion mine).

Here again, in a tone similar to the earlier letter, Burke praises *TMS* effusively. In addition, after declaring “sympathy” as “the basis of [Smith’s] theory”<sup>25</sup> near the end of this review, Burke reprinted the entire first chapter of *TMS* (“Of Sympathy”). And yet, if we take into account the possibility that Burke’s admiration for *TMS* was not absolute, and that writing this text was part of his job as a man of letters, some caution must be observed in interpreting literally the following passage from the same review as evidence of Burke’s praise for *TMS*:

The author seeks for the foundation of the just, the fit, the proper, the decent, in our most common and most allowed passions; and making approbation and disapprobation the tests of virtue and vice, and shewing that those are founded on sympathy, he raises from this simple truth, one of the most *beautiful* fabrics of moral theory, that has perhaps ever appeared.... His language ... is rather *painting* than writing.<sup>26</sup>

Note how Burke asserts in this passage that Smith’s language is “rather *painting* than writing.” This style of argument, which clearly contrasts “painting” with “writing,” corresponds to that developed in Part 5 of the *Enquiry*. For Burke, as the author of the *Enquiry*, both “beautiful” and “painting” are technical terms associated with an ethico-aesthetic value judgment or, to go further, words with which to express relative superiority or inferiority. As already discussed in Section I, Burke privileges “the sublime” over “the beautiful” and concludes that “painting,” representing “the beautiful,” is inferior to “poetry,” representing “the sublime.” Passages such as “one of the most beautiful fabrics of moral theory” and “rather painting than writing” are unlikely to represent genuine praise, as long as they appear in a review written by the author of the *Enquiry*. Furthermore, although Burke does not point it out in this review, there is a fundamental disagreement between him and Smith regarding the cause of beauty. Smith argues that “utility is one of the principal sources of beauty,” whereas Burke insists that “beauty does not depend on [proportion or utility], let it owe its origin to what else it

25 Ibid., 52 (bracketed insertion mine).

26 Ibid. (italics mine).

will.”<sup>27</sup> In this light, might it not be more reasonable to consider Burke’s choice of words—“beautiful” and “painting”—as implying a partially negative evaluation, and to make the assertion that this critique could be contrived in order to convey a polite question: “Is Smith’s moral theory perhaps more beautiful and less sublime (namely, more secular and less religious) than true?”<sup>28</sup> Is it possibly in danger of straying farther from the truth of the starting premise as a result of being too particular about the beautifulness of the system?”<sup>29</sup>

### Conclusion

This paper concludes with the claim that, contrary to conventional wisdom, Burke can be seen to have expressed some significant reservations in his praise of Smith’s moral theory. Granted, obtaining a full picture of Burke’s assessment of *TMS* is limited by the scarcity of materials on Burke’s side. However, if we pay close attention to the religious character of Burke’s notion of the sublime, it can be inferred that Burke

27 Smith, *TMS*, 179; Burke, *Enquiry*, 270 (bracketed insertion mine).

28 According to Heydt, Hume and Smith “omit piety and duties to God.” See Colin Heydt, “The Problem of Natural Religion in Smith’s Moral Thought,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 78, no. 1 (2017): 94.

29 This paper takes a different approach from the following interpretation by Siraki: “Unfortunately for the history of aesthetics, neither Burke’s letter to Smith nor his review [on *TMS*] makes any connection to his or any other aesthetics” (Arby Ted Siraki, “Adam Smith and the Problems of Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics,” unpublished thesis [University of Ottawa, 2013], 177; bracketed insertion mine). See also Arby Ted Siraki, “Adam Smith’s Solution to the Paradox of Tragedy,” in *The Philosophy of Adam Smith: Essays Commemorating the 250th Anniversary of The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Vivienne Brown and Samuel Fleischacker (London: Routledge, 2010), 222. Frazer rightly considers this letter and review from an aesthetic point of view, but remains unaware of the superiority of the sublime over the beautiful and consequently ignores the long debate over the relative merits of painting and poetry (Michael L. Frazer, “Seduced by System: Edmund Burke’s Aesthetic Embrace of Adam Smith’s Philosophy,” *Intellectual History Review*, vol. 25, issue 3 (2015): 357–72). Labio gives an almost diametrically opposed interpretation of this paper regarding the sublimity of Smith’s moral theory: “Smith’s understanding of the workings of sympathy intersects with contemporary theories on the sublime, an aestheticized feeling of terror experienced from a distance by a spectator who is merely imagining her/his imminent demise” (Catherine Labio, “Adam Smith’s Aesthetics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Adam Smith*, ed. Christopher J. Berry, Maria Pia Paganelli, and Craig Smith [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 118).

suspects that Smith's argument is too secular and lacking in adequate respect for a holy God.<sup>30</sup>

My final suggestion to those interested in acquiring a more historically accurate understanding of the intellectual affinities and differences shared by Burke and Smith is that they consider the significance of the young Burke's nuanced praise of *TMS* and pay particular attention to the use of the expression "beautiful" as a term of ethico-aesthetic judgment.<sup>31</sup>

---

30 Additionally, the findings of the present paper can possibly support and extend the following interpretation by Lock: "By 1784, on his first visit to Scotland, Burke had come to speak 'coldly' of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Perhaps twenty-five years in politics had dimmed his faith in a theory founded on sympathy" (Lock, *Burke*, 1:197).

31 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 202nd meeting of the Adam Smith Society (Japan) held in Kyoto in November 2019. I would like to thank all the participants for their helpful feedback. My special thanks go to Hideki Kuwajima and Daisuke Odagawa for comments and discussion that enhanced and increased my understanding. Part of this study was supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science through Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (KAKENHI), grant numbers 18K01536 and 20K00926. Responsibility for all remaining errors lies entirely with me.

# *London's Coffeehouse Literati*

AND THE RISE OF THE PUBLIC MAN  
IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY



E. WESLEY REYNOLDS, III

## *Introduction*

The coffeehouse era in London saw the cultivation of a classical and polite journalizing style, as well as the rise of the public literary man in English social and political life. English “wits” and “critics,” as they were called, incorporated the vast array of pleasurable activities of London’s urban social life into their society journals, editorial columns, satirical tracts, and novels, and attempted to moderate the leisurely public sphere with an ethos of politeness and taste. Journalists embraced coffee’s pleasurable pursuits in an attempt to discover a new empirical form of rational knowledge; what Jürgen Habermas has called *communicative action*.<sup>1</sup> The eighteenth-century coffeehouse circuit birthed new sociological categories of human behavior frequently referred to in the London journals as, “a Gentleman, a Pretty Fellow, a Toast, a Coquet, a Critic, a Wit,

---

<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, Vol. 2, Trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 1–5, 26, 62–64.

and all other appellations of those now in the gayer world.”<sup>2</sup> Reviewing these behaviors became the literary pastime of the “triflers,” “tattlers,” “idlers,” “ramblers,” “connoisseurs,” “guardians,” and other public observers in London.<sup>3</sup> Historian John Wood has called this public atmosphere in London the “theatre of the polite world,” where, as Lawrence Klein has described, politeness became “a medium facilitating interaction and access to shared experience.”<sup>4</sup> Through their language of *critique*, coffeehouse critics interpreted London social life as a new *res publica*, or a public sphere vested with urbanity and *humanitas*. As one critic stated, “To read Men Is acknowledged more useful than Books.”<sup>5</sup> For that reason, Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke, and many others set out to explore London’s coffeehouse world in their turns over the course of the eighteenth century. All of these coffeehouse *literati* intended to transform the public and be transformed.

Burke, like many of his contemporaries, wished that the coffeehouse would blossom into a forum for an aristocracy of virtue. Following in the Earl of Shaftesbury’s condemnation of the corruptions of court manners, Burke sided with the Country Whigs in their defense of a more historic and virtuous aristocracy. To Burke, the coffeehouse was

2 “Tatler, No. 21, Saturday, May 28, 1709,” in *in Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele, The Tatler: With Notes, and a General Index . . . Complete in One Volume* (Philadelphia: J. J. Woodward, 1831), 53.

3 The names are derived from social columns in journals of the eighteenth century; “Tatler, No. 15, Saturday, May 14, 1709,” in *The Tatler*, 43; “Idler, No. 64. Saturday, 7 July 1759,” in Samuel Johnson, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Volume II: The Idler and The Adventurer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 199; Nich. Nonentity, “To the Author of The Trifler, Feb. 29. 1788.” in *The Aberdeen magazine, literary chronicle, and review; for The Year MDCCLXXXVIII. . . .* Vol. 1. 1788–1790 Aberdeen, Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, CMU Libraries - library.cmich.edu: 163–64, accessed Oct. 22, 2016, <[http://find.galegroup.com/cmich/idm.oclc.org/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=-lom\\_cmichu&tabID=T001&docId=CW124930040&ctype=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE](http://find.galegroup.com/cmich/idm.oclc.org/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=-lom_cmichu&tabID=T001&docId=CW124930040&ctype=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE)>.

4 Lawrence E. Klein, “Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century,” *The Historical Journal* 45, no. 4 (December 2002): 873, 879–80, 887.

5 *Coffee-houses Vindicated in Answer to the late Published Character of a Coffee-House Asserting From Reason, Experience, and good Authours, the Excellent Use, and Physical Vertues of that Liquor. With The grand Conveniency of such civil places of Resort and Ingenious Conversation* (London, 1675), 1–2.



one of the many “little platoons” in which friends congregated to regulate and fashion their moral character. As he stated in *Reflections*, “I love a manly, moral, regulated liberty as well as any gentleman” and lamented the impending loss of “[a]ll the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which by a bland assimilation incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society.”<sup>6</sup> He hoped that coffeehouse life in England would bridle the rash vigor of popular political whim. To that end, he joined Johnson’s coffeehouse club in the 1760s. By the 1790s however, Burke had his doubts. Coffee’s benign influence of polite sociability had been threatened by the overpoliticization of coffeehouse society, particularly in France. He wrote, “There, they are surrounded by an army not raised either by the authority of their crown, or by their command ... There a majority, sometimes real, sometimes pretended, captive itself, compels a captive king to issue as royal edicts, at their hand, the polluted nonsense of their most licentious and giddy coffee-houses.”<sup>7</sup> According to Burke, the difficulty in coffeehouse life lay not in free political opinion, but rather in the direct political power of coffeehouse parties to overturn the legislative process of a nation. This was an unexpected and unwelcome change for the very reason that it was not in keeping with the original character of coffeehouse public life in London’s eighteenth-century world, which emphasized politeness over partisanship.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, journalists portrayed the “character” of a coffeehouse as a political and sociable meeting house for manners and news.<sup>8</sup> Joseph Addison’s and Richard Steele’s *Tatler* (1709)

6 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France: A Critical Edition*, ed. J. C. D. Clark (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 151, 239.

7 *Ibid.*, 228.

8 For a more lengthy discussion of the literature of sociability and politeness in London coffeehouses, refer to Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991), 1–2, 10, 14–15, 22–23; Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 66, 69, 116–17, 199–203, 381; Lawrence E. Klein, “Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century,” *The Historical Journal* 45, no. 4 (December 2002): 873–87, accessed Oct. 29, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3133532>; Klein, “Coffeehouse Civility, 1660–1714: An Aspect of Post-Courtly Culture in England,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (1996): 30–51, published by University of Pennsylvania Press, accessed Oct. 20, 2016, <http://www>.

and *Spectator* (1711) columns and Henry Fielding's *The Coffee-House Politician* (1730) did much to cement this impression. As Addison wrote in *Spectator* 430: "I first of all called in at St. James's, where I found the whole outward room in a buzz of politics ... by the knot of theorists, who sat in the inner room, within the steams of the coffee-pot."<sup>9</sup> These journalists were not able to expel fully the crime and the gaming culture from even the famous coffeehouses of London, but they did provide a literary reason for polite company to mix with the diverse coffeehouse crowds of London. Society journals adopted, modified, and elevated coffeehouse impressions left from the previous half-century of coffeehouse pamphlets into a social art form, comparable to France's "republic of letters."<sup>10</sup> The key to moderating the urban experience of consumption and sociability was the invention of the coffeehouse editorial column, where literate middling urbanites subjected London life to constant criticism and modeled good taste and politeness in consumption and conversation. To them, the *Tatler* and *Spectator* catered.

Editorial criticism also reflected a budding new form of clubbable sociability among university students, middling professionals, and scientists. This era in journalistic literature, which roughly began with Addison and ended with Paine, ushered in a new coffeehouse community that bought news at much as it did consumer goods. Benedict Anderson has termed this transformation of print into a commodity "print-capitalism" and he argues that "mechanically reproduced print-languages" assem-

---

jstor.org/stable/3817904; Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 5–21, 42, 138, 190; Brian Cowan, "The Rise of the Coffeehouse Reconsidered," *The Historical Journal* 47, no. 1 (March 2004): 21–46, accessed Oct. 29, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4091544>; Cowan, "Mr. Spectator and the Coffeehouse Public Sphere," 345–66, accessed Oct. 20, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25098064>; Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 87, 101–102.

9 "Spectator, No. 403, Thursday, June 12, 1712," Addison, *The Works of Joseph Addison; complete in three volumes, embracing the whole of the "Spectator," etc.*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1845), 128; Bryant Lillywhite, *London Coffee Houses* (London: Georg Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1963), 500–501.

10 Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), 2–12, 21–24; Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 53, 90–95, 99.

bled vernacular communities together.<sup>11</sup> Mass production of books and newspapers made a fraternal community of readers possible in which both morning and evening papers were consumed and their readers were “well aware that the ceremony ... [performed] is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others ...”<sup>12</sup> This process began when Classic humanists reinvigorated Latin with its Roman roots and many Protestants broke away from Latin altogether, inviting merchants and even women to read in their own languages. Yet, Latin and Greek still remained the high languages of scholarship and study for intellectuals who increasingly read a diversity of vernacular languages.

It was this public culture of learning that so fascinated the English “wits,” who increasingly believed that they were architecting a new epistemology of sensible manners. London journalists and newspaper writers believed they were engaged in an experiment to elevate the best aspects of urban life into a discussion of Classical taste. With the death of John Dryden, the court ceased to patronize the coffeehouse *literati*. Instead, the literature of “wits” drew on the social networks of London’s literate middling peoples and clubbable artists and statesmen, such as Samuel Johnson, Joshua Reynolds, and Edmund Burke.<sup>13</sup> As such, it celebrated London’s pleasurable lifestyle, and appealed to those who enjoyed London’s social “Season,” polite forms of coffeehouse discussion, and the news.

### *I. The New Political Culture of News*

The rise of party and the explosion of print in the constitutional settlement of 1689 set the eighteenth century apart for being an era of political coffeehouse conversation. It formalized politeness by vesting literate citizens with the power to review their society. As important as early political developments in public conversation were, they paled in comparison with the formalization of political discourse in the Exclusion Crisis of

11 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1995), 33–34.

12 *Ibid.*, 7, 35, 37.

13 Stephen Copley, “Commerce, Conversation and Politeness in the Early Eighteenth-Century Periodical,” *The British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 64–65.

1679–1681 (over the parliamentary attempt to exclude Catholic James II from the British throne). The Exclusion Crisis was the debut of modern political print culture and large-scale political debate. An estimated five to ten million pamphlets circulated in the public sphere, voicing the demands of political writers for and against the exclusion. The debate subsequently birthed the phenomenon known by commentators of the period as “the rage of party,” between Whigs, who supported exclusion, and Tories, who opposed exclusion. Parliament eventually confirmed James’s succession, but the political question of limited authority only intensified with his Gallican-modeled pro-Catholic policies as king. In the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689, Parliament dethroned James II, brought in a Protestant succession, and instituted the political process through the Triennial Act of 1694, mandating elections every three years. Elections encouraged a party debate within the public sphere between Parliament’s two factions; the Whigs favoring Protestant succession and toleration of Protestant Dissenters and the Tories supporting High Anglicanism, hereditary succession, and avoidance of foreign wars. Because both Whig and Tory leaders understood the vital significance of political propaganda as a means of protecting their party machines, Parliament allowed the Licensing Act of 1662 to expire in 1695, effectively raising publishing firms from twenty in 1695 to seventy-five in London and twenty-eight outside of London in 1725.<sup>14</sup>

Political clubs and party politics advanced the quantity of commentary outlets but they did not necessarily improve the quality of conversation. As parliamentary politics drifted downwards to the public sphere, the tone of public discourse changed from a preoccupation with manners, etiquette, and social station into an obsession with party pageantry. Political clubs organized anniversary celebrations such as William III’s birthday throughout the coffeehouse network. Daniel Defoe expressed dismay over the commercialization of party politics and the loss of genuine sociability, stating that “[t]he certainty of a new election in three years is an unhappy occasion of keeping alive the divisions and party strife among the people, which otherwise would have died of course.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> James Von Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 19–21; Steven Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 91, 122–25; Cowan, *Social Life*, 209–24.

<sup>15</sup> Melton, *The Rise of the Public*, 20–21.

Freeing the public voice did not necessarily translate into real political representation in Parliament. Court minister Sir Robert Walpole strengthened a Whig oligarchy over Parliament through patronage and delegation of civic service appointments. Walpole's regime included approximately 27 percent of Parliament and nearly all of the military, church, and civil service offices. After the failed Jacobite revolt in 1715, the Tory party failed to gain enough votes to check the growth of Whig control and, by 1760, Parliament succumbed to one-party rule. Parliament repealed the Triennial Act in 1716, increasing the power of Whig patronage networks. The eligible electorate shrank from about 23.4 percent of adult males in 1715 to 17.2 percent by the late eighteenth century. Yet, local canvassers for political candidates circulated vast amounts of political tracts, stimulated political discourse, and encouraged newfound interest in political sociability among voters. For instance, Charles James Fox's victory in Westminster in 1784 included five celebration dinners for about seven hundred to one thousand people each.

Connecting with voters required politeness; that is, public social graces. A campaign manager for Sir William Milner's 1784 election in York complained, "He has, I fear, too cold and ungracious a manner to make great or lasting conquests over the affections of the populace ...



Joseph Highmore, detail from *Figures in a Tavern or Coffee House*  
Oil on Panel, c. 1725, Yale Center for British Art / Wikimedia

The hearty shake, and the familiar bit of conversation must be attended to.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, familiarity and congeniality became political virtues. Nevertheless, these niceties, rallies, and celebrations were only open to those invited among a small electorate. They cannot be said to have had the same level of popular significance as the earlier period of coffeehouse political sociability, when parties were still open entities with less direct parliamentary power. The institutionalization of the Whig regime in Parliament contracted the size of meaningful political discussion.

The same process did, however, give birth to vibrant clubs, which competed for public followings in London coffeehouses. New clubs like the Whig Kit-Cat club and salon hostesses such as Louise de Keroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth, in Whitehall, encouraged social networking and formulated political interests. When the Licensing Act requiring press writers to register with the state expired in 1695, an explosion of print culture followed that corresponded closely with the clubs and coffeehouses of London.<sup>17</sup> St. James’s coffeehouse became a center for Whig members of Parliament to discuss matters of state. Button’s housed Joseph Addison’s and Sir Richard Steele’s satirical columns and its great lion’s head received letters to the editor in *The Guardian*. Tories regularly rendezvoused at Garraway’s coffeehouse. Often, coffeehouses evolved from the pleasure gardens of the West End, housing new intellectual circles for literature, art, and political economy. Such was Turk’s Head, home to literary critic Samuel Johnson, novelist and playwright Oliver Goldsmith, painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, parliamentary orator Edmund Burke, historian Edward Gibbon, and economist Adam Smith. The political potential of public coffeehouse discussion was evident almost from the beginning of coffeehouse establishments.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the *litterati* of certain party clubs, like the Whigs at Button’s coffeehouse, policed their own political conversation at their own tables and crafted a literary genre of politeness in their popular journals. A social union between polite connoisseurs of specific genres of literature

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 22–25.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 187, 199; Cowan, *Social Life*, 170–76.

<sup>18</sup> Cowan, *Social Life*, 170–76; William Harrison Ukers, *All About Coffee* (New York: New York The Tea and Coffee Trade Journal Company, 1922), 59–60, 80–81; Leo Damrosch, *The Club: Johnson, Boswell, and the Friends Who Shaped an Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 68.



or material culture, a club mentality of inner-jokes and club house gossip, political association, and above all, an air of chaste austerity marked nationalistic Whig culture.<sup>19</sup>

A resurgence of political discourse and normative print culture transpired with the articulation of the “Country” opposition to the Whig hegemony. Beginning in the 1720s, radical Whigs found peculiar allies in Tory squires who resented their exclusion from Court and found the power of the Court suppressive of free parliamentary process. Bearing the brunt of the fiscal burdens of the War of Spanish Succession (1701–1714) with France, the Tory gentry believed they had much in common with urban critics in new manufacturing towns who received little or no representation in Parliament, while representative power was rarely adjusted in sparsely populated “rotten boroughs.” With no hope of penetrating the Whig ministry through patronage or by electoral power, Lord Bolingbroke organized a Tory/Country alliance outside of conventional political circles, going instead “out-of-doors” to the urban coffeehouses through political journalism. His *The Craftsman* (1726–1746) ran 10,000–12,000 copies per issue. Like Shaftesbury, Bolingbroke hoped to free society from the false ceremony of the Court. Adopting a language of transparency and investigative reporting, *The Craftsman* described its purpose as “to unravel the dark secrets of *Political Craft*” pleading “the cause of *publick Virtue*.”<sup>20</sup> Representing a moderate response to oligarchy, the County party integrated public opinion into the normative functions of political experience.

Popular radical John Wilkes harnessed the power of the new rhetoric of publicity to push popular politics beyond the conservative aims of the Country party during the 1760s. He launched a vicious attack against George III’s prime minister Lord Bute in his *The North Brittain* and joined William Pitt’s opposition to the end of the Seven Years’ War. Wilkes was prosecuted along with forty-eight other printers and booksellers under the Grenville administration for libel against government authorities. Wilkes clubs and societies mobilized enough support through street demonstrations, editorial letters, and the dissemination of Wilkes badges and paraphernalia to propel Wilkes to the

19 Klein, “Coffeehouse Civility,” 30–51; Ukers, *All About Coffee*, 60–61.

20 Melton, *The Rise of the Public*, 23, 27–28.

office of Lord Mayor of London and later the House of Commons. Wilkes's rapid success paved the way for a radical movement in Parliament during the 1780s, calling for (with only marginal success) the dissolution of many rotten boroughs, granting more electoral seats to new towns, annual elections, and universal male suffrage. Christopher Wyvill led a petitioning campaign across thirty-eight counties for electoral reform. Behind the movement was the intentional mobilization of public opinion toward political action. Political clubs and debating societies increased dramatically among the urban middling sort. In 1780 in London alone, thirty-five debating clubs existed with anything between four hundred and twelve hundred participants in each. London daily newspapers grew from six in 1746 to fourteen in 1790, and British readership increased from 2.5 million in 1713 to 16 million in 1801. John Cartwright's Society for Constitutional Information and the exclusively Female Parliament society were counter-parliamentary debating offshoots of the radical movement. James Van Horn Melton comments, "What emerged during the latter half of the eighteenth century was an extra-parliamentary sphere of political action that was increasingly national in its focus, more autonomous *vis-à-vis* political elites, and organized from below."<sup>21</sup> Public opinion had matured into political activism throughout coffeehouse associations.

## *II. Coffeehouse Literati: The Great Personalities of London*

The journalists of the eighteenth century saw in the rise of political news culture the opportunity to reform coffeehouse discussion without resorting to party factionalism. The Enlightenment turned to coffeehouses for an insight into the beauty of harmonious human fraternity. Underneath this attempt lay a philosophical assumption that cultivated manners came only from participating freely in the world at large (the right of association) and gaining more social experience in a participatory public sphere. What made this new print culture so powerful was its reliance on the experience of sociability in coffeehouses. It was not by books that men learned manners, but by polite company. When

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 28–29, 35–39.



Samuel Johnson decided that he would become a “fine gentleman,” his first destination was to the “polite coffee-houses” of London. His life in London exhibited the achievement of a generation of *literati* who had come before him, and in search of their experiment in politeness, Johnson came to London’s notable houses. Boswell related that Johnson and his pupil in the law, David Garrick, were simply swept off their feet with the “art of living in London.” Intended for the law, Garrick was referred to a mathematician and master of an academy, Mr. Colson, but soon changed course and headed for the stage. And what an actor he made! Leo Damrosch calls Garrick “the greatest actor of the century” for his realistic style.<sup>22</sup> Johnson decided to take to the stage as well, but as a critic and scholar of literature, rather than as an actor. From his first arrival in London, Johnson hoped to find all the literary inspiration he needed to write a great tragedy of his own.<sup>23</sup> He desired to put coffeehouse conversation to the test, for there he hoped to find a well-established circle of famed critics who seamlessly integrated London social life into the world of letters, nightly going to the playhouse and weighing the value of contemporary tragedy and comedy in coffeehouses.

Johnson’s age saw the flowering of clubbable coffeehouse associations. Seemingly, coffeehouse clubs across the Anglo world were simultaneously achieving the same breakthroughs in diversifying branches of knowledge in accord with the peculiar tastes of their patrons. The Royal Society and Old Whig clubs at the Grecian Coffeehouse had laid the foundation for a philosophical revision of social discourse in the coffeehouses, one dependent upon right of association, empirical knowledge, and Classical languages as the foundations for social order. The Greek’s Coffeehouse at Cambridge followed the same line. The economics of that social order were largely indexed at Lloyd’s Coffeehouse, the largest syndicate of the Royal Exchange, where marine insurers indexed prices

<sup>22</sup> Damrosch, *The Club*, I, 174–75.

<sup>23</sup> While Damrosch chronicles Johnson’s literary achievements with the “club,” coffeehouses feature little in his book. He does not give weight to the coffeehouse culture of sociability upon which the “club” was founded and which was upheld even when not meeting in a coffeehouse; *Ibid.*, 38–42, 130–32, 272, 297; Samuel Johnson, “Idler, No. 64. Saturday, 7 July 1759,” in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, 199; James Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson, Abridged and edited, with an introduction by Charles Grosvenor Osgood* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1917), 24–27.

and exchange rates, as the Colonial Office would later do. Metaphorically, they were the ministers of Adam Smith's "invisible hand."

Yet clubs were not merely political or economic. Indeed, the Tuesday Club of Annapolis, Maryland required its members to laugh down any form of political or religious talk. Literary and sporting clubs abounded in the coffeehouses. Literary critics were to be found in Tom's, Miles's, White's, St. James's, Will's, and Button's. The ladies and gentlemen of Liverpool coffeehouses founded circulating libraries of humane letters. The Kit-Cat Club and Beefsteak Club tried to maintain traditional English values in diet, while adhering to a Whiggish ideology of polite indulgence. Similarly, colonial American elites attempted to shorten the distance between them and England by starting hunting clubs, such as the Gloucester Fox Hunting Club in Pennsylvania or St. John's Hunt Club in South Carolina. There seemed to be a club for almost everything anywhere in the empire. It was the golden age of the clubbable amateur.<sup>24</sup>

Johnson's two noted public London journals, *The Rambler* (1750–1752) and *The Idler* (1758–1760), proposed that knowledge was a sociable activity, not confined to the mind, but realized in action. As Johnson stated in *Idler* No. 33, "Mr. Sober's chief pleasure is conversation."<sup>25</sup> Idleness was not a vice in and of itself, Johnson said. The idle must occupy themselves "with petty business, to have always something in hand which may raise curiosity, but not solicitude, and keep the mind in a state of action, but not of labour."<sup>26</sup> A virtuous standard for taste differentiated the sociability of the critics from the rancor of intemperate conversation. In *Rambler* No. 4, Johnson argued, "The task of our present writers . . . requires, together with that learning which is to be gained from books, that *experience* which can never be attained by

---

24 Jonathan Harris, "The Grecian Coffee House and Political Debate in London 1688–1714," *The London Journal, A Review of Metropolitan Society Past and Present* 25:1 (2000): 1–4; John J. McCusker, "The Early History of 'Lloyd's List,'" *Historical Research* 64:155 (October 1991): 429; James M. Davis, "The Colonial Coffeehouse," *Early American Life* 9:1 (1978): 27–28; A. H. Arkle, "The Early Coffee Houses of Liverpool," *Transactions of the Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 64 (1912): 10–12; Lillywhite, *The London Coffee House*, 209–12, 363–66, 718, 726–27.

25 Johnson, "Idler No. 31, 18 November 1758," in *The Yale Edition*, 99.

26 Ibid.

solitary diligence, but must arise from general converse and accurate observation of the living world."<sup>27</sup>

Johnson's experiential philosophy of knowledge drove him to notice all ranks of society and consequently to become England's great observer. He argued for the practical dignity of society's various ranks and the bustle of life such a world created. He considered the coffeehouse a working equipoise of mixed social classes. Johnson once vehemently argued against one man in a coffeehouse, who had said that all wool-drapers were not worth the money they made. Johnson believed that the natural aristocracy could only serve the public by observing the dignity of all social classes. Rather than philosophical isolation, Johnson advised his critical readers to spread both thought and leisure across the business of life.<sup>28</sup> Hence, Johnson loved the world, primarily the social world of London, and wished to realize the classical ideals of virtue and taste in the real world.

Johnson sought a community of clubbable connoisseurs who found beauty in a social order; what Scottish philosopher David Hume meant by the "conversable world."<sup>29</sup> The ethos of comfort that saturated the coffeehouse clubs aided in the act of extending social networks. Sharing commodities forged common ties, whether in shipping, selling, buying, or tasting. Consumption became the new domain of social protocol. As Klein argues, "As fashion shaped the objects, so taste defined the consumer ..."<sup>30</sup> Soon, connoisseurs constructed a parallel understanding of fine china and sociable behaviors. In an age when it was as easy to break a china dish as it was to trespass a social rule, Hume observed, "[d]elicacy of taste is as much to be desired and cultivated as delicacy of passion is to be lamented."<sup>31</sup> For him and many of his Edinburgh associates, it was more gratifying to satisfy one's taste than heavily to indulge one's appetite. Hume exalted the artistic use of things (readable, viewable, hearable, or edible) on the value of their connection with higher ideas

<sup>27</sup> Johnson, "Rambler, No. 4," in *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Johnson, "Rambler, No. 8" and "Rambler, No. 9," in *Ibid.*, 13–15.

<sup>29</sup> Copley, "Commerce," 63–66, 75.

<sup>30</sup> Klein, "Politeness," 883.

<sup>31</sup> David Hume, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects, A New Edition* (London: Printed for A. Millar, in the Strand; and A. Kincaid and A. Donaldson, at Edinburgh, 1777), 6.

in order to acquire a natural taste for them. Yet his vehement skepticism about human nature attaining this goal matched his doubt of the inductive process. Luxury and the propensity to feel too keenly either piercing grief or joy will always present difficulties for connoisseurs to reach an acquisition of taste. "I am persuaded," he wrote, "that nothing is so proper to cure us of this delicacy of passion, as the cultivating of that higher and more refined taste, which enables us to judge of the characters of men, of compositions of genius, and of the productions of the nobler arts."<sup>32</sup> Hume wished to purge the public from its baser emotions and erect a classical ideal of taste for the sociable world.<sup>33</sup>

The same sentiment was shared by Johnson, who soon found coffeehouse conversation cheaper than he had expected it to be. He echoed the sentiments of fellow critic Mr. Minim, that the academies of France were better at reinforcing standards of taste than the coffeehouses of London. Johnson provided a full description of Mr. Minim's complaint in his London journal, *The Idler*:

Mr. Minim had now advanced himself to the zenith of critical reputation; when he was in the pit, every eye in the boxes was fixed upon him; when he entered his coffee-house, he was surrounded by circles of candidates, who passed their novitiate of literature under his tuition; his opinion was asked by all who had no opinion of their own, and yet loved to debate and decide; and no composition was supposed to pass in safety to posterity, till it had been secured by Minim's approbation.

Minim professes great admiration of the wisdom and munificence by which the academies of the continent were raised, and often wishes for some standard of taste, for some tribunal, to which merit may appeal from caprice, prejudice, and malignity. He has formed a plan for an academy of criticism, where every work of imagination may be read before it is printed, and which shall authoritatively direct the theatres what pieces to receive or reject, to exclude or to revive.

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 6–8.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Such an institution would, in Dick's opinion, spread the fame of English literature over Europe, and make London the metropolis of elegance and politeness, the place to which the learned and ingenious of all countries would repair for instruction and improvement, and where nothing would any longer be applauded or endured that was not conformed to the nicest rules, and finished with the highest elegance.

Till some happy conjunction of the planets shall dispose our princes or ministers to make themselves immortal by such an academy, Minim contents himself to preside four nights in a week in a critical society selected by himself, where he is heard without contradiction, and whence his judgment is disseminated through the great vulgar and the small.

When he is placed in the chair of criticism [either literal or metaphorical], he declares loudly for the noble simplicity of our ancestors, in opposition to the petty refinements, and ornamental luxuriance. Sometimes he is sunk in despair, and perceives false delicacy daily gaining ground, and sometimes brightens his countenance with a gleam of hope, and predicts the revival of the true sublime.<sup>34</sup>

Coffeehouse critics worried that there was not a formal process for critical review or a clear hierarchy of merit with academic standards to judge them. In proposing a structure for critical review, Minim hoped to lift coffeehouse criticism out of the bog of hearsay. Much like the academic antagonism against Wikipedia today, scholars resisted the complete leveling of information. Johnson and his fellow coffeehouse critics found that the trifling refinements of London were a double-edged sword. There was so much freedom for learned discourse, but so little real polite or academic conversation. Despite all the journalistic reform of Swift, Steele, and Addison, eighteenth-century English literature fell from the exalted language of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton in the English renaissance of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Indeed, like Steele and Addison before him, it was Milton's blank verse that provided Johnson with a sense of the sublime and a hope for the

---

34 Johnson, "Idler, No. 61, Saturday, 16 June 1759," *The Yale Edition*, 189–91.

Classical vigor of epic poetry.<sup>35</sup> Yet he found it impossible to resurrect good taste in literature and science without resorting to court sociability, as the French academies so often did. The Critics of his age had de-throned literature, resorting to “Prejudice and False Taste . . . Fraud

35 Scholars who debate whether Milton himself was a member of Harrington's Rota Club at Miles's Coffee House, or a frequenter of coffeehouses in general, miss the point that his work was of immense importance to the coffeehouse literary imagination of London. Dryden clashed with Milton's Puritanism and spoke against it in his coffeehouse literary circle. It was Steele and Addison who made Miltonic theology a tool of experiential philosophy in coffeehouse journalism. Steele and Addison believed that Milton had expressed one facet of theology that had escaped the Gothic Christian world; hierarchy was both a spiritual and natural relationship, and not artificially constructed. They praised him for considering heavenly and earthly creatures as “multitudes of spectators” to God's work in creation and redemption, in the passage, “That heav'n would want spectators, God want praise; Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth.” Hell was sociable exclusion from God and the fellowship of His saints. Steele and Addison paid particular attention to the fact that Milton's Satan tried to illegitimately escape his torments by assembling a false congregation of fellows who engaged in mischievous amusement. Pushing Milton far beyond the bounds of his seventeenth-century Puritan context, *The Spectator* used Milton's *Paradise Lost* as a lever for natural religion. Generally preferring citations from Milton over that of the Bible, *The Spectator* reinforced a classically stylized version of Christian themes, rather than Christianity itself. Insisting on a dualistic division between faith and morality within religion, *The Spectator* asserted that “because the rule of morality is much more certain than that of faith, all the civilized nations of the world agreeing in the great points of morality, as much as they differ in those of faith.” Steele and Addison ignored Milton's last injunction given to Adam and Eve before their expulsion from Eden, announcing salvation in Jesus Christ:

Chiefly what may concern her Faith to know,  
The great deliverance by her Seed to come  
(For by the Womans Seed) on all Mankind.  
That ye may live, which will be many dayes,  
Both in one Faith unanimous though sad,  
With cause for evils past, yet much more cheer'd  
With meditation on the happie end.

To Steele and Addison, Milton was merely a brilliant moral writer, preserving ancient simplicity, and therefore credible. If Milton had a fault, it was that he lacked the perspicuity of syntax which he so obviously adhered to in subject. Nevertheless, he exhibited a theology which justified sociability as a natural drama; a theme daily reinforced in the coffeehouses of London; Ukers, *All About Coffee*, 584; Pobranski, “Where Men of Differing Judgements Croud: Milton and the Culture of the Coffee Houses,” 34–39; Addison and Steele, *The Works of Joseph Addison*, vol. 1, 34–35, 238–39, 344, 410 and vol. 2, 203; John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, First Edition, 1667 (DjVu Editions E-books, Global Language Resources, Inc., 2001), 248, <http://triggs.djvu.org/djvu-editions.com/MILTON/LOST/Download.pdf>.

and Mischief.<sup>36</sup> Johnson, like the coffeehouse proprietors before him, came to understand that a rational public sphere of taste had yet to be fully established.

To that end, Johnson soon formed a club of his own at Reynolds's initial suggestion, the Literary Club at the Turk's Head, and later the Essex Club in Dolly's Chop-House, consisting of all London's memorable men of letters: Boswell, Goldsmith, Reynolds, Burke, Charles Fox, and many others. It may be said that in the coffee-room of Dolly's Chop-House, the idea of a formal gentlemen's club took shape.<sup>37</sup> It was home not only to the Essex Club, but also to a long lineage of literary authorities including Fielding, Defoe, Sam Richardson, Smollett, Swift, Dryden, Pope, Hogarth, Sir James Thornhill (Hogarth's father-in-law), Purcell, Handel, and Dr. Arne. Tavern historian Edward Callow attributed to Johnson the formalization of the term *club*. He cited Johnson's working definition for a club as "[a]n assembly of good fellows, meeting under certain circumstances," and stated that "[t]he great modern institution, the club, had its birthplace and origin in the humble chop and coffee-houses in Queen Anne's reign."<sup>38</sup> The term came to imply a standard for male sociability. If a man was genial and had good taste, he was "clubbable." In this sense, Johnson declared that Boswell was "a very clubbable man" and Thackeray could give no higher compliment to a man than that he was "clubbable."<sup>39</sup> Johnson formu-

36 Johnson, "Rambler, No. 3," in *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, Vol. 1, 6.

37 Damrosch has made this view of the club credible again. Yet, he does not distinguish between these two clubs and misses the much larger social context. Johnson himself was imitating Addison's standards for a club. The other intellectuals such as Dryden and Fielding feature little in Damrosch's account of the roots of clubbing in London. Most of the actual club conversations left behind are anecdotal rather than formative. The new sociability of the Literary Club, akin to Hume's "conversable world" is only a subtext in Damrosch's work. It remains difficult to determine from his account whether we owe the great accomplishments of the "club" to the "club" itself, or rather to the intellectual foresight of its members; Damrosch, *The Club*, 1-2, 130-32.

38 Johnson, *The Letters of Samuel Johnson: With Mrs. Thrale's Genuine Letters to Him, Collected & Edited by R. W. Chapman, Volume I: 1719-1774, Letters 1-369*, Ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1952), 397; Edward Callow, *Old London Taverns: Historical, Descriptive and Reminiscent with some Account of the Coffee Houses, Clubs, Etc.* (Downey & Co. Limited: London, 1899), 160-63; James Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson, Abridged and edited, with an introduction by Charles Grosvenor Osgood* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917), 299.

39 *Ibid.*, 162-63.



lated a sociological category from a habit among London's middling coffeehouse clientele. Johnson did not invent the club as an institution—actual clubs abounded in London, and even formal societies, like the Royal Society—but he distilled the experience of London clubs into a sociable trait of gentlemanly, human nature, with the intent of discovering a mutual ethos of taste among the elites of London.

The Literary Club met once a week at seven in the evening to achieve an effective synthesis of classical taste and free association. The Club's first great move was to subscribe to Edward Lye's *Dictionarium Saxonico et Gothico-Latinum*, which provided an etymological structure for judging literary submissions to the club and guiding discussions of taste. Johnson hoped that such a literary club with a grammar of knowledge would actualize a successful experiment in making knowledge a public exercise.<sup>40</sup> Johnson had his doubts that his fellow club members were capable of erecting the sort of public archeology of knowledge that he so hoped for.<sup>41</sup> Regarding Goldsmith, Boswell remembered Johnson telling the club: "What Goldsmith comically says of himself is very true,—he always gets the better when he argues alone; meaning, that he is master of a subject in his study, and can write well upon it; but when he comes into company, grows confused, and unable to talk."<sup>42</sup> A knowledge which grew opaque in public company was a dead knowledge. Johnson desired knowledge to flow from life, and here, he ironically lauded Goldsmith's history and poetry above the Scottish Enlightenment. When asked whether Goldsmith's history was better than Hume's or Robertson's, he replied,

Sir, you must consider how that penetration and that painting are employed. It is not history, it is imagination. He who describes what he never saw, draws from fancy. Robertson paints minds as Sir Joshua paints faces in a history-piece: he imagines an heroic countenance. You must look upon Robertson's work as romance, and try it by that standard. History it

---

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, *The Letters*, 185.

<sup>41</sup> Here, Damrosch correctly notes Johnson's skepticism of the heretical views of Adams Smith and Edward Gibbon, but Johnson's personal skepticism extended to his other friends; Damrosch, *The Club*, 317–18, 323.

<sup>42</sup> Boswell, *Life*, 466.



is not. Besides, Sir, it is the great excellence of a writer to put into his book as much as his book will hold. Goldsmith has done this in his *History*.<sup>43</sup>

Johnson believed that fancy had crept into the pages of history and the answer was to write from life, primarily social life, where true taste and sound judgment was firmly anchored in circumstance. In Burke, Johnson saw great promise. “Burke is a great man by Nature, and is expected soon to attain civil greatness,” said Johnson.<sup>44</sup> Unlike Goldsmith, Burke’s platform was fundamentally public, and gaging from the newspapers, Johnson believed that Burke would refine the parliamentary debates over Britain’s empire with the same sense of public virtue which they shared in the Club. Even as the Club held its first meeting, a tax crisis in America called Burke away from the Club and into the halls of Parliament. This was Burke’s moment, or as Johnson prophesied, “we have less of Burke’s company since he has been engaged in publick business, in which he has gained more reputation than perhaps any man at his [first] appearance ever gained before. He made two speeches in the house for repealing the Stamp-act, which were publicly commended by Mr. Pit, and have filled the town with wonder.”<sup>45</sup> Not only was Burke a classical thinker, but he was a rhetorician with a standard of virtue and justice that captured public imagination. At least, such was Johnson’s assessment.

Johnson took the lead in judging the literary tastes of his generation at the Club tables. Swift’s two great faults, argued Johnson, were that he was generally exaggerated in his satire, sometimes literally, as in *Gulliver’s Travels*, and hid his own reputation behind a pseudonym.<sup>46</sup> Swift had violated the first rule of politeness; genuine appearance. Politeness and literary taste were so tied at the Club that, when Burke recommended Mr. Vesey to the Club, observing that he possessed gentle manners, Johnson replied, “When you have said a man of gentle manners; you have said enough.”<sup>47</sup> Yet, the consistency of the Club on this point proved its eventual downfall. Johnson’s experiment in the polite

---

43 Ibid., 467.

44 Johnson, *The Letters*, 185.

45 Ibid.

46 Boswell, *Life*, 510–11.

47 Ibid., 943.

pursuit of knowledge stagnated and eventually expired through boredom. Goldsmith told Johnson that the Club lacked an “agreeable variety” from any additional members. There was no new thing at the Club, save Johnson’s own whims. While Johnson himself blustered that his Club did not yet fully know his mind on all matters, Reynolds seconded Goldsmith’s assessment, stating that “when people have lived a great deal together, they know what each of them will say on every subject. A new understanding, therefore, is desirable.”<sup>48</sup> What was clear to all was that this “new understanding” could only come with new sociable encounters.<sup>49</sup> Johnson even fled the city at one interval in his life and looked for genuine sociable encounters among the crofting Scottish highlanders on the isles of Coll, Skye, and Mull. Even at the height of London’s “Enlightenment,” the crack in clubbable coffeehouse sociability began to show; a crack that would eventually shatter England’s *literati* into a thousand pieces and send them scouring the Lake District for romantic inspiration.<sup>50</sup>

### III. *Journaling London: The Polite Coffeehouse Enlightenment*

Johnson’s criticism of Swift’s reputation was disingenuous. It did not take into account that when Swift began writing on coffeehouse life there was no such thing as a polite, clubbable, “coffeehouse” atmosphere. When Swift published his *Hints Towards an Essay on Conversation* in 1713, broadsides had decried coffeehouse assemblies as riotous for over half a century. Swift was also very concerned about the lack of moral standards in London’s new public places. He believed that conversation had fallen from its zenith during the reign of Charles I, and had become intolerable: “I was prompted to write my thoughts upon this subject by meer indignation.” It was an indignation that had pushed him into the

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 1,023.

<sup>49</sup> Damrosch argues that the “club” declined with Johnson’s health, and while this is certainly true, the intellectual dearth of the “club” entirely escapes him; Damrosch, *The Club*, 366–88.

<sup>50</sup> I refer to the Lake poets; most notably, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Tory party in 1710.<sup>51</sup> Conversation represented the highest pleasure and distinction of man, and separated him from the animals; but when men lose the faculty of sensible speech, Swift argued:

[W]e are forced to take up with those poor amusements of dress and visiting, or the more pernicious ones of play, drink, and vicious amours, whereby the nobility and gentry of both sexes are entirely corrupted both in body and mind, and have lost all notions of love, honour, friendship, generosity; which, under the name of fopperies, have been for some time laughed out of doors.<sup>52</sup>

Conversants in London talked too much, cluttered their language with useless words, digressed from their subjects, talked more to themselves about their own achievements, specialities, or faults, gave superficial speeches, uttered profanities, shouted dogmas and withdrew without discussing, witticised without sense, insulted without mercy, interrupted without reflection. When Swift looked about him, the speech and activity of London's coffeehouse world seemed full of vanity. As Hugh Ormsby-Lennon argues, London was a city of quacks who prescribed patent drugs, pulled teeth, and even cut corns from the feet of coffee's daily customers. Examples abounded. John Salter was an oral surgeon at Chelsea's Coffeehouse and Don Saltero displayed quack rarities at his own coffeehouse. Ned Ward bumped into a Royal Society alchemical projector, "with as many maggots in his noddle, as there are mice in a barn." Royal Society "virtuosos" became known as the coffeehouse philosophers. One of them even boasted at Joe's Coffeehouse that he had a flying machine. Swift forever immortalized these quacks in the fictional land of Brobdingnag, where Gulliver walked away with "a corn that I had cut off with my own hand from a maid of honor's toe."<sup>53</sup> Obviously, these were no polite accomplishments.

Swift considered false wit the primal fault of coffeehouse conversation. Wits worked only to entertain and gain a following of flatterers.

51 Jonathan Swift, "Hints, Towards an Essay on Conversation" in *The Works of Dr. Jonathan Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin, Vol XIII* (London, 1762), 199.

52 *Ibid.*, 206–07.

53 Hugh Ormsby-Lennon, *Hey Presto!: Swift and the Quacks* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 63.

They disputed, contradicted, lied, and joked their way into the momentary affections of the crowd; they considered every gathering a pulpit to practice his speaking talents; to them, the subject mattered little, the crowd was everything. Swift hated the display:

And, indeed, the worst conversation I ever remember to have heard in my life, was that at *Will's* coffee-house, where the wits (as they were called) used formerly to assemble; that is to say, five or six men, who had writ plays, or at least prologues, or had share in a miscellany, came thither, and entertained one another with their trifling composures, in so important an air, as if they had been the noblest efforts of human nature, or that the fate of kingdoms depended on them; and they were usually attended with an humble audience of young students from the inns of court, or the universities, who, at due distance, listened to these oracles, and returned home with great contempt for their law and philosophy, their heads filled with trash, under the name of politeness, criticism, and belles lettres.<sup>54</sup>

Swift believed that it was impossible to establish a rational public sphere of taste in such a mixed congregation as a coffeehouse. Never would the coffeehouse audience rise to an elegance equal to the French academies without some form of aristocratic patronage. His complaint really was a criticism of the half-baked nature of democracy in England, or as he himself argued, the “rude familiarity” of the English people was “purely forced by art” and lacked “decorum and politeness.” Swift feared that familiarity was the dangerous trait of northern peoples, a Gothic propensity which might “lapse into barbarity.” And the Commonwealth of England had been nothing less: “This, among the *Romans*, was the rallery of slaves, of which we have many instances in *Plautus*. It seemeth to have been introduced among us by *Cromwell*, who, by preferring the scum of the people, made it a court-entertainment, of which I have heard many particulars; and, considering all things were turned upside down it was reasonable and judicious ...”<sup>55</sup> The Commonwealth had brought down court and decorum and all.

<sup>54</sup> Swift, “Hints, Towards an Essay on Conversation,” 201–02.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

Democracy ironically excluded ladies, the court's most relevant contribution to sociability. The courts of Louis XIV and Charles I encouraged courtly women to cultivate conversation. Swift believed that ladies were the natural hostesses of platonic friendships, modesty, and art in discussion. Their function, however, was dethroned with the end of the early Stuart era. The Commonwealth and the Restoration court grew more eccentric and separated from society, while a low life replaced the happy union between court and poet that had prevailed in the old days. Without courtly influence, society uniformly excluded women from public life, except for "parties at play, or dancing, or in the pursuit of an amour."<sup>56</sup> Democracy turned women into objects rather than allowing their graceful entrance into society. Pleasure roamed free in London's coffeehouse world, and Swift saw very little benefit in it. The argument harkened back to elements of the gendered coffeehouse broadside debate. Men had eroded natural, goodhearted English fellowship in their coffee quack-houses. Perhaps it was this distaste for modern life which Johnson found so disheartening about Swift. Rather than reform society, Swift preferred to criticize, satirize, and artistically withdraw from it. His pseudonym and very popular but equally cavalier essays set him artificially above the world of aspiring taste and leisure which he so longed to invent. It separated him from the real world.

Steele and Addison, although finding much fault in coffeehouse conversation, decided to invite coffeehouse writers to participate in the criticism of it. They erected a popular form of literature through the editorial column which allowed (or pretended to allow) readers and writers to compete for polite status. Thus, the very criticism of coffeehouses in their papers became a method for reforming them. Everyone knew that Steele and Addison could make or break the reputation of coffeehouses which aspired to politeness, because so many readers were engaged in either reading their papers or actually submitting letters to the editor. The editorials throughout the paper (whether real or generated) created the feel of a coffeehouse conversation, reformed and purged of much of its casual and irrelevant conversations and its impropriety.

Steele's first move was to link his editorial project to the pleasurable and active coffeehouse life; a simulated reality-based setting to invite

---

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

participation from an audience. Thus, Steele announced in *Tatler* No. 1: "All counts of gallantry, pleasure, and entertainment, shall be under the article of White's Chocolate-house; poetry under that of Will's Coffee-house; learning, under the title of Grecian; foreign and domestic news you will have from Saint James's Coffee-house."<sup>57</sup> Coffeehouse proprietors had worked for decades to establish followings with peculiar interests into their coffeehouses and give an aura of *connoisseurship* to their establishments. Every coffeehouse customer would have recognized these stylized reputations. Steele preferred to characterize the various humors around the coffee-tables, or "to give the exact characters of all the chief politicians, who frequent any of the coffee-houses from St. James's to the Exchange; but designs to begin with that cluster of wise-heads, as they are found sitting every evening from the left side of the fire, at the Smyrna."<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, Steele and Addison actually shared Swift's disillusionment with regard to coffeehouses. Steele claimed that, with the loss of the courtly Dryden, the conversation at Will's had much gone down in the world. Rather than blaming plays for the lack of manners in society, Steele argued that it was the lack of witty and pleasurable coffeehouse conversation about plays that killed good society. Only at the Grecian was there a well-established public culture of knowledge. There, "we are making a very pleasant entertainment to ourselves, in putting the actions of Homer's Iliad into an exact journal."<sup>59</sup> Journaling Homer allowed everyday middling readers to participate in the classical rules of art and taste. It made a stark contrast to the "easy writers" of Will's Coffeehouse, who scribbled farcical sonnets about wood nymphs and the like. Steele criticized coffeehouses for the same reasons others had done. The "Critic" and the "Wit" tyrannized over the people's conversations, and artfully engineered, rather than moderated discourse.<sup>60</sup> The true coffeehouse patron should take the world of pleasure as it was, and elevate the already existing conversation to be had there. Steele explained:

57 "Tatler, No. 1, Tuesday, April 12, 1709," in *Tatler*, 11.

58 "Tatler, No. 10, Tuesday, May 3, 1709," in *Tatler*, 31-32.

59 "Tatler, No. 1, Tuesday, April 12, 1709," "Tatler, No. 3, Saturday, April 16, 1709," "Tatler, No. 6, Saturday, April 23, 1709," in *Tatler*, 12, 14-16, 22.

60 "Tatler, No. 9, Saturday, April 30, 1709" and "T; No. 29, Thursday, June 14, 1709," in *Tatler*, 28-29, 71-72.

[W]ealth and wisdom are possessions too solemn not to give weariness to active minds, without the relief (in vacant hours) of wit and love, which are the proper amusements of the powerful and the wise. This emperor therefore, with great regularity, every day at five in the afternoon, leaves his money-changers, his publicans, and little hoarders of wealth, to their low pursuits, and ascends his chariot, to drive to Will's; where the taste is refined, and a relish given to men's possessions, by a polite skill in gratifying their passions and appetites.<sup>61</sup>

The good-humored man should find good company in every general assembly: "A ... good company of us were this day to see, or rather to hear, an artful person do several feats of activity with his throat and wind-pipe. ... a ring of bells, which he imitated ... The company expressed their applause with much noise; and never was heard such an harmony of men and dogs."<sup>62</sup> Thus, Steele proposed that the characters to be found inside coffeehouse companies actually represented highly developed art forms of natural conversation, both good and evil. The highest man of quality in such company was someone with situational versatility amongst the diverse sets of leisurely outlets of London. Steele commented:

[I]n a coffee-house, or in the ordinary course of affairs, [he] appears rather dull than sprightly. You can seldom get him to the tavern; but when once he is arrived to his pint, and begins to look about and like his company, you admire a thousand things in him, which before lay buried. Then you discover the brightness of his mind and the strength of his judgement, accompanied with the most graceful mirth. In a word, by this enlivening aid, he is whatever is polite, instructive, and diverting.<sup>63</sup>

Politeness was the product of the urban experience of meaningful diversion. All the titles of the great editorial columns and episodic journals of the eighteenth century bore this out: *The Tatler*, *The Trifler*, *The Connoisseur*, *The Spectator*, *The Guardian*, *The Rambler*, *The Idler*, and so on.

61 "Tatler, No. 46, Tuesday, July 26, 1709," in *Tatler*, 105.

62 "Tatler, No. 51, Saturday, August 6, 1709," in *Tatler*, 115.

63 "Tatler, No. 252, Saturday, November 18, 1710," in *Tatler*, 405-06.

That Button's was part of the editorial project of Whig manners is evidenced in its prominent place as the headquarters for Steele and Addison's *Guardian*. Other houses would later imitate Daniel Button's harmonizing of manners, news, and coffee conversation. Before Bedford's Coffeehouse, it was "the grand archetype" of Whig discourse, in large part due to its editorial column.<sup>64</sup> In the end, John and Henry Fielding, Charles Churchill, Oliver Goldsmith, William Hogarth, and Samuel Foote took up residence at Bedford's, and so the Whigs moved from Will's, to Button's, to Bedford's, leaving a paper trail of social commentary behind them. A contemporary once said that Bedford's was "every night crowded with men of parts. Almost everyone you meet is a polite scholar and a wit. Jokes and bon mots are echoed from box to box; every branch of literature is critically examined, and the merit of every production of the press, or performance at the theatres, weighed and determined."<sup>65</sup> At least in these houses, coffee and politeness were synonymous.

There certainly remained impolite and even criminal behavior in the more well-known coffeehouses. The coffeehouse owners who signed a proposal in 1728 to reform coffeehouse news and manners complained that gambling newsmen frequently burst into their houses, and "neglecting Business to play at Cribbage in an Ale-House, are not provided with Intelligence sufficient to recommend their Zeal and Diligence to their Masters, [and so] fall to work with Invention."<sup>66</sup> The journalists agreed. Swift complained of "the gamesters of White's." The South Sea Bubble greatly damaged the reputation of Jonathan's Coffeehouse for honest talk and business. The very amateurs which gave rise to the literature of politeness brought in quacks and false enterprises. Clubs were a response to the unbranded sociability of the middling sort. If one was a member of a club, one could not be easily accused of foisting schemes into coffeehouses which only benefited one's own purse. As Pelzer and Pelzer state of Augustan London, "The change [clubbing] may have

64 George Colman, *The Connoisseur. By Mr. Town, Critic and Censor-General, Numb. 1, Thursday, January 31, 1754* (London, 1755-1756), 4.

65 John and Linda Pelzer, "The Coffee Houses of Augustan London," *History Today* 32, no. 10 (October 1982): 44.

66 By a Coffee Man, *The Case Between the Proprietors of News-papers, and the Coffee-men of London* (London, 1729), 9.



been effected to protect the house's clientele, for it was increasingly the object of thievery and assault. The rakes, sharpers, highwaymen, and quacks also frequented the city's coffee-houses, and not all of the coffee-houses were of high repute."<sup>67</sup> Although the journalists and coffee-house proprietors presented coffee as a polite activity, they did not shy away from admitting social deficiencies for polite talk.

#### IV. Conclusion

Whig journalism transformed public opinion on coffee and instituted the editorial system which permitted middling gentlemen to construct new public spaces dedicated to *humanitas*, culture, learning, and statecraft. The great coffeehouse project of the Anglophone world depended upon a classical republican understanding of manners and men and free association. Literary clubs such as Johnson's and Burke's circle of statesmen and artists did much to contribute to the reforming spirit. This literary project, although not exclusively confined to political discourse, was augmented by a revolution of political print. The Exclusion Crisis and the simultaneous expiration of traditional censorship encouraged an explosion not only of coffeehouse literature but also of philosophical discourse which praised a free press and celebrated the public's right to association. Sometimes this cut both ways. Burke understood the snares of coffeehouse life: party and power. The rise of party provided the coffeehouse with some of its most controversial debates, but also fractured the journalism of politeness, and many essayists worried that faction would leave the civic project in ruins. Indeed, it may be said that what brought about the new journalistic genre was angst over the survival of manners in coffeehouse life, culminating in *The Spectator*. Swift was very critical of coffeehouse discussion and he preferred to satirize rather than include the public sphere in his creative journalism. Steele and Addison brought the public directly into the critical project through the editorial column and made the coffeehouse the permanent residence for a normative style of literature. Not all coffeehouses were able to achieve recognition by essayists, but many coffeehouse proprietors, if not all, saw

---

67 John and Linda Pelzer, "The Coffee Houses," 47.

the value in joining hands with moralists and so raising the reputation of their establishments.

The new form of literature created a new community of coffeehouse customers—gentlemen dedicated to judging the sociable world around them according to humane standards of taste. The social structure that produced “print capitalism” also established readerships within the coffeehouses who discussed how better to organize society, politics, and consumer culture. Free association was not only a linguistic tool used by Addison to connote politeness, it became a political tenet among news readers who desired a fair system of trade and a free form of sociability. Americans and London merchants alike would use the language of politeness as a language of political reform. As long as the public did not see an inherent contradiction between free association and economic empire, all was well. Yet Swift and Burke were justified in having some misgivings about loosing the power of political opinion inside coffeehouse social networks. If coffeehouse parties began to gain footholds in the legislative process, they would be doubly powerful, possessing both a formidable connection with the press and popular leaders as well as having departmental control over governmental committees. The coffeehouse public was satisfied with its new culture of dispassionate discourse and critical distance from the political process until the tax crisis of the 1760s and the new age of political association based on the more radical revolutionary tenets of “the rights of man.” Until then, the *literati* were somewhat successful in realizing a *res publica* of culture, wit, and discourse in the coffeehouses of London.

Wesley Reynolds’s book *Coffeehouse Culture in the Atlantic World, 1650–1789* is due for publication by Bloomsbury Academic (London) in the spring of 2022.

# *A Burkean Reading of Late Jefferson's Legal Theory*



HAIMO LI

*Fudan University, Shanghai, China*

Scholars from Allen Guttman<sup>1</sup> to Herbert Sloan<sup>2</sup> and Stanley Mellon are accustomed to claiming that “Jefferson and Burke profoundly disagreed on issues related to the Enlightenment, aristocracy, and the French Revolution.”<sup>3</sup> Conor Cruise O’Brien realized that the divergence between Burke and Jefferson mainly happened after the outbreak of French Revolution, but he thought that that divergence, once happened, was permanent and never reconciled.<sup>4</sup> For a sharper understanding of the thought and legacy of these two great contemporaries, however, it is necessary to realize that some important overlap in their thinking can be found. In this article I propose to show, for example, that there may

---

1 Allen Guttman, *The Conservative Tradition in America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967), 10, 47–48, 36–37. See also Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 315.

2 Herbert Sloan argues that any suggestion of similarity between Jefferson and Burke “would have outraged Jefferson.” See Herbert Sloan, “The Earth Belongs in Usufruct to the Living,” in Peter Onuf (ed.), *Jeffersonian Legacies* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 299.

3 Stanley Mellon, “Jefferson and Burke” in *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe 1750–1850: Selected Papers* (1995): 58–64. See also *America, History and Life* 34, no. 4: 1043.

4 “Jefferson in his lifetime was a bitter ideological enemy of Edmund Burke, from the time of the publication of Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in November 1790.” See Conor Cruise O’Brien, *On the Eve of the Millennium: The Future of Democracy Through an Age of Unreason* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

exist a fully viable Burkean reading of Jefferson's legal theory between 1809 and 1826, a period referred to below as "late-Jefferson."

In February 17, 1826, Thomas Jefferson wrote a famous letter to James Madison in which we find Jefferson's landmark analysis on American legal education and British Tory legal thinkers:

[B]efore the revolution, Coke Littleton was the universal elementary book of Law Students; and a sounder whig never wrote, nor of profounder learning in the orthodox doctrines of the British constitution, or in what were called English liberties.... our lawyers were then all whigs. but when his black-letter text, and uncouth, but cunning learning got out of fashion, and the honied Mansfieldism of Blackstone became the Student's Hornbook from that moment that profession (the nursery of our Congress) began to slide into toryism, and nearly all the young brood of lawyers now are of that hue. they suppose themselves indeed to be whigs, because they no longer know what whiggism or republicanism means.<sup>5</sup>

We should notice that Jefferson's dissatisfaction with the replacement of Coke's work by Blackstone's, and his warning that, consequently, young law students might tragically become Tories ("Blackstone lawyers"), forgetting all the valuable Whig teachings, is a theme Jefferson mentions frequently in his later writings, from 1809 up to his death in 1826.<sup>6</sup>

Along with Blackstone, Lord Mansfield (1705–1793) provides another target for Jefferson. In many ways, though, the later Jefferson's criticism of Mansfield and Blackstone was nothing new. In a letter to John Brown Cutting dated October 2, 1788, in his November 1785 letter to Philip Mazzei, and in a letter of June 17, 1812, to John Tyler, Jefferson expressed his fear that an "unexpected revolution" in English law led by Mansfield and Blackstone might infect the newly founded American republic. In these letters, Jefferson specifically labeled Mansfield as "a man of the clearest head and most seducing eloquence," and Mansfield's legal innovations as full of "sly poison." From this, we can safely con-

5 Leonard Levy, *Jefferson and Civil Liberties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 151–52.

6 Blackstone coined the famous maxim "Kings never die."

clude that, from 1785 to the end of his life, Jefferson was continually at odds with the Mansfield and Blackstone cohort: the major trait of his attacks on these two figures was the insertion of a hard “Whig/Tory” division into the discourse, with Mansfield and Blackstone the representative of “bad” Tories.

Jefferson's understanding, even from a modern perspective, does indeed make some sense. As Steve Sheppard points out, Coke has “a predictably strong Whiggish overtone, protecting the jurisdiction of the courts and defending precedent from Parliamentary assault. In contrast, Blackstone presented a much more central role for the King and Parliament, even if this role is limited by the rights of citizens.”<sup>7</sup> But why Mansfield? The answer is simple. As M. P. Mack argues, “[Lord Mansfield's] Toryism was notorious. He always upheld crown prerogative, strict constructions in libel law, and high church doctrines ... the American Revolution was anathema to him.”<sup>8</sup> Throughout the 1760s, Mansfield firmly upheld parliament's right to tax the colonies.<sup>9</sup> These characteristic traits were bound to make Jefferson unhappy, in addition to which, as Sheppard writes, “Lord Mansfield recommended [Blackstone's] *Commentaries* as a replacement for Coke on Littleton.”<sup>10</sup> J. C. D. Clark has noted that “the wide currency of Blackstone's *Commentaries* was owed to their being acclaimed not only by Whigs but by those from a very different background, like the ex-Jacobite Lord Mansfield.”<sup>11</sup> Mansfield (who was also Blackstone's patron) was doing precisely the thing that so disgusted Jefferson: namely, putting a remarkable preference and priority on Blackstone, instead of Coke.<sup>12</sup> This is clearly illustrated in Mansfield's own evaluation of Coke and Blackstone: “Till of late, I could never, with any satisfaction to myself, point out a book proper for the perusal of a student; but since the publication of Mr. Blackstone's commentaries, I can never be at a loss. There your son will

7 Steve Sheppard, *The History of Legal Education in the United States: Commentaries and Primary Sources, Vol. 1* (Clark, NJ: The Lawbook Exchange, Ltd., 2007), 13.

8 M. P. Mack: *Jeremy Bentham* (New York: Columbia UP, 1963), 88.

9 Charles R. Ritcheson, *British Politics and the American Revolution* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 25–26.

10 Sheppard, *Legal Education in the United States*, 1: 12.

11 J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 241–42.

12 David H. Flaherty, *Essays in the History of Early American Law* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 467–68.

find analytical reasoning diffused in a pleasing and perspicuous style. There he may imbibe, imperceptibly, the first principles on which our excellent laws are founded; and there he may become acquainted with an uncouth, crabbed author—Coke upon Littleton—who has disappointed and disheartened many a tyro, but who cannot fail to please in a modern dress.”<sup>13</sup>

Blackstone also criticized Coke’s “quaintness and parochialism.” While admitting that Coke was “a man of infinite learning in his profession,” he simultaneously attacked Coke as “not a little infected with the pedantry and quaintness of the times he lived in,” and opined that only one of Coke’s four *Institutes* was “methodical,” with the first tending to present common law in a way that merely “collected and heaped together,” and was therefore “greatly defective in method.”<sup>14</sup> In Blackstone’s mind, Coke’s work lacked “any systematical order.”<sup>15</sup>

In his most recent publication, legal scholar Wendell Bird provides an excellent summary of the major agreements shared between Mansfield and Blackstone:

Both judges were appointed and retained as friends to the king and the ministry, and were hostile to critics of the monarch and the administration; King George III himself wrote that Mansfield provided “zealous support of the Crown.” Blackstone was equally zealous in supporting the king, though he as “an Old Interest Tory of some stripe” was “not completely antagonistic to the Whig position” or to citing Locke among scores of other writers. . . . [B]oth conceived of themselves as battling for the survival of the British government and, if it was not the same thing, of civilization. Both were horrified by John Wilkes, Blackstone devoting most of his sporadic parliamentary

13 Quoted in Samuel Warren, *A Popular and Practical Introduction to Law Studies* (John D. Parsons, 1870), 318. It should be noted that Jefferson adopted Mansfield’s “uncouth” label to describe Coke’s style, which suggests that, even with the wide gap between Jefferson and Mansfield, there remained a small degree of shared understanding.

14 Paul O. Carrese, *The Cloaking of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 119, 163.

15 Michael Zuckert: “Social Compact, Common Law, and the American Amalgam,” in Ronald J. Pestritto *et al.* (ed.), *The American Founding and the Social Compact* (Lexington Books, 2003), 61.

speeches to opposing Wilkes and representing a king's attorney who was sued by Wilkes, while Mansfield hounded Wilkes with seditious libel proceedings and outlawry.<sup>16</sup>

Regarding the notorious Wilkes affair, Burke, in contrast to the stance of Mansfield and Blackstone, famously fought in Wilkes's defense.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Burke took a similarly opposing position over the American revolutionary war, with Mansfield and Blackstone far more antagonistic to the American revolutionary cause and spirit of rebellion than Burke.<sup>18</sup> Seán Patrick Donlan provides a succinct summary of the disagreements between Burke and Tories such as Mansfield:

Even though Burke no doubt respected Mansfield's abilities, and the judge was related to Rockingham, the two disagreed on a number of public issues, not least the American war. Mansfield also jailed John Wilkes who was supported by the Rockingham Whigs. Perhaps most damning for Burke, Mansfield was, like Blackstone, a Tory and was linked to John Stuart, Lord Bute. Without descending to the anti-Scottish tirades of fellow Whigs, Burke criticized Bute's influence on the king (as well as the king's on parliament). For his part, Mansfield suspected Burke to be the author of Junius's Letters (1768–72), critical of him and around which another debate on libel arose.<sup>19</sup>

16 Wendell Bird, *The Revolution in Freedoms of Press and Speech* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020), 31–32. See also Stephen Conway, *The War of American Independence* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), 200–01.

17 Levy, op. cit., 34: "Wilkes was a symbol of liberty to revolutionary America, his prosecution in every respect held up as a symbol of tyranny." For Burke's position, see Frederick Dreyer, *Burke's Politics* (Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2010). See also David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2014), 129–30.

18 Blackstone is famous for claiming that "since the American colonies had been acquired by conquest, common law did not automatically extend to them"; see Colin Bonwick, *English Radicals and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 74. As pointed out by Dan Lacy, "as late as the eve of the Revolution, Chief Justice Mansfield equated the colonial governments with the business corporations of London, having the power only to make limited bylaws for their internal management." See Lacy, *The Meaning of the American Revolution* (New York: New American Library, 1964), 39.

19 As pointed out by Caroline Robbins, "All whigs until the French Revolution maintained that in theory at least tyrants could be resisted, and by so doing, justified the events of 1689." Peter Stanlis points out that Burke's stance was "similar to that of

Donlan also points out that, while Burke was a Whig, Blackstone was, at best, only a “Whiggish” Tory. Actually, Burke himself had already outspokenly attributed the historical failure of Britain’s policy toward the American colonies to the small clique surrounding the king, led by Charles Jenkinson, Bute, and Mansfield. “I have great reason,” he wrote, “to suspect that Jenkinson governs everything ... to follow Jenkinson, will be to discover my Lord Bute, and my Lord Mansfield, and another person [George III] as considerable as either of them.”<sup>20</sup> James Stoner has concluded that,

[t]o assume that the Americans of the Revolutionary Era simply accepted [Blackstone and Mansfield’s legal ideas] would be a serious error. ... it was understood that [Blackstone’s] account of parliamentary sovereignty was inapplicable here—the Revolution might even be said to have been fought against the assertion of that principle in the colonies—and Mansfield had been an outspoken foe in the struggles leading up to independence.<sup>21</sup>

Donlan and Stoner are not alone. Wilfrid Prest points out that, “as an upholder of the Stamp Act, Blackstone was no friend to the American Revolution—in 1779 one of his last letters ‘rejoiced at the fair Prospect of Success in America, which the last Accounts from thence have opened to Us.’”<sup>22</sup> Wendell Bird explains concisely that “Blackstone’s defense of monarchical government was incompatible with America’s revolutionary embrace of republicanism, limited government, and broad rights.”<sup>23</sup>

If we turn to the case of the “Junius” letters, Peter Burke pointed out as early as 1853 that:

---

Sir Edward Coke and the seventeenth century constitutional lawyers who opposed the arbitrary will of the Stuarts and their ministers”: “Like Sir Edward Coke, who insisted that the king is under the law, Burke believed that all rulers are obliged to obey the laws of equity and general public utility, in conformity to constitutional law.” Sean Donlan: “Burke on Law and Legal Theory,” in David Dwan *et al.* (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 72. See also Jeremy Black, *George III* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2006), 50.

20 Quoted in Robert Toohey, *Liberty and Empire* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1978), 126.

21 James R. Stoner: “The Idiom of Common Law in the Formation of Judicial Power,” in Bradford P. Wilson *et al.* (ed.), *The Supreme Court and American Constitutionalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

22 Wilfrid Prest, *William Blackstone* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 292.

23 Bird, *Revolution in Freedoms*, 36–37.



[t]he Whigs of Burke's party considered the doctrines advanced by the Lord Chief Justice Mansfield on the bench as inconsistent with constitutional liberty, and as plants of Tory or Jacobite growth. Burke, in the House of Commons, frequently enlarged with force against the law and practice of Lord Mansfield. Burke execrated the proceedings respecting Wilkes and the Middlesex election. In all these circumstances Burke completely coincided with Junius.<sup>24</sup>

More recently, Carl B. Cone recounted the clash that happened between Burke and Mansfield:

At the time when ... "court writers" were abusing Burke "systematically," [meaning early 1770s] Burke expressed indignation to his old friend William Markham because Lord Mansfield suffered these writers to blend "a vindication of his character with the most scurrilous attacks" upon Burke's. This hurt Burke, for he had defended Mansfield during the libel controversy.<sup>25</sup>

In October 1775, Burke recommended an anonymous work entitled *The Letter of Valens* to his friend as "worthy of printing in the Bristol papers."<sup>26</sup> In "Letter IX, American Independence," the author explicitly states:

I am obliged ... to lament seriously, that Lord Mansfield, in reading the history of even *one*, (the worst if he pleases) of the colonies, in order from thence to infer the guilt of the *whole*, should not have been able to perceive any thing in all that history besides acts of resistance and revolt. I shall beg leave to remind his Lordship, that until this unfortunate period, that colony (Massachusetts Bay) certainly never did take up arms against the Crown. It certainly did make some provision for the support of his Majesty's government. It certainly did raise sums of money, and very large sums too, at several times, for

24 Peter Burke, *The Public and Domestic Life of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke* (London, 1853), 67.

25 Carl B. Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics: The Age of the American Revolution* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 217–18; see also *Selected Letters of Edmund Burke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 56–57.

26 Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics*, 289.

the public service. It certainly did spill a great deal of such blood as it had to spill, in the quarrels of this country. The wealth of the colony was not equal to ours, nor their blood as noble as Lord Mansfield's, but there is an eye in which the widow's mite is not altogether disregarded, and in which the blood of the yeoman is not without an account.<sup>27</sup>

But it was not just Mansfield who suspected that Burke was the author of Junius. As early as 1837, we can read that "Lord Mansfield, Sir William Blackstone, and Sir William Draper, thought that Burke was Junius."<sup>28</sup> And in 1849, in the journal of *The North British Review*, it was reported that, "[t]he anxiety to discover Junius now became more eager than ever. So high were his *Letters* in public estimation that Burke was suspected to be their author. Lord Mansfield, Sir William Blackstone, and Sir William Draper, adopted this opinion."<sup>29</sup>

We can safely conclude, then, that, if we want to locate Jefferson's understanding of the Tory/Whig division (in the legal field) in a world before the French Revolution broke out, then quite obviously and undeniably, Burke would be his perfect counterpart. Moreover, Burke was the exact main target of Mansfield and Blackstone's legal crusade. Burke disagreed with both Mansfield and Blackstone on the proper limitation of the king's power, on the Wilkes affair, and on the American revolutionary war, while he had also been suspected by both Mansfield and Blackstone as being the author "Junius."

Moreover, there exists a further, key similarity between Jefferson and Burke, which is their shared admiration of Coke. Burke had started to cite Coke approvingly as early as his *Vindication of Natural Society* (1756).<sup>30</sup> Both J. G. A. Pocock and Peter Stanlis have long noted Burke's

27 *The Letters of Valens, (which originally appeared in the London Evening Post) with Corrections, Explanatory notes, and a Preface by the Author* (London, 1777), 83.

28 *The History of Party: A.D. 1762-1832*, Vol. 3 (J. Macrone, 1837), 131-32.

29 *The North British Review*, 10 (1849): 104. See also Jelinger Symons, *William Burke the Author of Junius* (London, 1859), 13-14.

30 Burke had also mentioned Coke's name in his 1760 review of George Wallace's *A System of the Principles of the Laws of Scotland*. In a 1771 letter sent from Burke, he also explicitly mentioned Coke's name. Moreover, Burke mentioned Coke and his principle of "every man's reason is not the reason of the law," in his March 19, 1770 speech on London Remonstrance.

debt to Coke and the so called “Common Law mind.” Burke was inclined to consider Coke “the most eminent modern English jurist to defend the Natural Law.”<sup>31</sup> Essentially, Coke believed law is something “above the king as well as above his subjects, and bound to judge impartially between them.”<sup>32</sup> Burke also believed in this. Multiple scholars’ researches show Burke’s similarity with Coke’s teachings. For example, Samuel V. Laselva shows us how “Burke, like Sir Edward Coke before him, traced many of those liberties back to Magna Carta, which—again like Coke—he described as an affirmation of still older law.”<sup>33</sup> Isaac Kramnick’s research reveals that Burke and Coke shared a similar understanding about political representation.<sup>34</sup> Stanlis judiciously observed that “[n]ext to Cicero no legal theorist had quite the same authority for Burke as Coke, whom he quotes nine times in his works and to whom he alludes in his speeches more frequently—and in general with unrestrained admiration—than to any other writer.” One essential reason for Burke’s admiration is that Coke had inspired “his seventeenth-century successors ... to give a strong moral basis to English civil liberty under the common law.”<sup>35</sup> Elsewhere, Stanlis elaborated:

Like Burke, Coke conceived of English society as a *dominium politicum et regale*, a commonwealth evolving through historical continuity into a complex and harmonious whole, in which the king, Lords, and Commons exercised their respective functions in conformity with the sovereignty of the common law, Magna Carta, and all the customs and manners that formed the constitution of England.<sup>36</sup>

---

31 Peter J. Stanlis (ed.), *Edmund Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1963), 104–05.

32 George Trevelyan, *A Shortened History of England* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1942), 286.

33 Samuel V. Laselva, *Canada and the Ethics of Constitutionalism* (Toronto: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2018), 211.

34 Isaac Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 173.

35 Peter J. Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 39–40.

36 *Ibid.*, 235. Harman points out that, “Coke’s *Institutes* was largely responsible for the popularity of Magna Carta.” See Charles E. Harman, *Critical Commentaries on Blackstone* (Brookings, OR: Old Court Press, 2002), 44.

Kunal M. Parker's research points us in a very similar direction:

Like Coke, Burke describes the English constitutional order as an inheritance in order to embrace and claim the presence of the past. . . . Coke had opposed the encroachments of England's monarch by arguing that a single individual could not possibly possess the undifferentiated collective wisdom of multiple generations embodied in an "immemorial" common law. Burke deploys the same idea against the present-minded revolutionary generation.<sup>37</sup>

The French Revolution, however, changed many things, and Jefferson started to criticize Burke fiercely. In May 1791, after he had read Burke's *Reflections*, Jefferson issued a robust criticism:

The Revolution of France does not astonish me so much as the Revolution of Mr. Burke. I wish I could believe the latter proceeded from as pure motives as the former. But what demonstration could scarcely have established before, less than the hints of Dr. Priestly and Mr. Paine establish firmly now. How mortifying that this evidence of the rottenness of his mind must oblige us now to ascribe to wicked motives those actions of his life which wore the mask of virtue and patriotism. To judge from what we see published, we must believe that the spirit of *toryism* has gained nearly the whole of the nation: that the whig principles are utterly extinguished except in the breasts of certain descriptions of dissenters.

It would appear, then, that, after 1791, the consensus between Jefferson and Burke that had held from at least 1785 collapsed overnight. I argue, however, that this is not what happened at all.

It can certainly be argued that, as Burke quickly reaffirmed his support for American political developments in the years after the *Reflections* appeared, and as Jefferson embarked upon a much more serious reconsideration (and critical assessment) of the French Revolution after

---

<sup>37</sup> Kunal M. Parker, *Common Law, History, and Democracy in America* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 82–83. See also Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 18.

1795 (and particularly after 1810), the gap between these two figures narrowed once again; but over and above that, we should also pay special attention to the simple fact that, even at the high tide of his tirade against the French Revolution, Burke notably continued to prioritize the status of Coke in his thought: “Our oldest reformation is that of Magna Charta. You will see that Sir Edward Coke, that great oracle of our law, and indeed all the great men who follow him, to Blackstone, are industrious to prove the pedigree of our liberties.” The words Burke employs to describe Coke here are basically the same as the ones he used to describe Coke in his *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol* (1777), where he labeled him “the oracle of the English law.” Again, in the *Reflections*, we read:

You will observe that from Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right it has been the uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties as *an entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity.

In 1875, the editor of Burke’s writings, Edward John Payne, appended a special note to that term “entailed inheritance”: “Major hereditas venit unicuique nostrum a jure et legibus, quam a parentibus,’ is the well-known motto from Cicero, prefixed to Coke upon Littleton.”<sup>38</sup> Payne’s point is well made: when mentioning the idea of “entailed inheritance,” Burke very likely had Coke’s legal writings in mind. J. G. A. Pocock has argued more recently that some important passages in the *Reflections* “should be understood in the context of a tradition of common-law thought established in the age of Sir Edward Coke,”<sup>39</sup> and Robert Tombs also notes that Burke’s fierce arguments against the French Revolution “revived ideas about custom and Common Law, as in the writings of Sir Edward Coke.”<sup>40</sup> If the widespread contemporary rumor that Mansfield strongly disliked *Reflections* is true, the explicit praise of Coke contained in that book might provide a reason.<sup>41</sup> Later, Burke

38 Edmund Burke, *Select Works* (Oxford, 1875), 2:315.

39 J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), 193–94.

40 Robert Tombs, *The English and Their History* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2015), 267.

41 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. C. D. Clark (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 182.

cited Coke with apparent approval in *A Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe* (1792), in his 1793 *Speech on Traitorous Correspondence Bill*, in the 1794 *Report on the Lords Journals* (and his *Speech in Reply* the same year), and in his *First Letter on a Regicide Peace*, published in 1796.<sup>42</sup> The French Revolution had not changed Burke's subscription to Coke's ideas at all.

The issue, then, would seem to boil down to the treatment of Blackstone, with a more orthodox interpretation arguing for a strong divergence: Burke valuing Blackstone and Jefferson wishing to banish him. But, if we follow the whole narrative with more nuance, Jefferson wished to argue the precedence of Coke to Blackstone, and the real difference between late Jefferson's and Burke's understanding is merely one of degree of precedence. Both agreed that Blackstone still had a role to play: that role should simply be significantly diminished in comparison with Coke's. This was in no way unreasonable, since, as James P. Ambuske has pointed out:

In Jefferson's ideal world, the University's law students would read Coke and Whig writers first before they touched Blackstone.... Jefferson begrudgingly recognized Blackstone's *Commentaries* as a useful reference work, but one to be read only after they had learned to recognize its danger. And while Jefferson questioned Mansfield's jurisprudence on many fronts, and the validity of English case law since George III's ascension to the throne, they still had something to teach Virginia republicans. He ordered, and the first library contained, law reports compiled by Blackstone, Mansfield, and other jurists spanning the king's reign.<sup>43</sup>

One reason why Jefferson was not absolute in his dislike of Blackstone was that, in the words of Wilfrid Prest, "Blackstone's clearly stated emphasis on the authority of the law of nature and the absolute rights of individuals was of particular importance in formulating and defending the case for armed resistance to King George and his parliament."<sup>44</sup> Jefferson knew this very well.

<sup>42</sup> Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 9:251; 4:579; 7:120, 132, 141, 145–46, 165, 246–47, 302; 9:628.

<sup>43</sup> James P. Ambuske *et al.*, "Reading Law in the Early Republic," in Peter S. Onuf *et al.* (ed.), *The Founding of Thomas Jefferson's University* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2019).

<sup>44</sup> Prest, *William Blackstone*, 292.

Both late-Jefferson and late-Burke wanted more seasoned lawyers who were well trained in Coke's well-informed, deeply insightful, sufficiently sophisticated and truly thoughtful style. Neither late-Jefferson nor late-Burke would entirely impugn Blackstone's scholarship, but undeniably both of them had a marked inclination toward Coke. Additionally, Jefferson's friend and ally St. George Tucker also tended to echo "Coke's description of legal study in his critique of Blackstone."<sup>45</sup> In Jefferson's mind, Blackstone could be studied after "exposure to commentators like Coke, or in an edition by St. George Tucker which included an appendix correcting Blackstone's *erroneous* principles."<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Jefferson believed that both Coke and Blackstone's writings "formed the best introduction to the common law and the theory of law; thus, they should be read thoroughly, not just picked through," despite "Blackstone's complacent monarchism and Coke's difficult style."<sup>47</sup> And, while we have several letters from late Jefferson approving "[John Henry] Thomas's Coke Littleton," it must be noted that Jefferson fully recognized that that book was largely "in the method of Blackstone."

This also helps to explain why the late Jefferson rarely included Burke in his criticisms of figures such as Hume, Blackstone, Mansfield, and even Montesquieu. When the Federalist James Wilson covered similar ground, the situation was different. In the words of Mark David Hall:

Wilson's most extensive discussion of natural rights is found in his law lecture entitled "Of the Natural Rights of Individuals" (1790). He began by criticizing Burke and Blackstone for teaching that individuals must give up any natural rights they possess when they enter civil society. . . . Wilson queried: "Must our rights be removed from the stable foundation of nature, and placed on the precarious and fluctuating basis of human institution? Such seems to be the sentiment of Mr. Burke: and

---

45 Crow, *Thomas Jefferson, Legal History, and the Art of Recollection*, 116–17.

46 See Cameron Addis, *Jefferson's Vision for Education 1760–1845* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 109. See also Leonard Levy, *Jefferson and Civil Liberties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 143–44.

47 Harold Hellenbrand, *The Unfinished Revolution* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1990), 57.



such too seems to have been the sentiment of a much higher authority than Mr. Burke—Sir William Blackstone.”<sup>48</sup>

A more intriguing question, in fact, may be why late-Jefferson, like Burke, preferred Coke to Blackstone, when, as a young man first studying Coke’s writings, he had indulged in some disgruntled complaints. Certainly, from the point of view of legal philosophy, Coke’s position is rather more Burkean than Jeffersonian, with its famous defense of “custom as reason accumulated through adaptive precedent,” and the insistence on “the collectively held character of legal and political knowledge—held in institutions and practices—and its greater eligibility than that found in propositions enunciated by individuals—however intelligent.”<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, although he wanted to apply common law to prevent the misuse of royal power, Coke never thought to completely get rid of monarchy.<sup>50</sup> On the contrary, he had in mind a theory of moral kingship, meaning, in the words of David Chan Smith, that “the king’s politic capacity had a body that was royal power and a soul that was justice. Law harmonized the two, ‘because power is to do justice,’ and so ‘by laws are kings, without law tyrants.’”<sup>51</sup> Coke frankly admitted that “the king’s prerogative could enlarge as it suited the king’s need to defend the realm,”<sup>52</sup> and he affirmed the royal supremacy in his writings.<sup>53</sup> Some scholars have gone so far as to summarize Coke’s doctrine as “the

48 Mark David Hall, *The Political and Legal Philosophy of James Wilson* (Columbus, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 47. See also Mark Hulliung, *The Social Contract in America* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 116. David A. J. Richards, *Foundations of American Constitutionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 138–39. Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 310–11.

49 Iain Hampsher-Monk, “Edmund Burke in the Tory World” in Jeremy Black (ed.), *The Tory World* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2015), 94–95.

50 As pointed out by Glenn Burgess: “where a modern constitutionalist might specify the rules governing prerogative (executive) power, Coke was only concerned to specify laws defining private property in all their detail. We might expect a constitutionalist, especially a proto-American one, to deny any place at all to a strict Austinian doctrine of sovereignty, but that was not Coke’s concern”; see Glenn Burgess, *Absolute Monarchy and the Stuart Constitution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 208.

51 See David Chan Smith, *Sir Edward Coke and the Reformation of the Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 263–264.

52 *Ibid.*, 8, 262.

53 *Ibid.*, 133.



king is God's lieutenant, and therefore *must do no wrong*."<sup>54</sup> Like Burke, but unlike Jefferson, Coke would not have celebrated the execution of Louis XVI at all. He would probably even have condemned Jefferson's behavior in claiming that monarchs were "amenable to punishment like other criminals" (in March, 1793), and in referring to the French king as "Louis Capet" in April 1793, after he had learned of the king's execution.

In conclusion, if we consider that, in the early days of the French Revolution, Jefferson was in favor of a constitutional monarchy, and that, as R. R. Palmer has noted sharply, on the eve of the outbreak of French Revolution, Jefferson had been "the most conservative in his ideas of what should be done"<sup>55</sup> amongst aristocratic reformists/revolutionaries such as Lafayette and Condorcet, we should not be that surprised to encounter a hidden Burkean turn in late Jefferson's political writings.

---

54 Conrad Russell, *Unrevolutionary England, 1603–1642* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 1990), 94–95.

55 R. R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution: The Challenge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1959), 469.

## *New Authoritarian Challenges to Liberal Democracy*

The Estoril Political Forum, which was established in 1993, is an annual international conference organized through the Institute for Political Studies at the Catholic University of Portugal, Lisbon. Successive conference themes have promoted the exploration of liberty as it has been formed and shaped in the Western liberal tradition defined by thinkers such as Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville.

In 2020, the theme of the Estoril Political Forum was “New Authoritarian Challenges to Liberal Democracy in a Global World,” to which the Edmund Burke Society, under the aegis of the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal, contributed a panel session under the title “Edmund Burke and the Limits of Toleration.” The panel was hosted by Dr. Carlos Marques de Almeida, and papers delivered on that occasion by panel members Ian Crowe, Ivone Moreira, and Luke Sheahan have been published here with slight revisions.

# *Edmund Burke's Narrow Line between Toleration and Slavery*



IAN CROWE

*Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal*

Edmund Burke published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* primarily as a warning to his fellow countrymen of the threat posed to British freedom and the constitution by a misreading of the aims of the French revolutionary program. In particular, Burke feared any concession to British radicals based upon a questionable interpretation of the legacy of the Glorious Revolution and of the so-called “rights of man.”

Similarly, while Western liberal democracy might face powerful challenges today from foreign governments and ideologies, one would be blind, indeed, not to recognize that the most urgent threat appears to come from ideologies born and nurtured within the political system and culture of Western liberal democracy itself. In this paper, I explore one narrow but vital feature of this internal threat: that is our confusion over the role toleration should play in our society. Facing a tide of so-called “woke-ness” flooding our traditional channels of conversation and debate, we might easily find ourselves asking: When and how did the quality of toleration become *antagonistic* to ordered liberty?

As a starting point, I want to reconsider Edmund Burke’s approach to *religious* toleration in his day. Religious perspectives continued to dominate approaches to political and social policy throughout the eighteenth century—and it might be argued, by analogy, that we even have our own

version of the Test and Corporation Acts today, where access to positions of political and cultural influence is dictated by (at least outward) conformity to an increasingly narrow ideological mindset and vocabulary.

Burke's approach to religious toleration pivoted on this question: Is toleration a privilege or a right? If the first, what are the circumstances in which that privilege might reasonably be limited? If it is a right, what is the rationale for its consistent application in the face of changing circumstances? Burke was famously uncomfortable arguing from the basis of "rights," and I suspect that most people acquainted with his thought would assume that he lines up with the former option: that toleration is a privilege dependent upon its conformity to the customs and traditions of society. This impression does, indeed, appear to follow the trajectory of his thinking on the subject from the 1770s to the 1790s, as his initially liberal approach narrowed with the rise of radical political movements in Britain and the outbreak of the French Revolution. A prominent supporter of relief for both Protestant dissenters and Roman Catholics in the early part of his parliamentary career, Burke was prepared to argue then that he supported toleration as "a principle favourable to Christianity, and as a part of Christianity";<sup>1</sup> and yet, in 1790, he abstained on a vote on Protestant relief, and he *stridently* opposed relaxing restrictions on Unitarians two years later, arguing that Unitarianism "mingle[d] a political System with ... religious opinions."<sup>2</sup>

I suggest, however, that we can detect in the same materials and the same trajectory an approach to toleration that is situated more firmly in the area of a right, and one which, when understood as such, provides a rationale both for its own boundaries and for *intolerance* when those boundaries are transgressed. Burke's early support for religious toleration followed familiar "Enlightened" thought in reconfiguring what might reasonably remain the preserve of private conscience; but he vitally complicated that position by his acknowledgment of an

---

1 Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford *et al.* 9 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981–2015), 2:383. The quotation is from "Speech on the Toleration Act," 17 March 1773. This is, essentially, a Latitudinarian position that (instructively, for those who retain an obstinately monochrome, "progressive" sense of Enlightenment thought) could be considered both religiously liberal and politically conservative.

2 *Ibid.*, 4:492. "Speech on Unitarians' Petition for Relief," 11 May 1792.

“unbought grace” to which institutional religion testified in both natural and civil human society and which evaded theological or ecclesiological precision. Indeed, Burke’s thinking here might almost be said to resemble Rousseau’s civil religion. In a speech on clerical subscription in 1772, he stated: “Who were more religious than the Romans, who were more tolerating. Methinks we would do well to attend to their institutions.”<sup>3</sup>

And yet Burke diverged widely from Rousseau in going on to argue that an Established Church must be a *voluntary* institution, integral to, and yet *distinct* from, the State within which it performs its vital function. A religious establishment aims to unify the whole community in its natural moral instincts; but, by the very *mystery* of its own incorporation it cannot impose doctrinal uniformity on the whole community, only on its own members. Burke presents us here with a paradox crucial to his understanding of religious toleration: while religion witnesses to the pre-existing *moral* purpose of civil society, and thus its own fundamental importance for civil liberty and order, any institution founded necessarily on *revelation* cannot claim anything but an imperfect, partial knowledge of the form that moral purpose should take in civil society.

So why did Burke emphatically reject toleration for Unitarians? The answer is perfectly consistent with his earlier position, where Burke was careful to draw a clear but narrow line between those who denied revelation and “those who do not hold revelation yet who *wish that it were proved to them*.”<sup>4</sup> The former—atheists and deists—he declared “outlaws of the constitution ... of the human Race ... never to be supported, never to be tolerated [since they] would deprive us of our best privilege and prerogative of human nature, that of being a religious animal.”<sup>5</sup> The latter, crucially, Burke allowed within the scope of “a serious

3 Ibid., 2:363. “Speech on Clerical Subscription,” 6 February 1772.

4 Ibid., 2:389. “Speech on Toleration Bill,” 17 March 1773 [emphasis added].

5 Ibid., 2:388. Burke argued further that not even Holy Scripture could reasonably or justly be used as a test for religious conformity. See *Writings and Speeches*, 2:361. “Speech on Clerical Subscription,” 6 February, 1772. This interpretation of the role of the Church is the only way that I can make sense of Burke’s somewhat convoluted definition of church-state relations in a speech of 1792: “[I]n a Christian commonwealth, the Church and State are one and the same thing; being different integrant parts of the same whole, which is the Church” (*Writings and Speeches*, 4:491, “Speech on Unitarians’ Petition for Relief,” 11 May, 1792). The awkward repetition of “Church” directs us to that religious community of believers as the transcendent, supra-gov-

religion.<sup>6</sup> Unitarianism failed the test of a “serious religion” not primarily because it incorporated a political system, but because it denied the revelation, signified in the Trinity, of the mysterious paradox that Burke saw underpinning “artificial,” or civil, society: that man is poised in tension, with a foot both in eternity (“being”) and time (“becoming”). And Burke reasoned further: *toleration* of Unitarianism, like atheism and deism, could only be legitimized by subordinating “serious religion” to civil duty, a move that would result in “religious slavery.”<sup>7</sup>

That chain of reasoning, by which Burke sniffed the onset of slavery from a surfeit of toleration, might also be explained by his encounter, as an undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin, with the work of Samuel Pufendorf, whose teaching secularized notions of justice, toleration, duty, and conscience as a rational way of stifling denominational strife with mutually referential concepts of civil law and personal liberty.<sup>8</sup> Such arguments likely proved helpful to the Protestant Irish elite, but they would hardly have been conducive to the young Edmund Burke, a vigorous critic of the “Popery Laws” in his native Ireland, who, in 1790, vividly described such subordination of “serious religion” to the perceived interests of civil society as “annihilat[ing] the god within [man] ... and violat[ing] him in his sanctuary.”<sup>9</sup> Ironically, though, Burke had an ally to hand in the same college text—Pufendorf’s Huguenot translator and editor, Jean Barbeyrac, whose textual notes, while accepting that the boundaries of toleration should be rational and reasonable (and

---

ernmental institution that compounds what is essential in human nature outside civil society with its destiny, which is realized only within the artifice of civil society.

6 Ibid., 2:389.

7 The phrase appears in “Speech on Clerical Subscription,” 6 February 1772: “[F]or I am convinced that the liberty of conscience contended for by the petitioners would be the fore runner of religious slavery.” Ibid., 2:364.

8 Pufendorf divides “conscience” into conscience “rightly inform’d,”—that is, “govern’d by sure principles, and settling its Resolutions conformably to the Laws”; and “Conscience grounded upon Probability,” when the subject “had indeed entertain’d the *true Opinion* about what is to be done or not to be done” but cannot yet make good that truth by reasoning.” See, Samuel Pufendorf, *The Whole Duty of Man, According to the Law of Nature*, ed. Ian Hunter and David Saunders (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2003), 29. That second category, as a kind of inversion of Burke’s “serious religion,” itself restricts conscience to a “closed” context of public duty, and thereby opens the way to a kind of soft religious slavery.

9 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 4:317. “Speech on Repeal of Test and Corporation Acts,” 2 March 1790.

which Huguenot wouldn't?), reinserted the purchase of a pre-political, religious conscience within the modern state, and, in so doing, inscribed his own "clear but narrow line" beyond which civil duty might be subordinated to "serious religion."<sup>10</sup>

To summarize: first, Burke's understanding of toleration seems inextricably bound up with mystery and paradox—or, rather, is incompatible with certainty. Second, if it is to operate beneficially for the preservation of both order and liberty, toleration must spring from a higher purpose of the state than *either* individual liberty *or* social order. In other words, toleration is something one must *bear* in order to achieve a final good—or, as Burke put the case in 1773: "Do not promote Diversity. When you have it bear it."<sup>11</sup> We tolerate because we are bound to do so not by someone else's "natural" right, but by a just awareness of our own limitations. Toleration is a right embedded in civil society for the sake of civil society—for the fullest realization of human being and becoming.

If Burke's approach to toleration contains any message to us nowadays, I suggest that it is this: Unless we are able to reattach toleration to a live awareness of the paradox of human flourishing in civil society—that as *creatures* we are both being and becoming—we will remain vulnerable to any internal authoritarian threat to liberal democracy masquerading as tolerance, where the intolerant appear to have all the best tunes, and the skeptical or resistant, as in Burke's Britain, are silenced by, or even beholden to, the slogans of a hate-fueled philanthropy.

---

10 Both editions of Pufendorf's writings listed in the catalog of Burke's library in 1830 include Barbeyrac's extensive notes and comments, which, while highly respectful, undermine the master in certain ways that have great bearing for Burke's early development (Saunders, 480). These volumes are either the two-volume octavo "small Pufendorf" edited by J. Spavan, or remnants of the eight-volume edition of *The Law of Nature and Nations*, edited by Basil Kennet. The Kennet eight-volume edition also includes Barbeyrac's lengthy "Prefatory Discourse," now often referred to as his "Historical Account," but titled in full, "An Historical and Critical Account of the Science of Morality, and the Progress it has made in the World, from the earliest Times down to the Publication of Pufendorf of the Law of Nature and Nations."

11 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 2:388. "Speech on Toleration Bill," 17 March 1773.

# *A View on Burke's Elitist Doctrine of Political Representation*



IVONE MOREIRA

*Catholic University of Portugal*

In assessing the limits of political toleration in Edmund Burke's thought, we must bear in mind the knowledge of the limits that he himself recognized in the mechanisms that lead to the election of the representatives of the nation. Although Burke values elections and the possible shift in parliamentary power between contesting "parties" as promoting good governance, he acknowledges, at the same time, limitations in these processes that make the parliamentarian's mission difficult. These limitations interested him from early in his career, as we see, for example, in his communication with his electors in Bristol. From the beginning of his political life, Burke was concerned to make his position clear over the independence of members of parliament from the control of the electors, which he saw as the guarantee of a stable and conservative society, one that respects inherited values. I argue that this concern that any constitutional changes should correspond to an organic evolution and not to a sudden revolutionary change underpins the limits Burke envisaged to toleration and liberty in the electoral process.

In his speech to the voters of Bristol at the end of the poll in 1774, Edmund Burke argues that a representative should live in close and frank communication with their voters, that he should sacrifice his rest and his personal interests to theirs, but that he cannot abdicate the



independence of his decisions. Autonomous opinion and the enlightened conscience of the parliamentarian should not be sacrificed to any group or individual, as sacrificing them to the opinion of voters would be to betray them instead of serving them.<sup>1</sup>

Parliament being representative of the whole nation, a member of parliament is not merely the representative for the particular constituency that elected him. And, because parliament is a place where the national interest is debated and which has the capacity to legislate in accordance with it, and since the national interest cannot be reduced to the sum of the various local interests, a parliamentarian cannot rescind their own assessment of what the nation's interests are by placing it in the hands of their voters.<sup>2</sup>

The notion of the interest of the nation will emerge through discussion between different interests, and that notion may gain substance even in the adoption of the defense of an apparently individual interest which may be seen, in the circumstances, better able to represent the interest of the whole. Such a thing happened when Burke defended Ireland's commercial interests even though his own voters in Bristol felt threatened. Burke justified himself then by stating that defending free trade and protecting that freedom for Irish traders aligned with Bristol's interests, even though it did not seem evident to Bristol's electorate then.

At the same time, no individual interest can take precedence over a broader one: what is so conceived will not end up even expressing an authentic individual interest, since what endangers the whole cannot truly serve the part:

If the local Constituent should have an Interest, or should form an hasty Opinion, evidently opposite to the real good of the rest of the Community, the Member for that place ought to be as far, as any other, from any endeavour to give it Effect.<sup>3</sup>

The opinion of the voter, who does not have to take into account the interest of the entire nation, much less impartially to take into account

---

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford *et al.* 9 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981–2015), *Writings and Speeches*, 3:69.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 69–70.

opposing interests, should not compel his representative to obey his requests, because government is a matter of reason, not of will: "If Government were a matter of Will upon any side, yours, without question, ought to be superior. But Government and Legislation are matters of reason and judgment and not of inclination."<sup>4</sup>

David Beetham argues that Burke is not claiming that the parliamentarian possesses a superior capacity for deliberation than the voters do, as would be the case with an elitist theory of representation, but simply that Burke's statements indicate an understanding that decisions should be made in the place where debate takes place, not far from the forum.<sup>5</sup> However accurate, Beetham's point does not seem to capture Burke's theory of representation in all its aspects. It is true that Burke understands that decisions must emerge from a discussion to be held in Parliament, but it is also true that Burke does, really, support a governing elite, subject to the control of voters at the polls, even if the primary qualification of this elite is its morality and its knowledge, and not just birth.

In 1769, in *Observations on a Late State of the Nation*, Burke comments on the suggestion made by William Knox that the electorate should be increased:

What other reason can he have for suggesting, that we are not happy enough to enjoy a sufficient number of voters in England? I believe that most sober thinkers on this subject are rather of opinion, that our fault is on the other side; and that it would be more in the spirit of our constitution, and more agreeable to the pattern of our best laws, by lessening the number, to add to the weight and independency of our voters. And truly, considering the immense and dangerous charge of elections; the prostitute and daring venality, the corruption of manners, the idleness and profligacy of the lower sort of voters, no prudent man would propose to encrease [*sic*] such an evil, if it be, as I fear it is, out of our power to administer to it any remedy.<sup>6</sup>

---

4 Ibid., 69.

5 David Beetham, "Political Participation, Mass Protest and Representative Democracy" in *Parliamentary Affairs* 56 (2003): 598–600.

6 Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 2:177.

Direct election was a necessity, but minimizing the unwanted effects of this consultation was of the utmost prudence, and this objective could be achieved by decreasing the number of voters, thus granting each of them greater weight and independence. In *A Bill for Shortening the Duration of Parliaments*, addressing the evils he saw inherent in popular elections, he states:

To govern according to the Sense and agreeably to the interests of the People is a great and glorious Object of Government. This Object cannot be obtained but through the Medium of popular Election; and Popular Election is a mighty Evil.<sup>7</sup>

It would be hasty to conclude from these statements that Burke did not consider elections a good *per se*; after all, it is only through them that “the glorious objective” of governing according to the interests of the people is achieved. Rather, it must be understood that, as happens in Burke’s assessment of other matters, popular elections are a good with an evil associated with them.

In fact, Burke recognizes that government action, in which parliamentarians participate, is a qualified action, which can only be performed by those who have the necessary skills, in accordance with the eminently rational nature of political action.

In his “Speech on the Plan for Economical Reform,” Burke defines the parliamentary task as follows:

The people are the masters. They have only to express their wants at large and in gross. We are the expert artists; we are the skilful workmen, to shape their desires into perfect form, and to fit the utensil to their use. They are the sufferers, they tell the symptoms of the complaint; but we know the exact seat of the disease, and how to apply the remedy, according to the rules of art.<sup>8</sup>

Voters present problems in an imprecise and vague way because they are not seen from the highest perspective, which characterizes the vision of the ruler. The ruler needs to have a deep and broad knowledge of reality

---

7 Ibid., 3:590.

8 Ibid., 3:547.

in order to know how to apply the remedy to the origin of the evil; that is why he appears as the specialist in solving the problems that voters “suffer”—the use of this term illustrates the passive role that Burke assigns to the people in matters of governance.

The representatives are qualified to find solutions because they are the “philosophers in action,” and they must solve the problems presented to them. Must the solution accord with the opinions of those who elected them? Perhaps, when it coincides with that of the parliamentarian himself; but, because the parliamentarian’s action is a rational one, it certainly does not coincide with the fleeting opinion that changes with the fashion of the day. Instead, it is likely to agree more with the opinion that they would probably maintain in five years time: “I am to look, indeed, to your opinions,—but to such opinions as you and I must have five years hence,”<sup>9</sup>—according to the result of the assessment of the situations and their possible evolution. This is a *qualified* opinion, and much more than a momentary inclination.

Advocating for the parliamentarian’s independence from direct voter instructions, in the name of their true interests, Burke states to his constituents before the poll in 1780:

I knew that you chose me ... to be a pillar of the state, and not a weathercock on the top of the edifice, exalted for my levity and versatility, and of no use but to indicate the shiftings of every fashionable gale.<sup>10</sup>

And finally, in a letter to the Duke of Portland, dated 3 September 1780, we read:

I shall always follow the popular humour, and endeavour to lead it to right points, at any expence of private Interest, or party Interest ... But as to leaving to the Crowd, to choose for me, what principles I ought to hold, or what Course I ought to pursue for their benefit—I had much rather ... mix with them, with the utter ruin of all my hopes ... than to betray them by learning lessons from them.<sup>11</sup>

---

9 Ibid., 3:634.

10 Ibid.

11 Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, 4:274.

While Burke is elitist in terms of his view of those who have the ability to elect and those who have the ability to govern, it does not mean that Burke favors an aristocratic society protected against social mobility, but rather that he supports an ordained pyramidal society where mobility is the result of merit.

# *Edmund Burke and Pluralism*

IN THE HISTORICAL, POLITICAL, AND SOCIOLOGICAL  
THOUGHT OF ROBERT NISBET



LUKE SHEAHAN  
*Duquesne University*

One of Edmund Burke's greatest twentieth-century disciples, the American sociologist Robert Nisbet, described two ways of perceiving the world: monism and pluralism. In metaphysics, monism focuses upon unity, oneness, the way in which the universe coheres. In political philosophy, the monistic tendency drives thinkers to seek for a unified theory of political society, a way in which all of society hangs together around a single model of political and moral order. In contrast, pluralism is the metaphysical inclination to focus on plurality in the universe. Pluralists "are those who, distrusting all unitary systems, find reality to lie in the concrete and particular, in multiplicity and plurality rather than in unity."<sup>1</sup> In social thought, pluralists see the way in which history, philosophy, science, and religion do not cohere, but provide for a plethora of interpretations, which must be carefully sifted from different disciplinary perspectives to perceive reality properly. The pluralist penchant drives political philosophers to be suspicious of unified theories that reduce the complexities of human existence to a single principle or

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Nisbet, *The Social Philosophers* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1973), 385.

even a small group of principles. The concern of the pluralist is that such reductiveness loses much in terms of accurate understanding, whether in politics, history, or anything else.

One of the less discussed aspects of Nisbet's scholarship is his work on the nature and history of sociology. Nisbet authored two sociological textbooks, *The Sociological Tradition* (1966) and *The Social Bond* (1970), and a third book, *Sociology as an Art Form* (1976) that explored the artistic nature of sociology even as an academic discipline. Within this intellectual context of Nisbet's grappling with the discipline of sociology, a key aspect of his understanding of pluralism derives from his account of the origins of sociology in the fundamentally pluralist conservative reaction to the industrial and French revolutions. Conservatives believed that the new economic arrangements of an industrialized world undermined static sources of meaning for people and cut them off from their traditional bases of communal attachment, including property. No longer was property central to social institutions, whether church or family. It became merely a means of acquiring cash through sale or development. Treating property in this manner meant it could no longer garner loyalty and serve a galvanizing function for communities and associations.<sup>2</sup> Another disruptive effect of the industrial revolution that atomized the population was the mass exodus from rural areas, where workers were protected by guild and local community, to urban areas for work in factories.<sup>3</sup>

The democratic revolution spawned primarily by the French Revolution sparked a massive change in the orientation of academic disciplines. But where most disciplines adopted the rationalism of the philosophy behind the French Revolution, the conservatives reacted by defending the old order.<sup>4</sup> The French National Assembly suppressed associations and corporations, including the church, and it regulated family relationships including those between husband and wife and between parents and children according to a scheme of radical egalitarianism and geometric rationalism.<sup>5</sup>

---

2 Robert A. Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 27.

3 *Ibid.*, 23–31.

4 *Ibid.*, 12.

5 *Ibid.*, 31–42.

Against this revolution stood Burke and his disciples. Nisbet credits Burke's inspiration of pluralism, his defense of the social realm against the intrusions of the French revolutionary state, with triggering the rise of sociology as a distinct discipline.<sup>6</sup> Nisbet writes, "It was Edmund Burke who first identified this novel form of power taking shape in Revolutionary France and spreading first to other parts of Western Europe, then to other parts of the world."<sup>7</sup> Louis de Bonald and Joseph de Maistre echoed the horror Burke expressed at the centralization schemes of the Jacobins. The reason for their displeasure was the disruption of social institutions and traditional communities, articulating a distinction between this realm and that of politics and economics.

Following Burke, Bonald, and de Maistre were Auguste Comte and Frédéric Le Play, figures who forged sociology as a systematic discipline.<sup>8</sup> Émile Durkheim and Max Weber both contributed mightily to twentieth-century sociology and both disliked the centralization of the French Revolution. Durkheim studied the continuing deleterious effects of revolutionary policies on social groups of various sorts and Weber's critique of bureaucratization was essentially a critique of centralization.<sup>9</sup> In this way, "the basic insights and assumptions of philosophical conservatism became translated into an empirical study of human relationships."<sup>10</sup> The conservatism inherent in the fundamental approach to the study of society was tied to its pluralist origins, by which Nisbet meant its focus on social institutions as existing in their own legitimate right apart from their economic or political utility.

The perspective that begins with plurality rather than unity in political society has never had many philosophical adherents. Nonetheless, Nisbet does identify "those thinkers who have resisted the appeal of the One, the unitary and the monistic, and have found not merely reality

6 Nisbet makes this point first in Nisbet, "Conservatism and Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* (September 1952): 167–75. Reprinted in *Tradition and Revolt*, Robert A. Nisbet (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1999), 73–90. For a fuller discussion, see Luke C. Sheahan, "Conservative, Pluralist, Sociologist: Robert Nisbet's Burke," *Studies in Burke and His Time* 28 (2019): 56–60.

7 Robert A. Nisbet, *Sociology as an Art Form* (Oxford University Press, 1976; Republished by Transaction Publishers, 2002), 51.

8 Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 432–33. Nisbet, *Sociological Tradition*, 13.

9 Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 437–42.

10 Nisbet, "Conservatism and Sociology," 86.



but freedom and justice and equity to lie in plurality.”<sup>11</sup> First is Aristotle, who opposed Plato’s notion of monolithic unity in the state, positing instead a fundamental plurality of wealth, occupation, and interest. Nisbet writes, “From Aristotle’s viewpoint—and this would be the basic viewpoint of Burke, Tocqueville, and other nineteenth-century pluralists—almost any form of political government was good if it preserved the all-important spheres of autonomy to which each of the major groups and institutions was entitled within the social order.”<sup>12</sup>

Burke, rather than Aristotle, is the great pluralist thinker of the modern world. Just as Rousseau was Nisbet’s paradigmatic figure of modern monism, the form of citizenship that comprises individuals united only through their relationship to government, Burke is the paradigmatic figure of modern pluralism. Nisbet, along with Russell Kirk, sees Burke’s influence in American and English conservatism, which is fundamentally pluralist, but also in the continental nineteenth-century conservatism of Louis de Bonald and Friedrich Hegel.<sup>13</sup> What is even more extraordinary is that Nisbet also perceives Burke’s influence in liberal pluralists such as Robert de Lamennais and Alexis de Tocqueville as well as radical pluralists Peter Kropotkin and Joseph Proudhon.<sup>14</sup> Across the three great ideologies of the modern world, Burke’s influence is for pluralism in political thought and against centralizing and totalizing tendencies wherever they may arise.

Burke’s pluralism as a metaphysical perspective is clear from the early pages of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, where he writes:

I cannot stand forward, and give praise or blame to any thing which relates to human actions, and human concerns, on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of every relation,

<sup>11</sup> Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 386. I briefly discuss the role of Aristotle, Althusius, and Burke in Nisbet’s scheme of the plural community in Luke C. Sheahan, “Freedom’s Like a Fox: The Constitutional Community and First Amendment Rights,” *PRRUCS Annual* 1 (Spring 2020): 23–30.

<sup>12</sup> Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 396.

<sup>13</sup> For Burke’s centrality to Nisbet’s account of conservatism, see Robert A. Nisbet, *Conservatism: Dream and Reality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). On Burke’s influence on Bonald and Hegel, see Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 414–18.

<sup>14</sup> Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 418–32. For a discussion of Burke’s influence on these thinkers in Nisbet’s thought, see Sheahan, “Nisbet’s Burke,” 49–56.

in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction. Circumstances (which with some gentlemen pass for nothing) give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing colour and discriminating effect.<sup>15</sup>

We cannot praise government or liberty “abstractedly speaking” because neither is good in itself. We must understand the particularity and plurality of circumstances to get a sense for whether that of which we speak is “beneficial or noxious to mankind.”

Nisbet sees Burke’s critique of the French Revolutionaries as relying precisely on the grounds that they ignore the plurality of their society, believing in a fundamental unity, even sameness, that simply does not exist. Instead of seeing “Gascons, Picards, Bretons, Normans,” the revolutionaries wanted simply “Frenchmen.”<sup>16</sup> But that is not how the inherent pluralism of human existence works. For Burke, famously:

We begin our public affections in our families. No cold relation is a zealous citizen. We pass on to our neighbourhoods, and our habitual provincial connections. These are inns and resting places. Such divisions of our country as have been formed by habit, and not by a sudden jerk of authority, were so many little images of the great country in which the heart found something which it could fill. The love to the whole is not extinguished by this subordinate partiality.<sup>17</sup>

Whatever unity a country has, it emerges from the interplay of the plurality of existing institutions and must be mediated through them if it is to exist at all. Nisbet sees this sentiment in Burke as shaping modern pluralist thought.<sup>18</sup>

Burke defends the British constitution precisely for its plurality, the way in which it recognizes different classes in society and the way in which even diversity created by hierarchy does not denote absolute authority over those lower in status:

---

15 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. C. D. Clark (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 151.

16 *Ibid.*, 366.

17 *Ibid.*

18 Nisbet, *Conservatism*, 85–86.

The house of lords, for instance, is not morally competent to dissolve the house of commons; no, nor even to dissolve itself, nor to abdicate, if it would, its portion in the legislature of the kingdom. Though a king may abdicate for his own person, he cannot abdicate for the monarchy. By as strong, or by a stronger reason, the house of commons cannot renounce its share of authority. The engagement and pact of society, which generally goes by the name of the constitution, forbids such invasion and such surrender. The constituent parts of a state are obliged to hold their public faith with each other, and with all those who derive any serious interest under their engagements, as much as the whole state is bound to keep its faith with separate communities. Otherwise competence and power would soon be confounded, and no law be left but the will of a prevailing force.<sup>19</sup>

The British constitution instantiates an inherent plurality which cannot be eradicated by any of the constituent parts.

Plurality is present in Burke's defense of inheritance. For Burke, inheritance preserves a plurality of principles in the British constitution. He writes that the Magna Carta and Declaration of Right were political reforms that did not undermine the political order by undermining the hereditary monarch. Rather, these documents intended to preserve a variety of distinctions in society that King John and King Charles I were undermining through their centralizing schemes. Burke writes, "We have an inheritable crown; an inheritable peerage; and an house of commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties, from a long line of ancestors."<sup>20</sup> These distinctions are essential to the autonomy enjoyed by each part of society. The principle of heredity preserves that plurality and autonomy.

Similarly, in his defense of the old French constitution, Burke writes, "you had all that combination, and all that opposition of interests, you had that action and counteraction which, in the natural and in the political world, from the reciprocal struggle of discordant powers, draws

---

<sup>19</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 168–69.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

out the harmony of the universe.”<sup>21</sup> Traditional French society had the essential principle of plurality. To the extent there was need for reform (and there was) the defective parts could have been reformed by drawing from the great plurality in its society, where it had reservoirs residual in less corrupted sectors of society capable of providing the necessary means and substance of reform. To the extent there is unity, it is because of the diversity of parts working together in their own way.

Regarding reform of society, again, Burke expresses the principle of plurality. He writes, “It is far from impossible to reconcile, if we do not suffer ourselves to be entangled in the mazes of metaphysic sophistry, the use both of a fixed rule and an occasional deviation; the sacredness of an heredity principle of succession in our government, with a power of change in its application in cases of extreme emergency.”<sup>22</sup> Sometimes one sides with the principle, heredity, and sometimes one deviates from it. However, one must have a pluralist mindset to see that there is a place for both the principle as well as the deviation. The advocates for revolution had no such distinctions in mind. Burke writes, “The gentlemen of the Society for Revolutions see nothing in that of 1688 but the deviation from the constitution; and they take the deviation from the principle for the principle.”<sup>23</sup> The revolutionaries were monists in that they could only understand one principle at play: revolutionary change. They could not see that small changes and corrections could take place in one part of the constitution while others remained intact in their plurality. They could not perceive both fixity *and* change, preservation *and* reform, a plurality of means to enhance and improve the constitution of their society.

On rights, Burke writes, “The pretended rights of these theorists are all extremes; and in proportion as they are metaphysically true, they are morally and politically false. The rights of men are in a sort of *middle*, incapable of definition, but not impossible to be discerned.”<sup>24</sup> These metaphysical rights Burke criticizes are more like the rights granted by Cleisthenes, Augustus, and the Jacobins. They cut straight through

---

21 Ibid., 187.

22 Ibid., 169.

23 Ibid., 172.

24 Ibid., 221.

intermediate associations to the individual. Rights for the French revolutionaries were a form of power, part of the monist conception of state as society. A pluralist rendering of rights sees them not as metaphysical abstractions, arising from a single principle, but as emerging over time in the plurality of particular practices in a given society, reconciling many different aims. There is not a fundamental principle to which all rights may be reduced, but a variety of humane practices that emerge over time, especially in regard to the necessary autonomies and procedures to protect certain factions of society from others. In such a way, rights operate to protect ancient forms of community as well as the individual.<sup>25</sup>

What would a polity look like in political thought if it rejected not only Rousseau but Plato, Hobbes, and the whole thrust of the development of the modern political state? What would it look like if it adopted the pluralism of Burke? In the last chapter of *The Social Philosophers* Nisbet describes six elements of the plural community: plurality, autonomy, decentralization, hierarchy, tradition, and localism.<sup>26</sup> Plurality is the idea that the plural community “is not founded upon a single objective or pursuit—whether kinship, religion, or politics—but upon a plurality of communities, each holding its proper and due place in the larger social order.”<sup>27</sup> From this idea emerges the idea of *communitas communitatum*, a community of communities. The political power makes a legitimate, albeit limited, claim upon individuals. As does the religious community in its notion of the sacred, and so on. By autonomy, Nisbet means that groups are autonomous as to function. Each group is “endowed with the greatest possible autonomy consistent with the performance of its function and with performance by other groups and communities of the functions embedded in them by tradition or plan.”<sup>28</sup> Decentralization means that authority should not come from one source, not the political state and not the war chief. Rather, authority should be decentralized, dispersed throughout many groups in the community.

---

25 Nisbet, *Conservatism*, 49–50, 55.

26 Nisbet discusses four of these principles in Nisbet, *Twilight*, 213–8. I discuss them in Luke Sheahan, *Why Associations Matter: The Case for First Amendment Pluralism* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2020), 38–9 and 148–9.

27 Nisbet, *Social Philosophers*, 388.

28 *Ibid.*, 388.

Hierarchy is the idea that every community has “stratification of function and responsibility.”<sup>29</sup> Rather than lamenting this fact, the plural community celebrates it as an essential part of any genuine community. Of course, there are horizontal aspects to a community when members are equal, but there are also vertical, hierarchical aspects. Tradition is the fifth element of the plural community. It means “the customary and the habitual” as well as the sense of the “handing down, the transferring, of ideals and practices.”<sup>30</sup> The plural community sees “tradition as something emerging from community, from consensus, from a stable base of social interaction that makes law in the formal and prescriptive sense unnecessary.”<sup>31</sup> Tradition is the collection of customs and habits that develop organically within a community.

Finally, localism is the pluralist “emphasis on the family, neighborhood, small community, and local association.”<sup>32</sup> Historically, the pluralist philosophers objected to the effects of industrialism and democratic society on the grounds that it caused massive dislocations from *place*. They believed that the rootlessness resulting from loss of connection to the local community is a prime cause of alienation in the modern world. This last element is the only one that is geographical. The others can exist in any association and do not necessarily require close proximity or imply living in the same place. The emphasis of localism is that even in a territorial state, smaller localities within the larger territory are important, even if they are not the seat of sovereignty. They still ought to be able to operate with a certain amount of autonomy.

The plural community is the type of community that recognizes and celebrates the existence of social groups in all their variety—kinship, local community, places of employment, religious organizations, and the like. It rejects centralization of authority wherever it may lie and the individualization of persons for whatever purpose. The plural community, the sort of community embraced by Burke, indeed rooted in Burke’s thought, is Nisbet’s alternative to the political community of Rousseau.

---

29 Ibid., 389.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 390.

## Book Reviews



Gregory M. Collins, *Commerce and Manners in Edmund Burke's Political Economy*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

In March 1776 Edmund Burke rose to address the House of Commons on the subject of the Butcher's Meat bill, an arcane piece of legislation designed to regulate the meat industry and to improve the quality of meat available to consumers. Burke objected to the legislation on two grounds; first, because a provision within the proposed legislation mandating that butchers should not kill animals immediately upon arrival in their premises would concentrate the trade amongst the larger butchers, creating a monopoly; secondly, because this would drive up prices and the poor would no longer have access to the cheaper meat that they were accustomed to. The less fortunate were, he argued, better off accessing poor quality meat, as it could after all be disguised by the application of preservatives. Perhaps Burke was thinking here of how every part of the cattle originating on his mother's family's estates in North Cork was skilfully exploited by the butchers of Cork for profit.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, their ability to preserve and to cure even the meanest cuts of beef, bacon, and pork had caused social discord and rioting during the period of high prices caused by the Seven Years War, an outcome that would have been anathema to Burke.<sup>2</sup> Developing his argument fur-

<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of Lord Chief Baron Edward Wiles to the Earl of Warwick*, ed. James Kelly (Aberystwyth, 1990), pp. 48–49.

<sup>2</sup> Chulki Kim, *Economy and Empire in Making the British-Irish Union, 1756–1801* (PhD thesis, Binghamton University, 2020), esp. chapter 1.

ther in the Commons, Burke questioned the need for such regulation, wondering just how tainted the existing meat really was. In doing so he drew upon the argument that wine had previously been considered poisonous, but it was now widely understood that instead it generated “cheerfulness and good humour” (138).<sup>3</sup> There are echoes here of ongoing debates about the deregulation of food safety standards and the prospect of imported chlorinated chicken filling the shelves of British supermarkets—what some might argue is the logical twenty-first endpoint of the laissez faire free trade policies advocated by Burke and his great contemporary Adam Smith.

This was a largely unremarkable episode in Burke’s long parliamentary career, but it is used by Gregory Collins in his fascinating book to illustrate the practical development of Burke’s thoughts on political economy and it gives us a brief window into the arguments and methods used to advance Collins’s thesis that Burke needs to be taken more seriously as an important thinker on political economy. Central to this argument is that while Burke did not write a sustained treatise on political economy, in the vein of an Adam Smith or a James Steuart, he made a significant contribution to the emerging discipline of political economy. This contribution, as Collins shows, can be traced across Burke’s major and minor works including among the latter his contributions to parliament and indeed his private correspondence. Thus, Burke’s speech on the Butcher’s Meat bill—a piece of failed legislation—can be used to demonstrate his antipathy to monopolies, his belief in the market economy, and in the poor’s capacity to better understand their own place within the economic ecosystem than the legislators in Westminster—something that Collins sees as anticipating Hayek’s idea of the “gross pretence of knowledge” (138). Such a kaleidoscopic approach drawing on a vast array of documentary evidence allows Collins to formulate a detailed picture of Burke’s arguments over time to sustain his thesis. His research is impressive but at times the detail can overwhelm the reader and the significance attached to isolated episodes can be hard to discern. The treatment of the speech on the Butcher’s Meat bill, for instance, is followed by a short section on Burke and Adam Smith, a thread that is picked up at different times throughout the book, but which might have benefited from a single con-

3 Page references to Collins, *Commerce and Manners* are in parentheses in the text.



solidated interrogation. This is but one of many instances where treatments of discrete topics are split off from each other (see also the exploration of Burke's thoughts on slavery, of which more below) leading both to repetition and on occasion to a diminution of the overall argument. Like a good butcher, Collins might have been better advised to trim the fat and to focus his energies on the choicest cuts.

And to extend this metaphor to breaking point, there are many choice cuts on offer. At the core of this book is a forceful argument that Burke is under-appreciated as a political economist and that his thinking on economic issues requires serious scholarly engagement. On these grounds alone this book certainly achieves its aim. Across twelve chapters and over five hundred pages Collins demonstrates the centrality of economic issues to Burke's thinking. He begins with a conundrum arising out of his close reading of Burke's posthumously published 1795 tract *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* which while written to address the specific occasion of the provisions crisis then gripping Britain and the appropriateness or not of government intervention in the grain market—Burke advocated not—is seen by Collins as Burke's most sustained piece of writing on political economy. In *Thoughts and Details* Burke makes a forceful argument for the primacy of exchange and the market economy seemingly demonstrating sympathy with the enlightenment ideals of modernity and general principles drawn from the laws of nature which had so influenced the French philosophes he attacked in the *Reflections*. At the heart of Collins's book thus is a concern with resolving this apparent contradiction between Burke's defense of the modern market economy and his simultaneous defense of cultural traditionalism, what he calls "Das Edmund Burke Problem," referencing the famous debate over how to reconcile the Adam Smith of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* with the Smith of *The Wealth of Nations*. To do this, Collins first needs to demonstrate the contours of Burke's economic thought.

His analysis begins with a brief examination of Burke's biography before turning to a sustained analysis of *Thoughts and Details*, which Collins sees as Burke's primary tract while simultaneously warning the reader that "no greater mistake can be made than to assume [it] captures the range and extent of Burke's conception of political economy" (4). These opening chapters are followed by thematic explorations focusing

on key texts and issues ranging from the economical reform to foreign trade—taking in the West Indies, Ireland, and America—to India before returning in the final sections to the 1790s and the *Reflections*. This thematic structure works reasonably well but it does lead to some repetition.

Burke's time in parliament alongside his Irish family and educational background are briefly explored in the opening biography chapter, though surprisingly little attention is paid to how Burke's Irishness might have affected his ideas of political economy beyond some penetrating remarks on the role of property rights in his *Tracts on the Popery Laws*. Of much more interest to Collins in his biographical sketch is Burke's role as an engaged farmer and landowner at Beaconsfield, and he cites some revealing anecdotes about Burke's personal obsessive interest in husbandry and improvement. Burke's lived experience as a farmer and improving landlord, while interesting, was however surely less significant to shaping his thoughts on political economy than his more time-consuming practical careers as a "man of business" and as a parliamentarian during a period when the role of parliament in regulating the economy was reaching unprecedented levels. Peter Marshall has recently expertly delineated Burke's role as a man of business with close material and personal interests in the West Indies and African trades which at times complicated his political judgment and consistency.<sup>4</sup>

As to the changing role of parliament, recent scholarship, by Julian Hoppit and Perry Gauci in particular, has stressed the growing influence of the legislature in shaping the economy through regulation and the promotion of private acts of legislation, among other strategies.<sup>5</sup> Burke's views on this legislative revolution are implied but are not systematically engaged with by Collins, although he does acknowledge that they were formed within the cut and thrust of politics and not in a classroom (397), or, as he puts it elsewhere, Burke as MP encountered "friction" between his economic principles and political prudence (212). It is possible therefore to discern Burke's reaction to and understanding of this new role taken on by parliamentarians like himself who increas-

4 P. J. Marshall, *Edmund Burke and the British Empire in the West Indies* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2019).

5 Julian Hoppit, *Britain's Political Economies: Parliament and Economic Life, 1660–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017); Perry Gauci (ed.), *Regulating the British Economy, 1650–1850* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011).

ingly saw their role as technocrats charged with improving British society and economy. Some, like Burke as we have seen, were largely unsympathetic to the increased role of parliament and the state in shaping economic development, although as Collins does point out Burke was not opposed to all state/parliamentary intervention, notably supporting bounties on corn exports and enclosure legislation—after turnpike acts, the second largest category of legislation passed at Westminster from 1760 onwards.<sup>6</sup> Future researchers might fruitfully draw out the intersections between his insights into Burke’s political economy and the picture emerging from contemporary scholarship on parliament, the state, and the industrial revolution to fully contextualize Burke’s thought within his own lived experience.

This would help scholars better understand Burke within his own context and therefore to avoid the danger of ascribing either too much agency to him or to assuming that he was an innovative outlier in terms of his methods and thought. In some cases, he certainly was, and Collins makes a very good case for Burke’s exceptional devotion to the study of political economy from quite early in his career, drawing on Burke’s own words both at the time and retrospectively looking back, as well as on his actions as a member of the Rockingham ministry in 1765. This can be confirmed, for example, by Marshall’s independent analysis of the Burke’s role in making the Free Port Act, a topic also discussed here by Collins with a different emphasis, notably, in relation to slavery.<sup>7</sup> On occasion, however, the levels of Burke’s attention to detail are perhaps over-emphasized. Notable here is the attention given to Burke’s use of empirical data in his parliamentary speeches and writings. Certainly, he was an effective proponent of the importance of using statistical evidence drawn from parliamentary papers and government trade statistics. As far back as 1752, following his first visit to London, he had commented that an MP “will make more by the figures of arithmetic than the figures of rhetoric” (156) and he held to this precept during his parliamentary career. In doing so—as in his celebrated speech on economical reform—he was, however, part of a wider trend whereby political arithmetic was being taken increasingly more seriously by politicians

6 Hoppit, *Britain’s Political Economies*, 99.

7 Marshall, *Burke and the British Empire*, 105–24.

and policy makers. The volume of papers presented to the Commons to inform the contentious and far-reaching debate on the corn bounties in the 1766–67 session proves—as Hoppit has demonstrated—the point.<sup>8</sup> Burke may have been of one of the most assiduous readers of such material, but he was part of a wider turn within the policy making elite.

Turning to Collins’s arguments in more detail, he begins with a detailed analysis of an extensive treatment of *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*. Prepared by Burke in rural retirement as a position paper for Pitt and Dundas during the subsistence crisis of the 1790s and not published until after Burke’s death, it is not generally regarded as one of Burke’s standout works.<sup>9</sup> Collins, however, makes a persuasive case for its critical importance to understanding Burke’s political economy. He shows how Burke had a thorough understanding of the laws of supply and demand and the price level and how his understanding of these concepts informed his suspicion of state intervention in the economy even at times of crises. The market could and would find its own level. This applied not just to the price of provisions but also the price of labor—wages—and it is possible that a parliamentary debate on proposals to introduce a minimum wage stirred Burke’s pen (42). Burke’s defense of the market extended to supporting the commercial activities of middlemen, a group generally seen as villains during the bread crises of the 1760s and 1790s. For Burke, they were entrepreneurs rather than hoarders and furthermore they played an essential, even natural, role in the exchange economy connecting the farmer and the consumer. They also acted as a bulwark against further state intervention through the possible introduction or, as he would have seen it, imposition of public granaries. Burke’s defense of the middlemen and a more open internal grain market is traced back to his advocacy for the 1772 laws against forestalling and regrating that had regulated the grain trade since the sixteenth century, although the impact of the French revolutionaries’ attempts to regulate French internal grain markets under the influence of the ideas of the Physiocrats was also of critical importance.

8 Julian Hoppit, “Political Arithmetic in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Economic History Review* 49 (1996): 516–40. See also William Derringer *Calculated Values: Finance, Politics and the Quantitative Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2018).

9 Although see Ralph E. Ancil, “The Un-Burkean Economic Policy of Edmund Burke,” *Studies in Burke and His Time* 29 (2020): 31–64.

Burke's ideas were taken up by the British government and it should be noted that there was minimal intervention in the internal grain market during the severe subsistence crisis of 1801. Burkean laissez faire ideas had triumphed. Interestingly, a rather different approach was taken in his native Ireland, where the concept of the moral economy at least in relation to the grain trade continued to maintain a hold over the governing elite, indicating the more volatile socioeconomic situation following the 1798 rebellion and the Act of Union.<sup>10</sup> In Ireland in 1801 counter-revolutionary prudence mattered more than doctrinaire market economics. Burke would probably have approved.

Having devoted considerable space to *Thoughts and Details*, Collins again emphasizes that it does not tell the whole story with regard to Burke's views on markets and regulation. Here his analysis of Burke's defense of export bounties for corn up to and including Thomas Pownall's act of 1773 is important, as well as the subsequent discussion of enclosure legislation, though the latter can be perhaps better squared with Burke's views on the codification and securing of property rights first articulated in his objections to Irish penal legislation.<sup>11</sup> What is perhaps most intriguing about Burke's defense of export bounties on corn (he opposed all other bounties), and Pownall's act of 1773 in particular, was that he saw it as the least worst solution and one that would lead to their eventual demise, anticipating his gradualist approach to other controversial questions, notably the abolition of the slave trade (86–87).

If questions of market regulation—whether corn, land, or wages—dominated Burke's domestic political economy, what can be said about his political economy of empire? Recent scholarship has continued to emphasize how Burke's thought was deeply concerned with analyzing, understanding, and justifying the expansion of Britain's imperial interests. Collins, like P. J. Marshall, takes Burke's interest in the West Indies seriously, giving his treatment of Burke's views on empire a global span. He is rightly cautious about identifying an overarching theory of empire or indeed of reverse engineering a Burkean position on later concepts

<sup>10</sup> See James Kelly, *Food Rioting in Ireland in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 200.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly Collins makes no mention of Burke's prominent role in the repeal of the penal laws pertaining to property in 1778. See Eamonn O'Flaherty, "Burke and the Catholic Question," *Eighteenth-Century Ireland/Iris an dà chultúr*, 12 (1997): 7–27.

like “free trade” or “protectionism.” He begins with Burke’s contribution to *An Account of the European Settlements in America* noting not only the wealth of sources mined by Burke but also the sophisticated nature of the economic insights contained within its pages—on, among other topics, the regulation of colonies on French expansionism, human nature, slavery, monopolistic trading companies, and the hazards of paper money—which Collins claims have unjustly been ignored by many later scholars. Central to Burke’s argument is the principle of collective benefit, whereby colonies aid the empire, but imperial protection likewise helps them prosper. Such prosperity, Burke argued, was dependent in Collins’s reading on liberal free trading policies such as the Free Port Act of 1766, which Burke as a novice MP played a key role in drafting, thereby putting into practice at an early stage his principles, albeit with compromise. Such a reading of this episode seems logical, although it places less emphasis than Marshall does on Burke’s connections with the West Indies lobby or interest groups, as well as his family connections who were seeking to profit in the Caribbean. Collins justifies this interpretation by pointing towards Burke’s position on the Irish free trade legislation of the 1770s where Burke went against the mercantile interests of his constituents, though there is perhaps a difference between constituent interests and loyalties to family and other personal connections.

Moving on to North America, Collins emphasizes the role of Burke’s views on the benefits wrought by commercial exchange between partners as determining his understanding and analysis of the American crisis. As Burke put it in his *Two Letters on the Trade of Ireland*: “Justice to others is not always folly to ourselves.” Collins demonstrates correctly how the binary of either “free trade” or “mercantilism” as categories of analysis does not help us understand either Anglo-American commercial relations or Burke’s response to them. Reform of the navigation acts could not just be about commercial reform, it had to be about social and imperial reform as well. Similar ideas about the social benefits of commercial exchange as indicated above explain Burke’s position on the successive attempts to reform the Anglo-Irish trading relationship in the 1770s and 80s. Burke was not, however, entirely consistent in his views on Irish trade, and while he supported the so-called free trade legislation of 1779 that granted Ireland greater access to colonial markets through a

significant modification of the navigation acts, he did not support William Pitt's attempts in 1784–85 to further streamline the commercial relationship between Britain and Ireland through an effective commercial union. In this case, Burke followed his party leader Charles James Fox in opposing the controversial legislation. Sometimes, as we have seen, political prudence (or partisanship) trumped political economy.

The chapter on Ireland, while effectively integrating Burke's views on commerce and mutual advantage into another context, also tries to do too much. Mixed in with Burke's views on "free trade" with Ireland is a discussion of Burke's debt to Adam Smith, a topic previously discussed in the opening chapter. Interestingly, this fails to engage with Smith's own very rare foray into policymaking when he was asked by Dundas to advise on the Irish situation. Smith's views were similar to Burke's on this question, and he advocated greater freedom for the Irish economy notwithstanding its potential capacity to compete with Britain on the basis of lower wages.<sup>12</sup> This intervention, which also tilted towards the advantages of a commercial and political union, is not the subject of Collins's writing here. Instead, he focuses somewhat tendentiously on the independence of Burke's thought from the *Wealth of Nations* by pointing to the long gestation of Burke's ideas. All of this is fair enough in its own right, but it sits somewhat oddly in this chapter.

Moving away from mercantilism, free trade, and the advantages of commercial exchange in the Atlantic world, Collins follows Burke to India. In doing so he draws out the connections between the Burke of the *Account of the European Settlements* and the Burke who led the impeachment of Warren Hastings. The common thread is the need to rule conquered populations with humility. This was, in Burke's view, impossible to do through the monopolistic framework of the East India Company. Competitive markets and free commercial exchange with the local population were once again the keys to prosperity and opulence. Burke would develop these ideas further in what Collins calls his six mercantile principles in his celebrated speech on Fox's 1783 India bill. These six necessary standards encompassed buying low and selling high, driving strict bargains, overseeing the activities of servants, prudence

<sup>12</sup> Adam Smith to Henry Dundas, 1, 8 Nov. 1779, in *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*, Eds. Ernest Mossner and Ian Simpson Ross (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), 240–44.



in the making up of accounts, the prior calculation of profit or what we call risk assessment, and finally the maintenance of sufficient balances to meet any exigencies or demands from creditors. The East India Company, in Burke's view, failed these six tests. As Collins points out, Burke's defense of the merchant, or indeed the middleman in *Thoughts and Details*, depended upon them living up to the ethical standards he expected. Questions arise about how realistic his ideal merchant type was, therefore providing a neat way to tie up any contradiction between Burke's defense of the merchant with his cherished belief, most powerfully expressed in the *Reflections*, in the benefits of rule by the landed aristocracy. This tension was arguably present in his assessment of the relationship between the Company and hereditary Indian landed interests. They too had their rights, and the failure by the Company to protect and guarantee these property rights in Burke's view added to their indictable offenses. There are echoes of his views on the barriers to opportunity imposed by the penal laws on Irish Catholics, here a point developed by Collins to explain how natural right trumped a commitment to free markets in Burke's ideology. This compromise between the pursuit of profit and the need to maintain stable social relations would of course receive its greatest test in the aftermath of what Collins—perhaps identifying too much with his subject—terms “the most calamitous political event of his age” (401).

The analysis of the *Reflections* in the penultimate chapter draws attention to it as a key source for Burke's political economy, with Collins seeing it as Burke's second major statement on the subject alongside *Thoughts and Details*. Central to his analysis is a consideration of how Burke's “meditation on the role of commerce in the wider growth of civil order and decay” (411) can be accommodated alongside his continued advocacy for market principles and commercial exchange. This analysis focuses on property rights and on the role of the monied interest. Critically, these could not be separated. As early as his writings on the Irish penal laws in the 1760s, Burke had noted how a “law against property is a law against industry” to support his argument that the penal provisions against Irish Catholics owning property disincentivized improvement and investment. Such sentiments governed his understanding of the relationship between commerce and property through to the 1790s.



The tricky part was maintaining the correct balance in this relationship. This was where Burke's defense of the hereditary aristocracy came in—they alone could maintain the commonwealth, even if they on occasion needed infusions of new blood. The revolution in France and its overturning of the existing propertied order, notably in terms of church property, therefore horrified Burke and crystallized his thoughts on property and the rights and responsibilities of property owners.

Connected to his concerns about the revolutionaries' attacks on private property were Burke's concerns about the role of the monied interest. Here it is crucial to acknowledge, as Collins does, that Burke was not opposed to the monied interest or to investment per se. He did not, however, wish to see the merchants and financiers dominate politics—they should not be “impatient of the place which settled society prescribes to them” (431). The role of French speculators in promoting revolutionary paper money—the *assignats*—what Collins, in a nice turn of phrase, terms their “consecration of paper money as the new saving grace of their political economy” (438) was of especial concern to Burke both because of his suspicions of paper money which can be traced back to the *Account of European Settlements* and to his horror at the confiscation of the church property to provide the security for the new currency. Burke's attack on the *assignats* and on the mismanagement of French public finance in the age of the revolution has not received much attention, and the innovative reading of the *Reflections* here provides an important correction.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the argument Collins pursues in this chapter, that Burke's defense of the propertied and the need to manage the slow integration or percolation of new monied interests into their ranks can be seen as part of his more general gradualist approach to reform, is intriguing. It is perhaps especially so when we consider it alongside Burke's views on the gradual elimination of the trade in enslaved people. Burke's reasoning for gradual reform and then the abolition of slavery, while perhaps putting him on the wrong side of history, does certainly fit within his wider thought on property rights as well as on the best way to deal with thorny questions of reform even when applied to institutions he

<sup>13</sup> See also Rebecca Spang, *Stuff and Money in the Time of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2015).

detested, such as the penal legislation against Irish Catholics, or, indeed slavery.<sup>14</sup> One wonders, too, how Burke might have reacted to the way in which his gradual approach to the abolition of slavery was taken up, and its culmination in the creation of a new monied interest through the compensation paid by the British government in the 1830s to the slaveowners who lost their property.

In his final chapter, Collins continues his analysis of Burke's anti-revolutionary thought, focusing first on his conception of the right of a man not just to own property but to the fruits of his labor. This attack on the revolutionary principle of equality and the consequent defense of individual liberty was, however, in Collins's reading, more nuanced than it might appear at first glance. With the possession of wealth and status came social responsibility. This takes us back to where we began, with Burke as the improving gentleman farmer at Beaconsfield careful to provide for his tenants but opposed to organized poor relief. It also takes us back to the essential conundrum posed in this book: how can the proper harmony between the traditional propertied elite, with their long-established roots in the stewardship of local and national societies, and the rising monied and commercial interests be established and maintained while also allowing for the accumulation of national opulence? For Burke, one solution was to demonstrate how and why things had gone wrong in France. This was, as we know, a highly effective strategy, especially when Burke could show that even where his ideas intersected with the revolutionaries—such as in the primacy of the market and commercial exchange—their ideas had failed because they moved too quickly. As Collins puts it, “gradual revisions of France's economy were sacrificed at the altar of zealous utopianism” (478). The “creative destruction” of modern-day Tories would have been anathema to him, despite the veneration accorded to him by some of its leading advocates.

For Collins, the key to resolving this conundrum is, however, bound up in the relationship between the wheel of exchange and a moral code of manners. For commercial exchange to operate in a harmonious society, it needed a moral core. For Burke, this was not the case in post-rev-

---

<sup>14</sup> On Burke and slavery see the now-definitive account in Marshall, *Burke and the British Empire*. See also the debate between Gregory Collins and Daniel O'Neill in the pages of the journal *Slavery and Abolition*.

olutionary France, and this, according to Collins, has implications for contemporary theorists who seek to locate the advent of modernity in the commercial dynamism that supposedly erupted in the aftermath of the enlightenment. This may be true, but if so, what is the evidence for a moral core in the pre-revolutionary marketplace? We are back to the heritable duties, responsibilities, and ethics of the landed aristocracy—an interest group which Burke had viable, even natural, reasons to idealize and defend; but can we really extrapolate wider truths from their experiences and practices? A certain degree of mental reservation seems necessary. This is not to diminish the argument presented here too far, nor, indeed, its contemporary impact.

To conclude: Gregory Collins has engaged in a remarkable act of recovery by repositioning political economy at the center of Burke's thought. He has shown through sustained analysis of a vast corpus of material how certain threads—the importance of commercial exchange, the primacy of property rights, and the right to profit—run through Burke's thought, how he developed a sophisticated response to the changing political economy of empire as the empire changed around him, and how his critiques of the French Revolution need to be understood for their economic insight as well as for their defense of conservative ideals. Furthermore, he has demonstrated that apparent contradictions between Burke's liberal economics and his political conservatism can be resolved by paying attention to the moral basis of his political economy. Debates are liable to continue about the morality of his political economy, about the interests it upheld, and about how Burke shaped and was shaped by the revolutions in British political economy in theory and practice that characterized his times. This book will be indispensable to these debates.

**PATRICK WALSH**  
Trinity College Dublin



Emily Jones, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830–1914: An Intellectual History*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

*The Fifth:* Whence came our thought?

*The Sixth:* From four great minds that hated Whiggery.

*The Fifth:* Burke was a Whig.

W. B. Yeats, “The Seven Sages”

The readers of Edmund Burke have rarely responded to him lukewarmly; he has more frequently inspired either admiring devotion or sharp disapproval. In the early years of his “afterlife,” he was more likely to be known by his reputation, not then generally a high one, than for his writings. Once read, among his various admirers Burke has often been seen to be essentially *one of them*, in ways not easily seen to be consistent with readings by others. Burke may be seen as crypto-Catholic, or as a defender of Establishment; an Enlightenment figure, or the last of the Schoolmen; of proto-Victorian probity, or a pen for hire; an inspiration to modern socialists, or to the American Right—and to both *paleo-* and *neo-* exemplars. Some readers have even significantly changed their minds about Burke. Partly this has been a matter of *text*, of understanding it, misunderstanding it, or reading it anew. But, as Jones shows, Burke’s protean quality is also a matter of *context*; the times change around him and his readers, rather as Burke himself responded with quickened genius to the great events happening in his times; and the times still call him into new acts of witness. How this came to be so in the minds of various Victorian and Edwardian “conservatives”

(whether notionally Tory, Conservative, Liberal, or Unionist), from the first Reform Act to the First World War, is the task that Emily Jones has set herself in the present work. It is the story of an outsider becoming the tutelary spirit of the party of insiders, as they assimilated to themselves both insiders and outsiders alike, in meeting the political challenges of new times. The source of the authority of Burke as a guide through modern events may be seen to be his unparalleled insight into the nature of modernity itself.

Jones's purpose, in attending to Burke's reception history, is "to ascertain exactly when and how 'Burkean conservatism' was first shaped into a powerful intellectual and political force in Britain," and, in doing so, "to provide a much more precise idea of how political traditions are constructed, as well as how they adapt and evolve in changing circumstances and contexts—be they political, intellectual, cultural, or otherwise." (In this regard, it is difficult to think of any other figure who might fit this method so well as Burke.) Jones also wants to let go of "Burkean and its present day connotations" so as to "gain a compelling account of Burke's shifting reputation as well as the reimagining of C/conservatism in Britain"; that is, how and why did Burke come to be read as a conservative, and how did this reflect and inform the development of British conservatism and the Conservative party? In order to do this, Jones presents a fascinating picture of the shifting interrelationship of Burkean texts and British contexts, either historical (the constitutional crises of the first Reform Act, and, in the next century, of the People's Budget); political (the way that the Home Rule for Ireland movement brought Burke's writings into play); intellectual (the interest in Burkean thought from the point of view of Idealist and utilitarian philosophy); and educational (as secondary and tertiary level institutions expanded in the later nineteenth century to meet the growing demands of an increasingly affluent society). This perspective involves a broadly chronological progression, but within the whole conspectus there is overlap and interconnection.

At the beginning of the period in view, with the constitutional upheaval following the first Reform Act, Jones shows that Burke was not seen as very useful to any of the parties. As a defender of the Whig constitution of 1688, and one who brooked no consideration of its

change, he was out of tune with the increasingly influential view of the English constitution as essentially flexible and even fluid. In addition, Burke's Irishness and sympathy for Catholic relief also made him suspicious to Tories and Conservatives. In his *Vindication of the English Constitution* (1835), Disraeli could present the Tories as above factionalism and therefore better able to represent the whole people than the Whigs. (Although Disraeli venerated Burke, he actually mentions him little in this essay.) Among Whigs and Liberals, Burke was also suspect. He was considered, with the *Reflections*, to have split the Whigs; Macaulay, who thought Burke the greatest man since Milton, also thought that the French Revolution "made Burke a Tory." Burke was also seen to have had a mind and a pen for sale, and was blamed by the Whigs for having delayed the Reform Act.

Many of Burke's early (and later) admirers were Irish; John Wilson Croker, for example, an eminent Irish Tory and sympathetic to the plight of Catholics, was an important figure in establishing Burke (early in this period), along with Pitt, as "the immortal guides and glory of Conservatism." Croker was an associate of Peel, who often quoted Burke, but also acknowledged that a different quotation from him might prove the opposite point. Peel identified with Burke's horror of social upheaval, but did not seem directly inspired by him on Catholic emancipation. Peel recognized Burke's genius, even if he did not share his imagination. It was primarily as a man of letters, imaginative and philosophical, that Burke came to be drawn upon by all political groupings, including the Radicals, in this period.

Burke's Irishness was of course problematical but the perception of this aspect of him shifted. Jones shows that it was a key to the perception of—variously—his passion, his madness, his genius, and his wisdom. His liminality made him capable of almost integrating the English and wider British political world. James Prior linked his wisdom to the capacity for foresight or prophecy. The head and the heart, reason and imagination, were seen to be in unusual combination in Burke. Matthew Arnold considered that Burke brought a vision from ideas that distinguished him from both Whigs and Tories, and Burke's greatness was linked with his Irishness, blended with an "English basis." (There was some resistance to this view in Ireland, since it was thought that the

English claimed the best of Burke, his political wisdom, as their own.) Burke's passion was seen (by J. R. Green, John Morley, and Macaulay) as the central unifying element in his thought; as Morley put it: "Few men's opinions hang together so closely and compactly as his did. The fiery glow of his nature fused all his ideas into a tenacious and homogeneous mass." His apparent madness towards the end of his life was attributed to Irish traits, which had always prevented him from being fully assimilated into an English parliament. But he was not seen as entirely Irish, and later in the nineteenth century, in light of the Home Rule debates, he was seen as less the bespectacled Jesuit and very much a master of English prose.

Jones identifies 1860 to 1880 as the period of Burke's critical recovery, a time in which the work of Liberal writers was crucial. John Morley and Leslie Stephen revised and rebutted accounts from earlier in the century of Burke's inconsistency, compounded as it was with the picture of a debt-ridden adventurer. Other figures such as Leslie Stephen's brother, James Fitzjames Stephen, and E. J. Payne, Matthew Arnold, Edward Dowden, and W. E. H. Lecky also contributed to the developing reappraisal of Burke, and for all of them the most important thing about him was his contribution to political thought, in particular to that which was organic and developmental, even utilitarian, because essentially empirical. Leslie Stephen said that

a nation was a living organism, of infinitely complex structure, of intimate dependence upon the parts, and to be treated by politicians in obedience to a careful observation of the laws of its healthy development. To them [the French Revolutionaries], a nation was an aggregate of independent units, to be regulated by a set of a priori maxims.

(The utilitarian view did not include John Stuart Mill, who had little to say about Burke.) A holistic reading of Burke was increasingly advanced by these Liberal writers, and a picture of moral and political consistency was asserted, in the context of an increasing interest in eighteenth-century thought. Jones argues that rather than molding Burke into a liberal-utilitarian, these writers actually played a fundamental role in establishing Burke as both a Conservative and conser-

vative thinker, without knowing how things would develop after them, and after 1880. By then, a substantial body of historiography on Burke's thought and character had been produced. It was the Home Rule Bill of 1886 that would start Burke's decisive integration into a self-conscious Conservative or Tory tradition.

In the 1880s, the debates on Home Rule for Ireland saw Burkean thinking deployed on both sides, but it was the Liberal Unionists who were able to make use of Burke as a whole rather than selectively. Their identification with Burke, and their subsequent assimilation into the Conservative party, was a significant factor in the assimilation, too, of Burke himself. Matthew Arnold did much to present Burke in an accessible form, and Lecky and Godwin Smith also presented Burkean texts which condemned Irish misrule, and promoted the moral statesmanship of Burke, but did not see the future of Ireland in Home Rule. On the other hand, Gladstone (who also venerated Burke) was reading him too much in the limited context of his works on America and Ireland. The Liberal Unionists, in seeking to protect the Protestant minority, saw the issue (like the Tories) in constitutional terms, and so made more use of Burke on France. (Jones traces the complexities of all these cross-party currents with admirable clarity.) When, in 1886, the Liberals split, and the Unionists among them joined the Conservatives, they saw themselves as the Portland Whigs crossing the floor to support Pitt, and Burke was with them as they did so. Lecky also argued that in crossing the divide they were the ones being true (as Burke was) to Whig principles, and it was the Gladstonian Home Rulers who were the separatists. In contrast to their eighteenth-century prototypes, the Liberal Unionists brought a more diverse body of men into the other party, but they were united in believing that Home Rule in Ireland would be disastrous for social cohesion, individual liberties, and the unity of the empire. Burke had been freed from the Liberal context which had done so much to reappraise him.

The Reform Act of 1885–86 ended a process of democratization that had continued since 1832. Historicist, organic, Idealist, and utilitarian thought continued to influence the reception of Burke in this period, and Burke became synonymous with a philosophy of organic, historical conservatism. After 1900, and the growing influence of the Labour movement and socialism, Burke was deployed to oppose abstract, ahis-



torical thought in politics, and to defend constitutional balance and private property. Burke was also increasingly read in a literary context, Edward Dowden being an example. Dowden, the Professor of English Literature at Trinity College, Dublin, and a Liberal Unionist and Irish Protestant, saw Burke as essentially an abstract, metaphysical, and supremely religious thinker; he was seen as not against ideas *per se*, but against sophistry. Jones cites John Maynard Keynes as an interesting example of the broadening context in which Burke was being increasingly and, as it were *naturally*, considered as a great thinker. Keynes, as an undergraduate, wrote a Cambridge prize-winning essay on Burke, and rejected the historical in favor of the abstract significance of Burke, emphasizing the utilitarian strand. John MacCunn, a Liberal Idealist, in *The Political Philosophy of Burke* (1913) also pointed out Burke's "religious temperament"; MacCunn wrote that, for Burke, "the attempted secularization of history and politics was nothing less than a conspiracy to denationalize the nation and to dehumanize the race." Tory politicians such as F. E. Smith (in *Toryism*, 1903) and Lord Hugh Cecil (in *Conservatism*, 1912) addressed Burke's thought in a new, theoretical way for Conservatives, and by 1914, Jones confirms, Burke the theorist was generally established in learned society, revolutionary feeling at the turn of the century also bringing his thought to the fore. As Geoffrey Butler, in *The Tory Tradition: Bolingbroke, Burke, Disraeli, Salisbury* (1914), put it:

The Tory must draw upon the wisdom of our Fathers, he must select and he must reinterpret their sacred principles in a language understood of the people. There must be a Renaissance, a Reformation, a Reception of unexampled brilliance and of unparalleled effect ... "Back to Burke," "An open Burke." He must be the Bible of a pure and reformed Conservatism, which alone can oust the misguided if generous proposals of the modern Radicals, and meet and solve the problems which have given those proposals motive force.

Jones's final chapter explores Burke in the social context of education. The Education Acts of 1870, 1891, and 1902 added to the existing provision of grammar, public, and private schools in which the children (mainly boys) of the middle- and upper-classes might have come across

Burke since the mid-century. English Literature was developing in this period as a distinct subject, and Burke was included for study both for his incomparable style, the intellectual rigor required in reading him, and his moral seriousness. (There was a sense in education then, long since departed of course, that the study of modern as well as classical literature had some humane utility in the moral, as well as the intellectual, development of young persons.) In addition, modern History was becoming increasingly established as a subject, and there was a growing interest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not least because the centenary of the French Revolution provoked interest in its continuing influence. There were further university foundations, in the civic (or “redbrick”) universities which came into being, granted a royal charter, in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, on the basis of university colleges and medical schools which had developed in the manufacturing cities, especially Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, and Birmingham. English Literature and History, along with Economics and Political Philosophy, were subjects in which Burke was seen to have relevance to the growing educated population from lower-middle and working-class social roots. Autodidacticism, in the context of university extension lectures and correspondence courses, in which women students were prominent, was also a way in which Burke was increasingly read; he also had particular relevance as a text for the Indian Civil Service exams. As Jones shows, the educational world in England, between 1880 and 1914, enabled considerably the dissemination of the works of Edmund Burke.

Emily Jones has given us a book that is deeply informed, highly persuasive, and entirely readable, being free of tortuous and ideological language. It will appeal both to the expert and general reader alike. Although “reception studies” is very much in academic vogue, the survey here of Burke’s Victorian readership is thoroughly evidenced, and also helps us to see the British Conservative party as more than the sum of its rather diverse parts, and more philosophical—if evidence were needed—than Mill’s stubbornly persistent epithet of “stupid” might suggest. It is clear that, in Britain at least, the reputation of Burke does not rest entirely on the important work of American scholars after the Second World War, such as Russell Kirk and Peter Stanlis (reviewed in Jones’s introduction.) Whether Jones has successfully established that it

is possible to argue from the particulars of Burke's reception history to the general of how political traditions form is less clear; are there any other relevant examples than that of Burke and Conservatism? But it is no criticism to say that we wish to look at the picture beyond the frame, to the years before 1830, and after 1914; the author's method, and its fine execution, has done much to interest us in the earliest, as well as the more recent, questions of Burke's reception history.

Jones points out that Yeats was one of those who revised his view of Burke, whom Yeats had excluded from his canon of Celtic Irish writers (along with Swift and Goldsmith) as being too Anglicized. His poem, "The Seven Sages," reflects the shift in Yeats's mind, and famously points to a visionary quality, that "looked out of the eye of a saint/Or out of drunkard's eye," in contrast to the "levelling, rancorous, rational sort of mind." Like Yeats at the turn of the twentieth century, Burke had looked into the heart of modernity and saw something bestial. Jones establishes very well that Burke was a Whig who, with the help of largely Whig and Liberal nineteenth-century readers, came to occupy, for philosophical and contingent reasons, a central place in the heart and mind of one of the most enduring and successful political parties of the twentieth century. In this way, and in no small part, has Burkean thought been a contributing factor in protecting Britain from the worst depredations of late modernity, the predatory "antagonist world." As the later Tory, Wordsworth, another who changed his mind about Burke, put it, Burke's genius was prophetically to look into the monstrous turn that the world was taking:

While he forewarns, denounces, launches forth,  
Against all systems built on abstract rights,  
Keen ridicule; the majesty proclaims  
Of Institutes and Laws, hallowed by time;  
Declares the vital power of social ties  
Endeared by Custom; and with high disdain,  
Exploding upstart Theory, insists  
Upon the allegiance to which men are born....

All this, to quote a third conservative poet, T. S. Eliot, constituted the emerging Conservatism that was "a fusion of Whig and Tory ele-

ments, due largely to the effect of the French Revolution on the mind of Burke." That such a vision continues to provide insight into the nature of our own, present discontents is evidence of his immense, continuing value to us.

ANDRÉ GUSHURST-MOORE  
Worth School, England



Greg Weiner, *Old Whigs: Burke, Lincoln, and the Politics of Prudence*. Encounter Books, 2019.

An aphorism attributed to John Milton states “Prudence is the virtue by which we discern what is proper to do under various circumstances in time and place.” The saying serves as a succinct introduction to Greg Weiner’s *Old Whigs: Burke, Lincoln, and the Politics of Prudence*. *Old Whigs* is a study in the virtue of prudence as exercised by two very different personalities over the course of very different careers: Edmund Burke, a Dubliner, a lawyer’s son, prolific essayist, parliamentarian, and champion of aristocratic order; and Abraham Lincoln, a child of the American frontier, largely self-educated, rail splitter, congressman, and emancipator of slaves. Burke and Lincoln represent different times and places, but history has also left the impression that they also represent two different orders of thinking: Burke the sworn enemy of abstraction, metaphysical speculation, and universal declarations; Lincoln the champion of common rights, comprehensive morality, and universal principles. In *Old Whigs*, Weiner demonstrates that despite their dissimilarities, Burke and Lincoln shared much in common, especially their respective abilities to apply the virtue of prudence to extraordinarily divisive political circumstances.

Weiner takes Aristotle’s definition of prudence as his starting point. Prudence is “practical wisdom,” or the ability to choose the right means to attain worthy ends. It requires the use of reason, but also humility to understand the limits of reason. More than simply hesitation, moder-

ation, or restraint, prudence is a disposition of character that discerns when and how to apply right moral actions to particular conditions. As Weiner puts it, prudence is a careful dance “between principle and circumstance” that results in judgment capable of “calibrating action to proper goals.” Contemporary politics, he urges, would do well to learn from Burke and Lincoln if simply for the fact that today, “all positions are stated in extremes, even when they are crafted in moderation.”

Burke demonstrated proper calibration of principles to action throughout his career. As a member of Parliament, he defended the American colonial cause by appealing to the colonists’ rightful claims as Englishmen. The colonists’ case made sense according to principles of both reason and tradition. They did not appeal to abstract speculative rights, such as those Burke later criticized during the French Revolution, but rather to rights as inherited through order and custom. Parliament had the prerogative to tax the colonies, but prudence dictated Great Britain would be better served if they did not provoke the colonists.

Burke similarly approached the question of natural rights. Natural rights were crucial to Burke’s American argument as they later were to his appeals on behalf of India and Ireland. Without prudence, natural rights risked being transformed into a weapon of metaphysical politics, such as with the Jacobins, who “sought to bend human beings into theories rather than accommodate theories to human nature.” Political rights are not products of theories, they are privileges inherited and prescribed through political arrangements. Political arrangements change with circumstances. “Natural rights,” by contrast, “were moral rights that all just political institutions were compelled to protect.” For Burke, prudence discerned the proper negotiation between natural rights and political arrangements. Political principles are always mediated through historical circumstances, and prudence allows for the moral application relevant to the particular situation.

Burke’s 1770 *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, a polemic addressing charges of nepotism against King George III and his political appointments, distinguished speculative philosophy from political application. The former marks “the proper ends of government,” while the latter discovers “the proper means towards those ends, and to employ them with effect.” Weiner argues that here Burke asserts “the

classical definition of prudence.” Some twenty years later, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke continued the theme. Imprudence ruled in Jacobin France because the Jacobins carelessly divorced principle from circumstances, insisting that their “truth” prevail. “They build their politics not on convenience but truth,” argued Burke, “With them there is no compromise ... It is with them a war or a revolution, or it is nothing.”

Regarding Abraham Lincoln, most southerners, and many northerners, held sentiments similar to Burke’s castigation of Jacobins. When he assumed the presidency, he was maligned across the country as a politician determined to press conflict in the name of abstract human rights rather than pursuing moderation under the reality of standing constitutional commitments. Weiner demonstrates that though Lincoln allowed rational abstractions, such as universal rights, a reality never permitted by Burke, he nevertheless was equally committed to prudently applying moral truths to particular circumstances. For most of his political career Lincoln acknowledged slavery to be wrong, but still permissible under the Constitution. Prudence demanded gradual emancipation or the country risked disunion. Speaking in Chicago in 1859, he recognized that ultimate principles had to be leavened with careful application: “The profound central truth [is] that slavery is wrong and ought to be dealt with as wrong, though we are always to remember the fact of its actual existence among us and faithfully observe all the constitutional guarantees.” Slavery may have to exist “for a length of time,” said Lincoln, but “the spread and strengthening and perpetuation of it is an entirely different proposition.”

Weiner argues Lincoln was wary of ambition and passion in political life precisely because it could lead to immoderate extremes. In his 1838 Lyceum Address, Lincoln warned that “men of ambition and talents” with a “ruling passion” for glory belong to “the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle.” Unchecked ambition and passion have the potential to create capable political predators who will ignore the law to gain advantage. Passion must never lead to violation “in the least particular the laws of the country.” Passion, said Lincoln, must be balanced with reason: “Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the material for our future support and defense.”

Though his appeal to calculating reason may seem to conflict with Burke's suspicions of reason divorced from sentiment and prejudice, Weiner makes the case such an appeal is of a piece with how both men exercised prudence. Burke, he argues, shared Lincoln's cautions about the passions as well as his dedication to the rule of law as a bond of civil society. The Lyceum Address, for instance, "was a model of Lincolnian prudence," because Lincoln "sought to calibrate actions to circumstances, such that calm times, like those he wrongly foresaw continuing, elicited calm leadership." Calm times, argues Weiner, ended with the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and the prospect of slavery's expansion into the territories. Lincoln understood the moment as critical for the nation's future and he calibrated his rhetoric and his actions accordingly.

Lincoln's conception of liberty was undoubtedly broader than Burke's. Weiner notes, however, that Lincoln lived under a written constitution with explicit references to rights, while Burke's context was an unwritten tradition. Lincoln was also far more comfortable than Burke associating liberty and rights with universal principles, perhaps nowhere more famously than in the Gettysburg Address, where a new nation is conceptualized as free and "dedicated to the proposition" of universal equality. The language resounds with possibility and idealism, and does not, on the surface at least, convey prudence. But Weiner argues that, taken as whole, Lincoln's rhetorical use of universal principles was always rooted in particular practices and circumstances. For example, his 1860 Cooper Union Address, the speech that likely secured the Republican nomination for the presidency, is "a masterwork of historical analysis and evidentiary synthesis." Here, Lincoln demonstrated that most of the framers of the Constitution opposed the expansion of slavery, and in continuity with Burkean prudence he appealed to "a presumption in favor of the founding fathers and a burden of proof for those who would overturn their work."

Arguably both Burke and Lincoln were "old" Whigs of a type in their respective contexts in that they both maintained their Whig principles, especially the principle of prudence, when faced with political crises that transformed the Whig tradition. Weiner, however, limits the scope of his analysis of their Whig identity to their suspicions of executive power and respect for legislative prerogatives. More historical



development of what exactly distinguishes old Whigs from new Whigs in the British and American environments would have benefitted the work, especially given Burke's later defenses of monarchy and Lincoln's unprecedented expansion of executive powers.

*Old Whigs* is peppered with responses to the work of Richard Weaver, George W. Carey, and Wilmoore Kendall, all critical of Lincoln's universalist impulses and alleged conflation of the Declaration of Independence with the Constitution. Weiner is not subtle in his conviction that these scholars were wrong about Lincoln, and some might read this as a Burkean defense of Lincoln against his detractors. If so, Weiner is by and large successful, and he convincingly demonstrates that prudence is the key concept Weaver, Carey, and Kendall failed to ascribe to Lincoln's thought and actions.


*Old Whigs* is not a systematic treatment of Edmund Burke or Abraham Lincoln, nor is it an attempt to show a causal connection between ideas or practices Burke passed to Lincoln. It is rather a succinct and persuasive study of an idea. Weiner has produced a work of scholarship that avoids the specialized byzantine language of professor-speak. His prose, as well as his argument, are accessible to the general public—an art for which more scholars should strive. Moreover, his narrative is simply helpful in a time when political prudence seems evacuated from public discourse and daily newsfeeds are rife with so-called crises.

Prudence is a virtue, and *Old Whigs* provides a commendable overview of how that virtue was practiced by two revered statesmen. Burke's prudence found expression relative to the long practices of tradition, sentiment, and good order as they guardedly informed his country's circumstances. Lincoln likewise exercised prudence in his interpretation of the unique and enduring meaning of 1776 for the changing circumstances of the United States. May we prudently heed their examples.

WILLIAM JASON WALLACE  
Samford University

STUDIES IN

*Burke*  
AND HIS TIME



[KIRKCENTER.ORG/BURKE](http://KIRKCENTER.ORG/BURKE)