AN INTRODUCTION TO MODERN PHILOSOPHY

IN SEVEN PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS

BY

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4. PRINCIPLES OF CONSERVATISM —FROM EDMUND BURKE

From Rousseau to Burke. Rousseau published *The Social Contract* in 1762. The American Revolution began in 1775. It was scarcely over

when the French Revolution began, in 1789. This political restlessness in the colonies and in Europe was accompanied by a sharp demand for parliamentary reform in England. The revolutionary Society for Constitutional Information was organized in 1780. Prime Minister Pitt tried three times, each time in vain, to persuade the House of Commons to consider the case for parliamentary reform. During these years, Tom Paine was gaining his reputation as spokesman for liberal and revolutionary movements in America and Europe. Jeremy Bentham published in 1789 his epoch-making treatise on liberal social reform, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, in which he argued that customs, laws, institutions, and constitutions should be evaluated in terms of one standard, namely, the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

Such was the climate of opinion in which Edmund Burke wrote his exposition and defense of political conservatism. On all hands he saw, or thought he saw, signs that the old regimes of monarchies and aristocracies were weakening before popular demand for democratic politics. Wherever he looked, he detected "factions now busy amongst us who endeavor to propagate an opinion that the people, in forming their commonwealth, have by no means parted with their power over it." He set himself to stem this tide. He might as well have bade the sun stand still. These democratizing tendencies swept on and left the memory of his plea stranded amid the welter of wars, revolutions, reforms, and changes. If this were all, there would be little need to include Burke among spokesmen of political philosophy. But there is more to Burke than a neglected warning against democratic politics. In his words may be found a careful account of the principles of political conservatism. It is an expression of one of man's perennial needs.

Biographical Note. Edmund Burke was born in Ireland in 1729 and died in England in 1797 at the age of sixty-eight. He received his academic education at Trinity College, Dublin. He spent some time acquiring the rudiments of a legal training in London in the Middle Temple. He entered Parliament in the 1760's and rose there to a position of great prestige. In 1775 he delivered his famous speech, "Conciliation with America." In 1785 he opened his attack on Warren Hastings' India administration with his equally famous speech "The Nabob of Arcot's Debts." In 1790 he published his *Reflections on the French Revolution.* The ideas advanced in this tract were subsequently elaborated in his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs,* his *Letter to a Noble Lord* and his *Letter on a Regicide Peace.* The citations in this chapter are, for the most part, from the *Reflections* and the *Appeal* and the *Letters.*

The Argument of the Citations. Burke begins by noting that there are certain "factions now busy amongst us who endeavor to propagate an opinion that 'the people' in forming their commonwealth have by no means parted with their power over it." In other words, the notion of popular sovereignty is being argued for. The substance of such claims is noted. A general criticism is passed upon them. The concept of "the people," upon which the whole argument turns, is then proposed for analysis. What does one mean by *the people?* If by *the people* one means a numerical majority, then certain criticisms may be advanced. At this point the argument is suspended while Burke makes two excursions into recent French history to document his critique of the concept of the people as sovereign. The first aside is addressed to a Frenchman, pointing out the extent to which, in Burke's mind, alternative steps had been possible in France at the time the revolution was launched. Various excesses are noted. "Were all these dreadful things necessary?" he demands. The second aside recounts the fate of the French king and queen and laments the absence of wisdom and decency exhibited by those who put them to death. "Alas, the age of chivalry is gone." From these historical asides, he returns to his criticism of the "barbarous philosophy" which has led to this havoc.

At this point Burke's arguments become positive. He sketches the foundation in which government is laid. From this, there results a more austere conception of the state than is held by those who launch and defend revolution in the name of the "rights of man." Does this commit Burke to a repudiation of the notion of the rights of man? "I am far from denying the real rights of man," he protests. The notion of "real" rights, in contrast to spurious rights, is outlined. This involves a clarification of "real" liberties in contrast to spurious liberties. The "real" rights and liberties, which Burke is prepared to ascribe to "the people" presuppose government by a natural aristocracy. This notion is outlined. It is then contrasted with a sham aristocracy of mere lords and dukes.

The fundamental claim is disclosed at this point: Burke will entertain the notion of rights only in terms of the notion of duties. We have rights because we have duties, and, within limits, we do not choose our duties. They await us in the society into which we are born and in which we grow up. This idea may involve difficult problems and nice distinctions. In all such cases, it is wiser to keep an eye on duties than on rights. The burden of proof rests with those who violate obligations in the name of their rights. This, however, is not to be taken as a categorical denial of all change and reform, merely an insistence that wisdom ordinarily lies

with custom and tradition, and that an individual should address himself to the problem of extracting the wisdom which these contain. It is folly to "trade each on his own private stock of reason." This conservative political philosophy rests upon a recognition of the fact that wise politics has, in the last analysis, a religious basis. "On religion all our laws and institutions stand." "The awful author of our being has disposed and marshalled us by a divine tactic." The argument concludes with several eloquent paragraphs setting forth the great wisdom which attends the policy, arising out of these views, of regarding "liberties as an entailed inheritance" to be held as a sacred trust and passed on intact to one's posterity.

Factions now busy amongst us, in order to divest men of all love for their country, and remove from their minds all duty with regard to the state, endeavor to propagate an opinion that the "people," in forming their commonwealth, have by no means parted with their power over it. Discuss any of their schemes, and their answer is, It is the act of the people and that is sufficient.

These theorists hold, that sovereignty, whether exercised by one or many, did not only originate from the people, but that in the people the same sovereignty constantly and unalienably resides; that the people may lawfully depose kings; not only for misconduct, but without any misconduct at all; that they may set up any new fashion of government for themselves, or continue without any government at their pleasure; that the people are essentially their own rule, and their will the measure of their conduct; that the tenure of rulers is not a proper subject of contracts, because rulers have duties, but no rights; and that if a contract *de facto* is made with them in one age, allowing that it binds at all, it binds only those who are immediately concerned in it, but does not pass to posterity.

They hold that to a majority of the people belongs the right of altering the whole frame of their society, if such should be their pleasure. They may change it, say they, from a monarchy to a republic today and tomorrow back again from a republic to a monarchy, and so backward and forward as often as they like. They are masters of the commonwealth, because in substance they are themselves the commonwealth.

The ceremony of cashiering kings, of which these gentlemen talk so much, can rarely, if ever, be performed without force. It then becomes a case of war, and not of constitution. Laws are commanded to hold their tongues amongst arms, and tribunals fall to the ground with the peace they are no longer able to uphold.

Whilst they are possessed by these notions, it is vain to talk to them of the practice of their ancestors, the fundamental laws of their country, the fixed form of a constitution, whose merits are confirmed by the solid test of long

experience, and an increasing public strength and national prosperity. They despise experience as the wisdom of unlettered men, and as for the rest, they have wrought underground a mine that will blow up, at one grand explosion, all examples of antiquity, precedents, charters, and acts of parliament.

Burke now has the political heresy stated. It is the claim that the people are sovereign and need acknowledge no masters save of their own choosing. Those who hold this view are, Burke feels, beyond the reach of argument. Nevertheless, over against the time when experience shall have disclosed to them the folly of their ways, he proposes to analyze and evaluate their claim:

These doctrines concerning "the people" tend, in my opinion, to the utter subversion, not only of all government, in all modes, but all stable securities to rational freedom, and all the rules and principles of morality itself.

On such principles every individual would have a right to originate what afterwards is to become the act of the majority. Whatever he may lawfully originate, he may lawfully endeavor to accomplish. He has a right therefore to break the ties and engagements which bind him to the country in which he lives, and he has a right to make as many converts to his opinions, and to obtain as many associates in his designs, as he can procure: for how can you know the dispositions of the majority to destroy their government, but by tampering with some part of the body? You must begin by a secret conspiracy, that you may end with a national confederation.

The mere pleasure of the beginning must be the sole guide, since the mere pleasure of others must be the sole ultimate sanction, as well as the sole actuating principle in every part of the progress. Thus, arbitrary will (the last corruption of ruling power) step by step poisons the heart of every citizen.

No sense of duty can prevent any man from being a leader or a follower in such enterprises. Nothing restrains the temper; nothing guards the tempted. Nor is the new state, fabricated by such arts, safer than the old. What can prevent the mere will of any person, who hopes to unite the wills of others to his own, from an attempt wholly to overturn it? It wants nothing but a disposition to trouble the *established* order, to give a title to the enterprise.

By such doctrines, all love to our country, all pious veneration and attachment to its laws and customs, are obliterated from our minds; and nothing can result from this opinion, when grown into a principle, and animated by discontent, ambition, or enthusiasm, but a series of conspiracies and seditions, sometimes ruinous to their authors, always noxious to the state.

There is, it appears, much to be said against this popular doctrine. A few obvious things have already been noted. But nothing fundamental

has been offered as yet. Burke moves, accordingly, to the essential point. Everything turns upon the meaning of this phrase, *the people*. So he proceeds:

Believing it a question at least arduous in theory, and in practice very critical, it would become us to ascertain what our incantations are about to call up from darkness and the sleep of ages when the supreme authority of "the people" is in question. Before we attempt to extend or to confine, we ought to fix in our minds, with some degree of distinctness, an idea of what it is we mean, when we say *the people*.

We are so little affected by things which are habitual, that we consider this idea of the decision of a majority as if it were a law of our original nature, but such constructive whole, residing in a part only, is one of the most violent fictions that ever has been or can be made on the principles of artificial incorporation. Out of civil society nature knows nothing of it; nor are men, even when arranged according to civil order, otherwise than by very long training, brought at all to submit to it.

In a state of rude nature there is no such thing as "a people." A number of men in themselves have no collective capacity. The idea of a people is the idea of a corporation. It is wholly artificial, and made like all other legal fictions, by common agreement. What the particular nature of that agreement was, is collected from the form into which the particular society has been cast. Any other is not their covenant.

When men, therefore, break up the agreement which gives its corporate form and capacity to a state, they are no longer a people; they have no longer a corporate existence; they have no longer a legal, coactive force to bind within, nor a claim to be recognized abroad. They are a number of vague, loose individuals and nothing more. With them all is to begin again. Alas! They little know how many a weary step is to be taken before they can form themselves into a mass, which has a true, political personality.

The phrase *the people* cannot be identified with a mere voting majority. Such an idea, namely that a voting majority shall be "the people" is a product of late political experience. Men must have learned much from long trial and error before they can act on that notion. It expresses an agreement or consensus that political experience alone makes possible. If this meaning of the phrase is a product of group experience of state organization, then it cannot be argued to be prior to and more fundamental than state organization. To overlook or to deny this fact is to court much trouble. Thus:

I see as little of policy or utility, as there is of right, in laying down a principle that a majority of men, told by the head are to be considered as "the

people," and that as such their will is to be law. What policy can there be in arrangements made in defiance of every political principle? To enable men to act *with* the weight and character of a people, and to answer the ends for which they are incorporated into that capacity, we must suppose them to be in that state of habitual social discipline, in which the wiser, the more expert, and the more opulent conduct, and by conducting enlighten and protect the weaker, the less knowing, and the less provided with the goods of fortune. When the multitude are not under this discipline, they can scarcely be said to be in civil society.

It is not necessary to teach men to thirst after power. But it is very expedient that by moral instruction, they should be taught, and by their civil constitutions they should be compelled, to put many restrictions upon the immoderate exercise of it, and the inordinate desire for it. The best method of obtaining these great points forms the important, but at the same time the difficult problem to the true statesman. No legislator, at any period of the world, has willingly placed the seat of active power in the hands of the multitude: because there it admits of no control, no regulation, no steady direction whatsoever.

The people are not to be taught to think lightly of their engagements to their governors; else they teach their governors to think lightly of their engagements toward them. In that kind of game in the end the people are sure to be the losers. To flatter them into a contempt of faith, truth, and justice, is to ruin them; for in those virtues consists their whole safety. To flatter any man, or any part of mankind, in any description, by asserting that in engagements he or they are free whilst any other human creature is bound, is ultimately to vest the rule of morality in the pleasure of those who ought to be rigidly submitted to it, to subject the sovereign reason of the world to the caprices of weak and giddy men.

The democratic commonwealth is the foodful nurse of ambition. Under other forms of government it meets with many restraints. Whenever, in states which have a democratic basis, the legislators have endeavored to put restraints upon ambition, their methods were as violent, as in the end they were ineffectual: as violent indeed as any the most jealous despotism could invent. The caution could not very long save the state which it was meant to guard, from the attempts of ambition, one of the natural, inbred, incurable distempers of a powerful democracy.

I am well aware that men love to hear of their power, but have an extreme disrelish to be told of their duty. This is a matter of course; because every duty is a limitation of some power. Indeed arbitrary power is so much to the depraved taste of the vulgar of every description, that almost all dissensions, which lacerate the commonwealth, are not concerning the manner in which it is to be exercised, but concerning the hands in which it is to be placed.

The people are, to a far less extent than are princes and other persons of

exalted station, under responsibility to one of the greatest controlling powers on earth, the sense of fame and estimation. The share of infamy that is likely to fall to the lot of each individual in public acts is small indeed; the operation of opinion being in the inverse ratio to the number of those who abuse power. Their own approbation of their own acts has to them the appearance of a public judgment in their favor. A perfect democracy is therefore the most shameless thing in the world. As it is the most shameless, it is also the most fearless.

So far his indictment has been in terms of rather large general issues. He moves to consider more specific outrages, particularly the case of the king and queen. Burke's prose here should be read aloud.

Let those who have the trust of political or of natural authority ever keep watch against the desperate enterprises of innovation; let even their benevolence be fortified and armed. They have before their eyes the example of a monarch, insulted, degraded, confined, deposed; his family dispersed, scattered, imprisoned; his wife insulted to his face like the vilest of the sex, by the vilest of all populace; himself three times dragged by these wretches in an infamous triumph; his children torn from him, in violation of the first right of nature, and given into the tuition of the most desperate and impious of the leaders of desperate and impious clubs; his revenues dilapidated and plundered; his magistrates murdered; his clergy proscribed, persecuted, famished; his nobility degraded in their rank, undone in their fortunes, fugitives in their persons; his armies corrupted and ruined; his whole people impoverished, disunited, dissolved; whilst through the bars of his prison, and amidst the bayonets of his keepers, he hears the tumult of two conflicting factions.

All this accumulation of calamity, the greatest that ever fell upon one man, has fallen upon his head, because he had left his virtues unguarded by caution; because he was not taught that, where power is concerned, he who will confer benefits must take security against ingratitude.

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 a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, glittering like the morning star, full of life and splendor and joy. Oh! what a revolution, and what a heart must I have, to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall. Little did I dream, when she added titles of veneration to those of enthusiastic, distant, respectful love, that she should ever be obliged to carry the sharp antidote against disgrace concealed in that bosom. Little did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her in a nation of gallant gentlemen, a nation of men of honor and of cavaliers. I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult!

But alas, the age of chivalry is gone. The age of sophisters, economists,

and calculators has succeeded, and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever. Never, never more shall we behold 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 an exalted freedom. The unbought grace of life, the cheap defense of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise, is gone. That sensibility of principle, that chastity of honor, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage while it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, under which vice lost half its evil by losing all its grossness, is gone.

Now all is changed. All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, which by a bland assimilation incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of "light and reason." All the decent drapery of life is to be torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature and raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.

Back of all this chaos and cruelty and injustice and folly lies the doctrine of popular sovereignty. That was what Burke set out to criticize. The asides have been intended merely to document his claims:

The pretended "rights of man," which have made this havoc, cannot be the rights of the people. For to be a people, and to have these rights, are things incompatible. The one supposes the presence, the other the absence of a state of civil society. The very foundation of the French commonwealth is false and self-destructive; nor can its principles be adopted in any country, without the certainty of bringing it to the very same condition in which France is found.

On the scheme of this barbarous philosophy, which is the offspring of cold hearts and muddy understandings, which is void of solid wisdom, which is destitute of all taste and elegance, laws are to be supported only by their own terrors and by the concern which each individual may find in them from his own private speculations or can spare to them from his own private interests. In the groves of their academy, at the end of every vista, you see nothing but the gallows.

On the principles of this philosophy institutions can never be embodied in persons. That sort of "reason" which banishes the affections is incapable of filling their place. These public affections, combined with manners, are required, sometimes as supplements, sometimes as correctives, always as aids, to law.

At this point he returns to his original argument. "The people" cannot be the foundation of government, it seems, or he has misread French history of late. What then? If the foundation of coercive government is not to be found in the doctrine of the "rights of man," where then? He settles down to this more positive question:

The dislike I feel to revolutions, the signals for which have so often been given from pulpits; the spirit of change that is gone abroad; the total contempt which prevails of all ancient institutions, when set in opposition to a present sense of convenience, or to the bent of a present inclination—all these considerations make it not unadvisable, in my opinion, to call back our attention to the true principle of laws.

The foundation of government is laid, not in imaginary rights of men, but in political convenience, and in human nature; either as that nature is universal, or as it is modified by local habits and social aptitudes. The foundation of government is laid in a provision for our wants, and in a conformity to our duties; it is to purvey for the one; it is to enforce the other.

Among men's wants is to be reckoned the want of a sufficient restraint upon their passions. Society requires not only that the passions of individuals should be subjected, but 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; not subject to that will and those passions which it is its office to bridle and subdue.

In this sense the restraints on men, as well as their liberties, are to be reckoned among their rights. But as the liberties and the restrictions vary with times and circumstances, and admit of infinite modifications, they cannot be settled upon any abstract rule; and nothing is so foolish as to discuss them upon that principle.

The state ought to be considered as something better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, *calico or tobacco*, to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked on with reverence, because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature.

The state is a partnership in all science, a partnership in all art, a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be attained in many generations, it 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. People will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors.

Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval

contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and the invisible world according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures each to their appointed places.

The "rights of man" are not the foundation of the state. They are not "prior" to the state. Indeed, they are made possible by the state; and the foundation of anything is not to be sought in that which the things in question makes possible. What then does he think about the "real" rights of men which *proceed* from political organization?

I am far from denying the real rights of men. In denying their false claims of right, I do not mean to injure those which are real, and are such as their pretended rights would totally destroy. If civil society be made for the advantage of man, all the advantages for which it is made become his right.

Men have right to the fruits of their industry, and to the means of making their industry fruitful. They have a right to the acquisitions of their parents; to the nourishment and improvement of their offspring; to instruction in life, and to consolation in death. Whatever each man can separately do, without trespassing upon others, he has a right to do for himself, and he has a right to a fair portion of all which society, with all its combination of skill and force, can do in his favor.

In this partnership all men have equal rights, but not to equal things. He that has but five shilling in the partnership, has as good a right to it as he that has five hundred pounds has to his larger proportion. But he has not a right to an equal dividend in the product in the joint stock, and as to the share of power, authority, and direction which each individual ought to have in the management of the state, that I must deny to be amongst the direct original rights of man in civil society; for I have in my contemplation the civil social man, and no other. It is a thing to be settled by convention.

Circumstances (which with some gentlemen pass for nothing) give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing color and discriminating effect. The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind.

I must be tolerably sure, before I venture publicly to congratulate men upon a blessing, that they have really received one. Flattery corrupts both the receiver and the giver, and adulation is not of more service to people than to kings. I should therefore suspend my congratulations on the acquisition of liberties, until I was informed how it had been combined with government; with public force; with the discipline and obedience of armies; with the collection of an effective and well-distributed revenue; with morality and religion; with solidity and property; with peace and order; with civil and social manners.

All these (in their way) are good things too, and, without them, liberty

is not a benefit whilst it lasts, and it is not likely to continue long. The effect of liberty to individuals is that they may do what they please; we ought to see what it will please them to do, before we risk congratulations, which may be soon turned into complaints. Prudence would dictate this in the case of separate, insulated, private men; but liberty, when men act in bodies, is power. Considerate people, before they declare themselves, will observe the use which is made of power, and particularly of so trying a thing as new power in new persons, of whose principles, tempers, and dispositions, they have little or no experience, and in situations where those who appear the most stirring in the scene may possibly not be the real movers.

I flatter myself that I love a manly, moral, regulated liberty as well as any gentleman, be he who he will; and perhaps I have given as good proofs of my attachments to that cause, in the whole course of my public conduct. I think I envy liberty as little as they do, to any other nation. But I cannot stand forward, and give praise or blame to anything which relates to human actions, and human concerns, on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of abstraction.

Is it because *liberty in the abstract may* be classed amongst the blessings of mankind, that I am seriously to felicitate a madman, who has escaped from the protecting restraint and wholesome darkness of his cell, on his restoration to the enjoyment of life and liberty? Am I to congratulate a highwayman and murderer, who has broke prison, upon the recovery of his natural rights?

If true rights and liberties presuppose government, and therefore, coercion, the question, as in Rousseau, presents itself: What is the best form of government? Again as in Rousseau, the answer is an aristocracy. But where Rousseau had suggested an elective, Burke suggests a *natural* aristocracy. Thus:

Believe me, those who attempt to level never equalize. In all societies, consisting of various descriptions of citizens, some description must be uppermost. The levelers therefore only change and pervert the natural order of things; they load the edifice of society, by setting up in the air what the solidity of the structure requires to be on the ground. Tailors and carpenters cannot be equal to the situation, into which, by the worst of usurpations, an usurpation on the prerogatives of nature, you attempt to force them.

You will hear it said that all occupations are honorable. If this means only that no honest employment was disgraceful, it does not go beyond the truth. But in asserting that anything is honorable, we imply some distinction in its favor. The occupation of a hairdresser, or of a working tallow chandler, cannot be a matter of honor to any person—to say nothing of a number of other more servile employments. Such men ought not to suffer oppression from the state, but the state suffers oppression, if such as they, either individually or

collectively, are permitted to rule. In this you think you are combatting prejudice, but you are at war with nature.

A true natural aristocracy is not a separate interest in the state, or separable from it. It is an essential integrant part of any large body rightly constituted. It is formed out of a class of legitimate presumptions, which, taken as generalities, must be admitted for actual truths. To be bred in a place of estimation; to see nothing low and sordid from one's infancy; to be taught to respect oneself; to be habituated to the censorial inspection of the public eye; to look early to public opinion; to stand upon such elevated ground as to be enabled to take a large view of the widespread and infinitely diversified combinations of men and affairs in a large society; to have leisure to read, to reflect, to converse; to be enabled to draw the court and attention of the wise and learned wherever they are to be found; to be habituated to command and to obey; to be taught to despise danger in the pursuit of honor and duty; to be formed to the greatest degree of vigilance, foresight, and circumspection, in a state of things in which no fault is committed with impunity, and the slightest mistakes draw on the most ruinous consequences; to be led to a guarded and regulated conduct, from a sense that you are considered as an instructor of your fellow citizens in their highest concerns, and that you act as a reconciler between God and man; to be employed as an administrator of law and justice, and to be thereby amongst the first benefactors to mankind; to be a professor of high science, or of liberal and ingenuous art; to be amongst rich traders, who from their success are presumed to have sharp and vigorous understandings, and to possess the virtues of diligence, order, constancy, and regularity, and to have cultivated an habitual regard to commutative justice—these are the circumstances of men that form what I should call a *natural* aristocracy, without which there is no nation.

Men, qualified in the manner I have just described, form in nature, as she operates in the common modification of society, the leading, guiding, and governing part. It is the soul to the body, without which the man does not exist. To give therefore no more importance, in the social order, to such men, than that of so many units, is a horrible usurpation.

When great multitudes act together, under that discipline of nature, I recognize the people. I acknowledge something that perhaps equals, and ought always to guide the sovereignty of convention. In all things the voice of this grand chorus of national harmony ought to have a mighty and decisive influence.

But when you disturb this harmony; when you break up this beautiful order, this array of truth and nature, as well as of habit and prejudice; when you separate the common sort of men from their proper chieftains so as to form them into an adverse army, I no longer know that venerable object called *the people* in such a disbanded race of deserters and vagabonds. For a while they may be terrible indeed, but in such a manner as wild beasts are terrible.

The mind owes to them no sort of submission. They are, as they have been reputed, rebels.

Woe to the country which would madly and impiously reject the service of the talents and virtues, civil, military, or religious, that are given to grace and serve it, and would condemn to obscurity everything formed to diffuse luster and glory around a state. Woe to that country too that, passing into the opposite extreme, considers a low education, a mean contracted view of things, a sordid, mercenary occupation, as a preferable title to command.

He wishes to be clear about one point. His doctrine of a natural aristocracy does not commit him to a theory of government by lords and dukes. Thus:

I am accused of being a man of aristocratic principles. If by *aristocracy* they mean the peers, I have no vulgar admiration, nor any vulgar antipathy, toward them; I hold their order in cold and decent respect. I hold them to be of absolute necessity in the constitution, but I think they are only good when kept within their proper bounds.

I am no friend to aristocracy, in the sense at least in which that word is usually understood. If it were not a bad habit to moot cases on the supposed ruin of the constitution, I should be free to declare that, if it must perish, I would rather by far see it resolved in any other form than lost in that austere and insolent domination.

Do not imagine that I wish to confine power, authority, and distinction to blood and names and titles. There is no qualification for government but virtue and wisdom, actual or presumptive. Wherever they are actually found, they have, in whatever state, condition, profession or trade, the passport of Heaven to human place and honor.

From the notion of a natural aristocracy, Burke returns to his earlier theme that government is justified by reason of the fact that men have duties which they need to have enforced. He desires to point out that "duties" is a basic notion, and that duties are seldom a matter of choice:

Look through the whole of life, and the whole system of duties. Much the strongest moral obligations are such as were never the result of our option.

I cannot too often recommend it to the serious consideration of all men, who think civil society to be within the province of moral jurisdiction, that if we owe to it any duty, it is not subject to our will. Duties are not voluntary. *Duty* and *will* are even contradictory terms.

Men without their choice derive benefits from association; without their choice they are subjected to duties in consequence of these benefits; and with-

out their choice they enter into a virtual obligation as binding as any that is actual. Look through the whole of life and the whole system of duties. Much the strongest moral obligations are such as were never the result of our option.

When we marry, the choice is voluntary, but the duties are not matter of choice. They are dictated by the nature of the situation. 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 of 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.

Parents may not be consenting to their moral relation; but consenting or not, they are bound to a long train of burdensome duties toward those with whom they have never made a convention of any sort. Children are not consenting to their relation, but their relation, without their actual consent, binds them to its duties, or rather it implies their consent, because the presumed consent of every rational creature is in unison with the predisposed order of things.

Nor are we left without powerful instincts to make this duty as grateful to us, as it is awful and coercive. Our country is not a thing of mere physical locality. It consists, in a great measure, in the ancient order into which we are born. We may have the same geographical situation, but another country; as we may have the same country, in another soil. The place that determines our duty to our country is a social civil relation.

Obviously, the notion of duties contains problems. There is always the problem of a clash between duties and rights. There is, too, the more difficult problem of a clash between one duty and another, and of deciding when, precisely, one is confronted with a duty. Burke acknowledges all this, but would not emphasize it:

I admit, indeed, that in morals, as in all things else, difficulties will sometimes occur. Duties will sometimes cross one another. Then questions will arise: Which of them is to be placed in subordination? Which of them may be entirely superseded? These doubts give rise to that part of moral science called *casuistry*. It requires a very solid and discriminating judgment, great modesty and caution, and much sobriety of mind in the handling; else there is a danger that it may totally subvert those offices which it is its object only to methodize and reconcile.

Duties, at their extreme bounds, are drawn very fine, so as to become almost evanescent. In that state some shade of doubt will always rest upon these questions, when they are pursued with subtlety. But the very habit of stating these extreme cases is not very laudable or safe, because, in general, it is not right to turn our duties into doubts. They are imposed to govern our conduct, not to exercise our ingenuity; and therefore, our opinions about them ought not to be in a state of fluctuation, but steady, sure, and resolved.

Amongst these nice, and therefore, dangerous points of casuistry, may be reckoned the question so much agitated at the present hour—whether, after the people have discharged themselves of their original power by an habitual delegation, no occasion can possibly occur which may justify the resumption of it. This question, in this latitude, is very hard to affirm or deny, but I am satisfied that no occasion can justify such a resumption, which would not equally authorize a dispensation with any other moral duty, perhaps with all of them together.

However, if, in general, it be not easy to determine concerning the lawfulness of such devious proceedings, which must be ever on the edge of crimes, it is far from difficult to see the perilous consequences of the resuscitation of such a power in the people. The practical consequences of any political tenet go a great way in deciding upon its value. Political problems do not primarily concern truth or falsehood. They relate to good or evil. What in the result is likely to produce evil, is politically false; that which is productive of good politically true.

The natural conservative in him has the floor by now. He cannot abide the thought of all the nice problems in casuistry which he sees rising before him:

I confess, I never liked this continual talk of resistance and revolution, or the practice of making the extreme medicine of the constitution its daily bread. It renders the habit of society dangerously valetudinarian; it is taking periodical doses of mercury sublimate, and swallowing down repeated provocatives of cantharides to our love of liberty.

As it was not made for common abuses, so it is not to be agitated by common minds. The speculative line of demarcation, where obedience ought to end, and resistance must begin, is faint, obscure, and not easily definable. It is not a single act, or a single event, which determines it. Governments must be abused and deranged indeed, before it can be thought of, and the prospect of the future must be as bad as the experience of the past.

The subversion of a government, to deserve any praise, must be considered but as a step preparatory to the formation of something better, either in the scheme of the government itself, or in the persons who administer it, or in both. These events cannot in reason be separated.

This, I think, may be safely affirmed: that a sore and pressing evil is to be removed, and a good, great in its amount and unequivocal in its nature, must be probable almost to certainty, before the inestimable price of our own morals, and the well-being of a number of our fellow citizens, is paid for a revolution. If ever we ought to be economists even to parsimony, it is in the voluntary production of evil. Every revolution contains in it something of evil.

The burden of proof lies heavily on those who tear to pieces the whole

frame and contexture of their country, that they could find no other way of settling a government fit to obtain its rational ends, except that which they have pursued by means unfavorable to all the present happiness of millions of people, and to the utter ruin of several hundreds of thousands.

It is not worth our while to discuss, like sophisters, whether, in no case, some evil, for the sake of some benefit, is to be tolerated. Nothing universal can be rationally affirmed on any moral, or any political subject. Pure abstraction does not belong to these matters. The lines of morality are not like ideal lines of mathematics. They are broad and deep as well as long. They admit of exceptions; they demand modifications. These exceptions and modifications are not made by the process of logic, but by the *rules of* prudence.

This line of argument against emancipation by citing hard cases reaches its high point in the paragraphs which follow:

I would not exclude alteration, but even when I changed, it should be to preserve, not to destroy. I should be led to my remedy by a great grievance. In what I did, I should follow the example of our ancestors. I would make the reparation as nearly as possible in the style of the building.

We know that we have made no discoveries, and 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, altogether as well as they will be after the grave has heaped its mold upon our presumption, and the silent tomb shall have imposed its law on our pert loquacity.

Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, sceptical, puzzled, and unresolved. Prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit, and not a series of unconnected acts. Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature.

Prescription [i.e., tradition] is the most solid of all titles, not only to property, but, which is to secure that property, to government. All titles terminate in prescription. Nor is prescription of government formed upon blind unmeaning prejudices for man is a most unwise and most wise being. The individual is foolish . . . but the species is wise, and when time is given to it, as a species it almost always acts right.

If you apprehend that on a concession you shall be pushed by metaphysical process to the extreme lines, and argued out of your whole authority, my advice is this: When you have recovered your old, your strong, your tenable position, then face about—stop short—do nothing more—reason not at all—oppose the ancient policy and practice as a rampart against the speculations of innovators on both sides of the question, and you will stand on great, manly, and sure ground.

We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason . . . individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages. Thanks to our sullen resistance to innovation, thanks to the cold sluggishness of our national character, we still bear the stamp of our forefathers.

Burke has one last point to make. It is that politics, like morals, is based ultimately on religion. This is the taproot of his conservatism. He begins:

Nothing is more certain than that manners, civilization, and all good things connected with manners and civilization, have, in this European world of ours, depended for ages upon two principles, and were indeed the result of both combined: I mean, the spirit of a gentleman and the spirit of religion.

We know, and what is better, we feel inwardly that religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good and all comfort; that on religion, according to our mode, all our laws and institutions stand as upon their base.

The religious sense of mankind, like a wise architect, hath built up the august fabric of states; like a provident proprietor, to preserve the structure from profanation and ruin, as a sacred temple purged from all the impurities of fraud and violence and injustice and tyranny, it hath solemnly and forever consecrated the commonwealth and all that officiate therein.

This consecration is made that all who administer in the government of men should have high and worthy notions of their function and destination; that their hope should be full of immortality; that they should not look to the paltry pelf of the moment, nor to the temporary and transient praise of the vulgar, but to a solid, permanent existence, in the permanent part of their nature, and to a permanent fame and glory, in the example they leave as a rich inheritance to the world.

This principle ought to be impressed, even more strongly, upon the minds of those who compose the collective sovereignty. For the people at large can never become the subject of punishment by any human hand. They ought therefore to be persuaded that they are fully as little entitled and far less qualified, with safety to themselves, to use any arbitrary power whatsoever; that they are not, under a false show of "liberty," tyranically to exact, from those who officiate in the state, an abject submission to their occasional will.

When the people have emptied themselves of all the lust of selfish will, which without religion it is utterly impossible they ever should; when they are conscious that they exercise a power, which to be legitimate must be according to that eternal and immutable law in which will and reason are the same, they will be more capable how they place power in base and incapable hands.

In their nomination to office they will not appoint to the exercise of authority as to a pitiful job, but as to a holy function; not according to their

sordid selfish interest, nor to their wanton caprice, nor to their arbitrary will. They will confer that power, which any man may well tremble to give or to receive, on those only in whom they discern a predominant portion of active virtue and wisdom.

Those who form their opinions on such grounds as they ought to form them, conceive that He who gave our nature to be perfected by our virtue willed also the necessary means to its perfection. He willed therefore the state. He willed its connection with the source and original archetype of all perfection.

Those who believe that God willed the state think some part of the wealth of the country is as usefully employed in *maintaining* a church and a clergy as in fomenting the luxury of individuals. It is the public ornament. It is the public consolation. It nourishes the public hope. The poorest man finds his own importance and dignity in it. It is for the man in humble life—to raise his nature, to put him in mind of a state in which the privileges of opulence will cease, when he will be equal by nature, and may be more than equal by virtue—that his portion of the general wealth of the country is thus employed and sanctified.

The awful author of our being is the author of our place in the order of existence. Having disposed and marshalled us by a divine tactic, not according to our will, but according to His, He has, in and by that disposition, virtually subjected us to act the part which belongs to the place assigned us. 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 relation of man to God, which relations are not matters of choice.

An "alliance" between church and state in a Christian commonwealth is, in my opinion an idle and a 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 state are one and the same thing, being different integral parts of the same whole.

Religion is so far, in my opinion, from being out of the province or duty of a Christian magistrate that it is, and ought to be, not only his care, but the principal thing in his care; because it is one of the great bonds of human society.

Against infidels [i.e., unbelievers] I would have the laws rise in all their terrors. . . . I would cut up the very root of atheism. The infidels are outlaws of the constitution; not of this country, but of the human race. They are never to be supported, never to be tolerated.

The concluding paragraphs sum up the argument. Rights and liberties are products of the political organization of society. In the political organization of society one is confronted, largely, with matters

of tradition—*prescription* is his word—matters of slow growth and gradual change:

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 from our forefathers and to be transmitted to our posterity; as an estate, specially belonging to the people of this realm without any reference whatever to any other more general or prior right.

By thus regarding our liberties as an entailed inheritance, our constitution preserves a unity in the great multiplicity of its parts. We have an inheritable crown; an inheritable peerage; and a house of commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties, from a long line of ancestors.

This policy appears to me to be the result of profound reflection; or rather, the happy effect of following nature, which is wisdom without reflection, and above it. The idea of inherited liberties, rights, and privileges furnishes a sure principle of conservation and transmission, without at all excluding a principle of improvement. It leaves acquisition free, but it secures what it acquires. Whatever advantages are obtained, are locked fast as in a sort of family settlement, grasped as in a kind of mortmain forever.

We receive, we hold, we transmit our government and our privileges, in the same manner in which we enjoy and transmit our property and our lives. The institutions of policy, the goods of fortune, the gifts of Providence, are handed down to us and from us in the same course and order. Our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with that mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts, by the disposition of a stupendous wisdom, molding together the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, the whole at one time, is never old or middle-aged or young, but in a condition of unchangeable constancy moves on through the varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression.

By preserving thus the method of nature in the conduct of the state, in what we improve we are never wholly new; in what we retain, we are never wholly obsolete. By adhering in this manner and on those principles to our forefathers, we are guided, not by the superstition of antiquarians but by the spirit of philosophic analogy. In this choice of entailment, inheritance, we have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood; binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties; adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections; keeping inseparable, and cherishing with the warmth of all their combined and mutually reflected charities, our state, our hearths, our sepulchers, and our altars.

We procure reverence to our civil institutions on the principle upon which nature teaches us to revere individual men, on account of their age, and on account of those from whom they are descended. All your sophisters cannot

produce anything better adapted to preserve a rational and manly liberty than the course we have pursued, who have chosen our nature rather than our speculations, our breasts rather than our inventions, for the great conservatories and magazines of our rights and privileges.

A politic caution, a guarded circumspection, a moral timidity, were among the ruling principles of our forefathers in their most decided conduct. They were *not* illuminated with that "light of reason," of which the gentlemen of France tell us they have got so abundant a share. They acted under a strong sense of the ignorance and fallibility of mankind. He that made them thus fallible, rewarded them for having in their conduct attended to their nature. Let us imitate their caution, if we wish to deserve their fortune or retain their bequests. Let us add, if we please; but let us preserve what they have left; let us be satisfied to admire, rather than attempt to follow in their desperate flights the aeronauts of France.

Note on Sources. The Burke materials in this section are quoted, abridged, or paraphrased from three sources: his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, and his *Letter to a Noble Lord*. The passages from each of these three books do not occur as continuous sequences; that is, you cannot refer any sequence of passages, as a set, to any one of those books. The "themes" were established, and then passages relevant to each "theme" were taken from one or other of the books and strung together.

Reading References. John Maccun has a good book, *The Political Philosophy of Burke*. It is not easy reading. Lord Morley has done the Burke volume in the *English Men of Letters* series. It is easier reading. Chapter 6 in Volume One and Chapter 1 in Volume Two of C. E. Vaughan's *Studies in the History of Political Philosophy* are good. Chapters 8, 10, and 11 in Sir Leslie Stephen's *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* are also good. An interesting contrast between author and subject will be found in Harold Laski's pages on Burke in *Political Thought in England from Locke to Bentham.* A good recent biography will be found in R. H. Murray's *Edmund Burke*. But better than any of these would be a careful reading of Burke's *Letter to a Noble Lord, Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs,* or any hundred pages from his *Reflections.*

The following are some books published since 1940:

Barry, L. *Our Legacy from Burke.*
Canavan, F. P. *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke.*
Cone, C. B. *Burke and the Nature of Politics,* Vol. I.

Copeland, T. W. *Our Eminent Friend Edmund Burke.*
Graubard, S. R. *Burke, Disraeli and Churchill.*
Hoffman, R. J. *Edmund Burke, New York Agent.*
Lucas, F. L. *The Art of Living: Hume, Walpole, Burke, Franklin.*
Mahoney, T. H. D. *Edmund Burke and Ireland.*
Oliver, R. T. *Four Who Spoke Out.*
Osborn, A. M. *Rousseau and Burke: A Study in the Idea of Liberty in Eighteenth Century Political Thought.*
Parkin, C. *The Moral Basis of Burke's Political Thought.*
Reynolds, E. E. *Edmund Burke: Christian Statesman.*
Stanlis, P. J. *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law.*
Utley, T. E. *Edmund Burke.*

READING QUESTIONS

1. Burke says somewhere that God willed (or wills) the state for man so that by the exercise of his virtues he might perfect his nature. Aside from how Burke knew this, what questions would that statement enable you to put to him?
2. He rejects the radical-revolutionary theory of "the people as sovereign." (a) What was that theory? (b) Any three of his reasons for rejecting it.
3. He rejects the radical-revolutionary theory of "the rights of man." (a) What was that theory? (b) Any two of his reasons for rejecting it.
4. Would you say that Burke held the "contract theory" as you find it in either Hobbes or Rousseau?
5. "I am far from denying the real rights of man." His position here. Use what he says about men's right to liberty as an example.
6. His theory of a true natural aristocracy. (a) State it. (b) Does it commit him to dukes and lords? (c) What conception of "the people" it leads him to.
7. Why he would emphasize "the duties of man" rather than "the rights of man."
8. How the notion of duty leads him to the notion of casuistry. Policy he recommends in that connection.
9. Is he categorically opposed to revolution, subversion?
10. Why he defends prejudice and prescription.
11. Why he rejects the notion of an alliance between church and state. What he would do about religious unbelievers.

12. What it means to regard liberties as an "entailed" inheritance. Why he would recommend a people so to regard them. Advantages which we (the English) have derived from so regarding them.
13. Wherein you find Burke (a) most (b) least convincing.

5. PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNISM —FROM KARL MARX

From Burke to Marx. We have been examining important theses about the state propounded by James I, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Burke. James I's thesis was that God gives kings the right to rule over states; and that, in the exercise of this right they are answerable to Him, not to their subjects. This was the doctrine of the divine right of kings. Hobbes' thesis was that states must have governments, and that governments must exercise a monopoly of coercive restraint over their peoples; otherwise there is anarchy or the threat of it, and that is the death of a state. There is not a great difference here between Hobbes and Rousseau. The latter's thesis is that the coercive restraint which a government, acting in the name of the state, exercises over a people, is justified when it is done in the name of the common good. Burke's thesis is that God wills the state, as a mode of living, for men so that by the exercise of their virtues they may perfect their natures. Left to themselves men would not do this. Hence a state needs a government to enforce the exercise of human virtues. A government should consist of a state's natural aristocracy, those who know the good for man and desire that it shall prevail. Each of these writers has more to say than what is here represented by his central thesis.

A lively turn in this protracted argument is introduced by Karl Marx's "economic interpretation" of the life of the state. The thesis is this: a state contains two great economic classes, one of which owns the materials and means of economic production, the other of which works for those who own. Referring to his own period in history, Marx spoke of the bourgeois or capitalist class, and the proletariat or wage-earning class. A society is organized as a state because in that way the bourgeoisie is able to use the government to rule over the proletariat. Between the property-owning class and the wage-earning class there is an irreconcilable antagonism. A government exercises a monopoly of legal violence to further and protect the class interests of the bourgeoisie.

Marx had also an historical thesis about the state. It was to this effect: in earlier times the antagonism had been between the feudal land-