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# Introduction: Philosophy in Action

Edmund Burke is one of the most important figures in the history of modern political thought, yet his thinking about politics is not easily reducible to a general or fully coherent philosophy. This is partly because of the practical character of much of his intellectual enterprise: elected to parliament in 1765, he remained – despite a brief hiatus in 1780 – a practicing politician for almost twenty-nine years. During this time, he never set out to produce a systematic work of political philosophy, and he repudiated attempts to read his various pronouncements on politics in this way. His account of his most famous work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) – 'I was throwing out reflexions upon a political event, and not reading a lecture upon theorism and principles of Government' – arguably applies to the whole sweep of his political writings (C, VI: 304). His 'works' are largely a compilation of disconnected performances urging practical responses to specific problems from rebellion in America to revolution in France to political corruption in England to the abuse of power in Ireland and India. Whether or not one can abstract from these contexts a general doctrine or corpus of thought is debateable. And if such abstraction is possible, it is far from clear that his thought was consistent across contexts. He boasted later in life that if 'he could venture to value himself on anything, it is on the virtue of consistency that he would value himself the most', but his critics would continue to insist that this was a virtue in which he was most derelict (Works, III: 24).

Thus Burke's writings are not swiftly convertible into a theoretical system and much of what he said might be regarded as explicitly hostile to any such endeavour. He was, after all, famously critical of abstract theory and called for a more modest and contextual approach to moral and political problems. 'I cannot stand forward,' he insisted, '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, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction.' 'Circumstances', he added, 'give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing colour, and

discriminating effect. The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind' (WS, VIII: 58). The extent to which Burke's views on political method should be recast as exegetical principles for reading him is, of course, an arguable question. Nevertheless, his criticisms of abstraction emphasise the conceptual risks of detaching his remarks from their specific circumstances in the service of a more capacious account of his overall outlook or system; it also reveals the potentially dogmatic character of committed assumptions that he had any such system. Of course, not everyone has been dissuaded. Burke has been credited with a highly methodical and philosophically ambitious approach to jurisprudence and to ethics and – despite his disgust for 'political metaphysics' (WS, VIII: 109) – his politics, for some, is informed by a broader metaphysical doctrine.[1] He also has been given a distinctive political credo and has been repeatedly cast as the principal theorist of modern conservatism.[2]

Here and elsewhere, the element of paradox in Burke's theories about the limitations of theory has been fully exploited: thus his elevation of practical reason over theoretical reason has been identified with a number of highly elaborate theoretical positions – utilitarianism, positivism, as well as a theologically honed scepticism.[3] In other accounts, Burke's emphasis on the extreme contingency of political reason has been situated within a broader tradition of common law, where legal norms are derived from historical precedent and customary practice.[4] Yet, for others, he remains a stalwart champion of classical conceptions of natural law (a law universal in scope and binding across all contexts), which he defends from distortion by modern enthusiasts of natural right.[5] However, Burke has also been seen as one of the initiators of a historical school that was hostile to the universalism and metaphysical commitments of a natural law tradition.[6] Each of these rival views risks exaggerating the systematic nature of Burke's enterprise, while the rivalry between them merely serves to expose this common flaw. Of course, the contradictions may reveal tensions in Burke, but the problems may equally stem from the over-ambitious pursuit of consistency itself.

This last view has much to recommend it, but it can also be brought to a point where it begins to distort Burke's intellectual practice. In his own opinion, at any rate, he had a coherent outlook on political affairs. Moreover, in his defence of that consistency, he hoped that people would learn to appreciate the distinction between 'a difference in conduct under a variation of circumstances, and an inconsistency in principle' (Works, III: 27). This was an invitation to interpret his words and deeds in context but also to recover some background principles that determined his responses to specific environments. The Companion takes up this invitation and explores

the practical settings that shaped Burke's reflections on politics as well as the general ideas or principles he brought to bear upon them.

The interaction between context and principle in Burke's political life is outlined by Fred Lock in the opening chapter of the volume. Lock sets Burke's key speeches and writings in the context of various events, alliances, and conflicts, mapping his pre-occupations with Ireland, America, India, and then France. Lock relates these various political and intellectual concerns in a sustained chronological narrative. He allows that Burke's writings transcend their various contexts, in terms of their themes and their importance to subsequent generations. But as Lock demonstrates, only by restoring the historical context, can we properly grasp Burke's meaning and nuance. Accordingly, the Companion attempts to address the perennial thematic interest of Burke's writings, by combining extensive treatments of his key intellectual influences and achievements, followed by a set of chapters on the various political theatres of Burke's career, and concluding with a consideration of Burke's legacy.

Seen within context, Burke's resistance to theory was far from total. 'Whenever I speak against theory,' he explained, 'I mean always a weak, erroneous, fallacious, unfounded, or imperfect theory; and one of the ways of discovering that is a false theory is by comparing it with practice.' Burke's criticisms of 'fallacious' theory begged the question, but the general drift of his comments was clear: practice was the 'true touchstone of all theories'; it set the limits for our theories and operated as the test of their merits (Works, VI: 148). Our everyday practices provided the conditions of intelligibility for moral and political claims. Since our theories derived from our practices, it was wrongheaded to attempt to ground our practices on a more foundational set of ideas:

> It seems to be a preposterous way of reasoning, and a perfect confusion of ideas to take the theories, which learned and speculative men have made from that Government and then supposing it made on those theories, which were made from it, to accuse the Government as not corresponding with them. (Works, VI: 148)

For Burke, there was often something hubristic about those who would seek to step outside their received social contexts in an effort to find an objective ground for their values. But there was usually something incoherent in this search for transcendence: it either presupposed the social norms that it put in question or it precluded the very practices that it sought to guarantee.

Such incoherence, he often suggested, was endemic in attempts to derive political entitlements from natural rights. He insisted in 1782 that political rights presupposed the existence of established institutions and social

norms, whereas the domain of natural right usually implied the absence of all such norms – given this, it was not clear how the impoverished category of natural rights could or should ground richer normative practices and institutions (Works, VI: 145). In 1791 he claimed that it was contradictory to cast the rights of the people as a natural right: 'a people' was an artificial entity; it was the product of political society not its legitimising condition (Works, III: 95). Thus, theories that pretended to be foundational for everything else inevitably borrowed from the social order that they would seek to challenge or to found. In some of his earliest writings, he insisted that the search for rational foundations for all our practices was fundamentally misguided: 'what would become of the World', he asked, 'if the Practice of all moral Duties, and the Foundations of Society, rested upon having their Reasons made clear and demonstrative to every Individual?' (WS, I: 136). His objections to such exhaustive demonstrations were largely practical, but they could also have a more theoretical bent: some things had to be taken on trust for rational enquiry to be possible; it was thus irrational to demand reasons for everything. Burke has been presented as a 'philosopher of unreason' in an age of Enlightenment, but it is more plausible to suggest that his aim was to expose the irrationality of some of the demands we place on reason.[7]

For Burke, the limits of our reasoning were set by our practices, but it is a mistake to draw an excessively sharp contrast between theory and practice when it comes to understanding his own parliamentary career. After all, the practice of politics was organised around systematic argument and habits of theorising. 'I do not put abstract ideas wholly out of any question,' he duly declared, 'because I well know that under that name I should dismiss principles; and that without the guide and light of sound, well-understood principles, all reasonings in politics, as in everything else, would be only a confused jumble of particular facts and details, without the means of drawing out any sort of theoretical or practical conclusion' (Works, VI: 114). As David Craig shows, it would be difficult to make sense of Burke's political life without commenting on the background theories that shaped it: received wisdom about the nation's 'ancient constitution'; pre-existing views about the role of trust in politics; classical debates about the dangers of faction and the sources of public corruption. His genius for conspiracy theory and his obsession with Court intrigue were informed by a clear-sighted understanding of parliament's role within a mixed constitution. He re-stated with unusual skill and acumen the importance of trust between king, parliament, and people and supplied with this a famous account of political representation as a type of trusteeship. Thus, representatives were entrusted to act in the interests of their constituents, but it was a condition of that

trust that they maintained their independence from the people they would serve. However, his respect for the independence of representatives did not lead him to proscribe alliances between them. Here he provided a powerful defence of party – 'a body of men united, for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed' – while retaining a conventional hatred of self-interested factions (WS, II: 317).

In these arguments, Burke lived up to his own definition of a politician as a 'philosopher in action', and in a series of responses to practical issues he made a lasting contribution to political thought (WS, II: 317). Understandably, Burke is often cast more as a rhetorician than as a political philosopher, but this distinction can be overdrawn and can credit one practice with too much interest in reason and truth, while allowing another all too little.[8] His rhetoric might easily be seen as opportunistic and emotionally manipulative; in Jeremy Bentham's eyes, Burke was a master of 'the art of misrepresentation – the art of misdirecting the judgment by agitating and inflaming the passions'.[9] However, his speeches were also exercises in reasoning and judgement; if their object was to persuade, Burke seemed to assume that systematic argument and theoretical speculation were valid means of persuasion.

Christopher Reid provides a study of Burke's famous oratory and shows how its venomous qualities were often jarringly at odds with contemporary ideals of eloquence. Burke's defence, drawing on Cicero, would be his sense of occasion: whether vehemence and passion is proper will depend upon the speaker, the subject, and the audience. Here, once again, Burke considers that circumstances can render an action that is right in one situation, wrong in another. When the correctness of an action is so vulnerable to context, high demands are placed upon the agent to perceive the salient circumstances. This is not to say that Burke's assessment of the circumstances was always correct. As Reid shows, his venomous rhetoric was deemed to lack propriety precisely with reference to the circumstances. Few believed, for instance, that he covered himself in glory during the Regency Crisis. His use of rhetoric in evoking the madness of the king was itself considered to put under question the sanity of the speaker, and to misjudge both the subject and the audience.

The study of Burke's rhetoric also reveals how his opinions were sifted from other thinkers, or were partly given to him in the form of readily available idioms. According to one of his best interpreters, he was not a creator of a school of thought, but 'a catalyst of pre-existing traditions of discourse'.[10] This volume examines Burke's use of these discourses and tries to situate his rhetoric within a broad set of intellectual traditions. Paddy Bullard shows

how Burke based his aesthetic theories on Lockean psychological principles, while his discussion of the sublime might owe as much to classical sources – clearly Longinus, but also Lucretius. The polemical energy of his *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757) is best recovered, according to Bullard, when the Earl of Shaftesbury is identified as its main target. Thus, Burke objects to Shaftesbury's excessively ethereal account of aesthetic phenomena and attempts to reassert their material causes and bodily nature. He worries most of all about Shaftesbury tendency to conflate aesthetic and moral orders of experience – a point also brought into sharp relief by Richard Bourke.

Burke's frequent recourse to legal arguments and principles gleaned from traditions of common law and natural law jurisprudence also need to be interpreted within a broader historical and intellectual context. As Seán Donlan argues, Burke could sing the praises of England's 'ancient constitution' as well as any other Whig, but he could also challenge parochial views of English legal history and was especially critical of the insularity of popular common law histories associated with William Blackstone. Instead, he chose to emphasise the degree to which English law was the result of frequent and constructive communication with the continent. Throughout his life he expressed impatience at narrow or excessively positivist constructions of law and insisted that all legal schemes must accommodate the particular manners and morals of nations as well as ethical constraints imposed by human nature. Of course, critics have disputed the meaning and importance of these ethical constraints, and it is an issue that Christopher Insole addresses in his chapter on Burke's use of natural law.

Insole finds Burke to be sketchy on some fundamental controversies about the precise grounding and implications of 'the immutable, pre-existent law' (WS VI: 350). Nonetheless, Insole argues that there is a loose pattern in Burke's use of the language of natural law: he unambiguously gravitates towards conceptions of natural law that focus on God as the source of laws of nature, where the human being is conceived of as having a divinely ordained purpose, manifested through the exercise of virtues such as prudence. Burke follows Aristotle and Cicero in maintaining that the task of prudence is to discern the right action – oriented to a substantive conception of the 'good' – by attending carefully to the whole range of contingent circumstances that frustrate, limit, or promote this endeavour. This conception of the role of prudence leads directly to Burke's critique of those who are 'metaphysically mad' enough to seek geometrical patterns of reasoning in politics (Works, VI: 101). On this issue, Burke clearly distances himself from some of the more systematic early modern reconstructors of natural law language, who were fascinated by and covetous of the certainty delivered by geometrical methods.

Burke has been cast as a natural law thinker on the one hand or as a utilitarian on the other, but as David Dwan argues, this dichotomy is overdrawn and imposes a false set of alternatives on Burke's intellectual practice. Dwan also cautions against viewing Burke as a 'utilitarian' – at least in the way that term was defined by Jeremy Bentham and by the Mills. 'Utility', for Burke, is a broad concept that describes the fitness of means to an end. Everything depends upon what the end is judged to be, and what the means are that are considered appropriate. On neither front does Burke look like a 'utilitarian' in any meaningful sense: the end is the 'good', constituted by a range of different and irreducible moral values, including, it is true, happiness, but not in the crude sense of pleasure, or even the slightly enlarged sense of satisfied desire. Oriented to a broad and objective sense of the human good, utility need not be incompatible with an attachment to justice or natural law, both of which for Burke have a reference to objective human purposes, and so to utility. A narrow conception of utility, on the other hand, is self-undermining – a fact that was lost, he suggested, on the 'oeconomical politicians' who increasingly hold sway in France and in England (WS, VIII: 130).

Burke had a strong interest in the developing science of political economy throughout his career. This was the archetypal science of political reform, according to Richard Whatmore; moreover, it twinned proposals for domestic improvements with a wide-ranging assessment of international relations. Even the most level-headed of Burke's contemporaries feared that Europe was on the verge of another decline and fall: the monarchies of France and Britain faced the prospect of bankruptcy and exhaustion through war. Consequent threats of domestic revolution loomed, while some anticipated the reawakening of religious conflict across Europe. To add to this dark picture, oriental despotism was anticipated by some to become a dominant state form, or at the very least, Europe's borders appeared to be vulnerable to renewed barbarian invasions from the East. Thus, reform of the European system of states was vital to prevent catastrophe – a process that entailed discussion about the security and merits of small and large states, the political prospects for rich and poor countries and the general relationship between commerce and government. This triggered questions as to whether trade could be moralised, whether it might be made immune to luxury and conducive to equality, whether it was compatible with particular forms of government and could be fully harmonised with empire. Burke's interest in contribution to these debates is evident across the whole sweep of his writings from An *Account of the European Settlements in America* – a work co-authored with William Burke and published in 1757 – to his late 'Thoughts and Details on Scarcity' (1795).

Here Burke emerges as very much a figure of enlightenment, committed to the ameliorating influence of modern social science. He is best remembered, of course, for his assault on the follies of 'this enlightened age' during the furious debates surrounding the French Revolution (Works, III: 17). Advocates of a naïve and self-undermining rationalism, he believed, had claimed for themselves a monopoly on enlightenment, and in this context he was happy to relinquish the prize to his adversaries. Against the emissaries of 'new light', he seemed to prefer 'the sober shade of the old obscurity' (Works, III: 67). But, as Richard Bourke argues, Burke was a self-conscious defender of enlightened principles for much of his career. From his early days at Trinity College, he defended the rational methods of 'enlightened times' and contrasted this with scholastic logic – a relic from the 'days of ignorance' (C, I: 89). If, as Ernst Cassirer once suggested, 'the Enlightenment begins by breaking down the older form of philosophical knowledge, the metaphysical systems', then Burke is located squarely within it.[11] In his *Account of European Settlements in America* and in his unfinished histories of England, he placed the growth of enlightenment within a broader and conventional narrative: the growth of modern science and humanist scholarship had led to a general improvement of minds and manners; this had vouchsafed the growth of commerce which in turn fostered civility; all was guaranteed by the rule of law and the consolidation of modern monarchies throughout Europe.

Religion, for Burke, was an essential constituent of this improvement: it softened manners and fostered learning. Burke is clearly a staunch critic of enlightenment if this is to be identified with anti-clericalism and religious scepticism, but there is no good reason why matters should be cast in this way.[12] For Burke, religion was perfectly compatible with 'ingenuous science' (WS, I: 322). This was partly due to the rational limits of both practices. Like many successors of Locke, he combined a confident empiricism with an intense awareness of the limitations of knowledge. It was precisely because knowledge derived from the senses that our grasp of metaphysical issues was always limited. He was convinced that the 'great chain of causes, which linking one to another even to the throne of God himself, can never be unravelled by any industry of ours.' 'When we go but one step beyond the immediately sensible qualities of things,' he added, 'we go out of our depth' (WS, I: 283). Religious truths could not be fully verified, but this exposed the limits of justification, not the errors of our belief.

However, the utility of religion could be known, and, as Ian Harris shows, he repeatedly emphasised the social benefits of religious practice. He insisted that it was both mistaken and impious to regard religion as 'nothing but policy' (WS, VIII: 486), but he also believed that 'its excellent policy instead

of being an objection to it, was one of the greatest proofs of its divinity.'[13] It was on the basis of their perceived utility that he discussed with approval the rise of monasteries in England and controversially defended their maintenance in France. For similar reasons, he endorsed the religious institutions of India, both 'Hindoo' and 'Mahometan' (WS, V: 422). Burke was a strong advocate of religious toleration and seemed to associate himself with those who would 'protect all religions, because they love and venerate the great principle upon which they all agree, and the great object to which they are all directed' (WS, VIII: 199). However, he had little tolerance for atheism – 'a foul, unnatural vice, foe to all the dignity and consolation of mankind' (Works, III: 273) – and his assaults on 'atheistical fanaticism' in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) are not without their own kind of zeal (WS, VIII: 202).

Having covered extensively the range of Burke's theoretical commitments and allegiances, the Companion moves into a detailed consideration of each of Burke's political theatres of action. Although each of these contexts has its own distinctive properties, his interventions on Ireland, America, and India all revolve in different ways around issues of empire and colonial power. Prior to chapter length treatments of each of these areas, Jennifer Pitts considers the extent to which Burke's outlook was more broadly guided by a theory or theories of empire. Pitts suggests that Burke's interest in the particularity of each situation did not prevent his theorising empire as a political form with more depth than any of his contemporaries. To govern an empire was a high calling, which required the exercise of power with restraint and for the benefit of those governed. Unlike his contemporaries, who tended to focus on issues of how to control and stabilise the governed, Burke saw the main threat to empire being a failure of moral and political imagination in the governors. The British state and public Burke considered to be morally and institutionally ill-prepared to run an empire, showing themselves neglectful of the deep structural liabilities of imperial rule, with its intrinsic momentum towards violence, instability, and oppression. In each political theatre that Burke attended to, he paid close attention to the source of the corruption and the abuse of power, setting out his diagnosis as part of the case for reform.

The colonial momentum towards oppression had gained an unusual longevity in the context of Ireland. Ian McBride explains that although 'colonisation' did not, for Burke, carry the immediate connotations of illegitimacy that it has since accrued, he considered the particular nature and history of the colonial rule in Ireland to be lamentable. Conquerors in other contexts, such as the Normans in England, had blended imperceptibly with the conquered population, but not so in Ireland. McBride shows how Burke lays

the heavy responsibility for this at the door of the Protestant Ascendancy, a 'plebeian oligarchy', whose garrison mentality had oppressed the majority of the people, stripping Catholics of their property and their traditional religion, two of Burke's pillars of civilisation (WS, IX: 600). Even the Whig shibboleth of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 is capable of becoming a political evil, in the wrong circumstances: Burke considered that the impact of the Revolution had the opposite effect in England, as it had in Ireland, where it consolidated the arbitrary power of a privileged minority, rather than the liberties of the nation as a whole.

Harry Dickinson explores Burke's response to American affairs, defending the cogency and nuance of Burke's contribution during the American crisis. Burke supported the Declaratory Act of 1766, which upheld the superintending power of the British parliament over the American colonies. At the same time Burke was heavily critical of much of the legislation imposed upon America by Britain. Both at the time and subsequently, Burke has come under criticism for his inconsistency, and for backing half-measures that failed to grasp that the real problem was the Declaratory Act itself. Dickinson puts the case that Burke was exploring a more subtle and pragmatic arrangement. Whilst avoiding split sovereignty, Burke considered that the colonists should be granted considerable self-government, with the British parliament imposing real restrictions on the exercise of its own sovereign authority. To repeal the theoretical superintendence of parliament would not address the practical issues, and could lead to unforeseen and extreme consequences. Here we see demonstrated in context Burke's consistent preference for practical measures with predictable consequences and benefits, rather than clean theoretical solutions, with undesired and precarious consequences.

As with America and Ireland, Burke's consistent preoccupation in India is with the abuse of power. Frederick Whelan sets out Burke's diagnosis of the particular source of these abuses: in India, the abuse of power is inevitable when young men are removed from the constraints and formation of their background and given authority, without accountability, in an alien environment. Burke's disgust with British actions in India is consistent with principles that he applies across a range of contexts: the British violate and uproot an ancient and refined civilisation in India that can boast – in a way that parallels Europe – institutions of law, religion, property, and orders of nobility. So dramatic is this destructive process in Bengal that the British must be conceived of as promulgating a 'revolution', and not a glorious one. In carrying out this revolution, the British violate natural law and fail to exercise the trust of authority.

The cumulative message of these chapters is that even when attending to Burke at his most contextual – when he is responding to crises and at