Edmund Burke

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1. Introduction

The name of Edmund Burke (1730-97) [1] is not one that often figures in the history of philosophy .[2] This is a curious fate for a writer of genius who was also the author of a book entitled *A Philosophical Enquiry*. Besides the *Enquiry*, Burke's writings and some of his speeches contain strongly philosophical elements — philosophical both in our contemporary sense and in the eighteenth century sense, especially 'philosophical' history. These elements play a fundamental role within his work, and help us to understand why Burke is a political classic. His writings and speeches therefore merit attention as examples of attention to both ideas and to history, and of the role of this attention in practical thought. His work is also, as we see shall see at the end of this entry, an achievement that challenges assumptions held by many of our contemporaries.

2. Life

Burke was born at Dublin in Ireland, then part of the British Empire, the son of a prosperous attorney, and, after an early education at home, became a boarder at the school run by Abraham Shackleton, a Quaker from Yorkshire, at Ballitore in County Kildare. Burke received his university education at Trinity College, Dublin, a bastion of the Anglican Church of Ireland. Thence he proceeded to the Middle Temple at London, in order to qualify for the Bar, but legal practice was less attractive to him than the broader perspective which had captured his attention at university (or earlier). It was first as a writer, and then as a public figure that he made his career. Burke's intellectual formation did not suggest that his career would be purely philosophical. Indeed, for those without an independent income or a clerical vocation such a way of life was not very feasible in Britain or Ireland. Only the Scottish universities offered posts that did not require holy orders, but they were not very receptive to non-presbyterians. Burke married in 1756, and had a son by 1758, so that a career of Humean celibacy, in which philosophy was cultivated on a little oatmeal, was not for him.

Indeed, like Hume, Burke found that there was more money in narrative works and in practical affairs than in philosophy. Burke's earliest writings include *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), and *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756). Thereafter he was co-author of *An Account of the European Settlements* (1757) and began *An Abridgement of English History* (c.1757-62). From 1758, at least until 1765, he was the principal 'conductor' of the new *Annual Register*. In 1765, Burke became private secretary to the Marquis of Rockingham (who had just become First Lord of the Treasury) and was elected to the British House of Commons in the same year. He remained there, with a brief intermission in the Autumn of 1780, for nearly twenty-nine years, retiring in the Summer of 1794. Burke, who was always a prominent figure there and sometimes an effective persuader, gave a great many parliamentary speeches. He published versions of some of these, notably on *American Taxation* (1774), *Conciliation with*

America (1775), and *Fox's East India Bill* (1783). These printed speeches, though anchored to specific occasions, and certainly intended to have a practical effect in British politics, were also meant to embody Burke's thought in a durable form. In that respect, they parallel his *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770), and *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), amongst other non-oratorical writings.

Burke's activity as a parliamentarian and political writer embraced a great many concerns. Prominent amongst these were the problems of British rule overseas, in North America, India and Ireland. His name, however, has been linked most strongly by posterity to a critique of the French Revolution. Burke was certainly more notable as a pundit than an executive politician, holding office only twice, for a few months in 1782 and 1783. His political life was punctuated in May 1791 by a break from some of his party colleagues over the significance of the Revolution. Thereafter, assisted not least by the turn it took in 1792-3, he became a largely independent commentator on domestic politics and international affairs in *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791), *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1795-7), and *A Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796). Burke in his last years, especially from 1792, turned his attention to his native Ireland. He failed to found a political dynasty, and he left no lasting school in parliamentary politics: the last politician who can be regarded plausibly as a disciple, the addressee of *A Letter to William Elliot* (1795), died in 1818. As Sidgwick observed, 'though Burke lives, we meet with no Burkites' (Sidgwick 2000, 195). Nor did Burke bequeath a straightforward legacy to any political party or to any ideological brand of thought, though plenty have tried to appropriate him wholly or partly. The difficulties that they might find in colonising his thought are apparent from an account of it that emphasizes its philosophical aspects.

3. Intellectual orientation

Burke's mind, by the time he left Trinity, had two facets: one was an orientation towards religion, improvement and politics, the other a philosophical method. The latter derived from his university education, the former from reflection on the Irish situation. Burke was born into an Ireland where reflective intellect had its social setting in a small educational elite, much of it connected with the Church of Ireland. This elite contemplated a political class which owned much of the land, and consisted primarily of a gentry and peerage, headed by the King's representative, the Lord-Lieutenant; but it saw too a tiny professional class, and a huge, illiterate, impoverished peasantry. The aim of the educational elite, which it shared with some of the political class, was improvement in the broadest sense, that is to say it connected self-improvement through the influence of the arts & sciences, and through the development of intellectual skills, with moral culture and with economic development. The ability of the educated, the politicians and the rich to take constructive initiatives contrasted starkly with the inability of the peasantry to help itself: peasants relieved their misery principally through spasms of savagery against their landlords' representatives, but such violence was repressed sternly and helped nobody. The Irish situation suggested a general rationale of practice to those who wished to improve themselves and others: improvement, if it was to spread outside the educational elite, must spring from the guidance and good will of the possessing classes: from the landlord who developed his property, from the priest who instructed and consoled the poor, and from the lord lieutenant who used his power benevolently. The only obvious alternative was violence - and that was both destructive and fruitless. Burke retained all his life a sense of the responsibility of the educated, rich and powerful to improve the lot of those whom they directed; a sense that existing arrangements were valuable insofar as they were the necessary preconditions for improvement; and a strong sense of the importance of educated people as agents for constructive change, change which he often contrasted with the use of force, whether as method or as result.

This experiental orientation of Burke's mind was turned from attitude into articulate thought through the educational medium of the Irish Enlightenment. For example, some points that may seem distinctively Burkean, belonged first to Berkeley. Berkeley saw no advantages in improper abstraction or in a mythical golden age. Thus Burke's unwillingness to judge institutions and practices without first connecting them with other things, his disinclination 'to give praise or blame to any thing which relates to human actions, and human concerns, on a simple view of the object in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction' (RRF, W & S 1981-, viii.58) is a practical judgement that implies a conceptual counterpart like Berkeley's view that 'when we attempt to abstract extension and motion from all other qualities, and consider them by themselves, we presently lose sight of them, and run into great extravagancies' (Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, 1948-57, vol. ii, 84.) In both cases, philosophical wariness matched a distaste for considering aspects of objects in permanent isolation from the other aspects with which they were essentially connected. This suspicion of abstract ideas accompanied a suspicion of schemes for considering people in abstraction from their present situation, and accompanied too doubts about a golden past: Berkeley rejected 'the rude original of society' (Berkeley, *The Querist*, 1948-57, vol. vi, 141) and had no time for 'declaimers against prejudice' who 'have wrought themselves into a sort of esteem for savages, as a virtuous and unprejudiced people'(Berkeley, *Discourse addressed to Magistrates*, 1948-57, vol. vi, 206), and it need not be emphasized that Burke shared this view. Both belonged to an elite which considered improvement to be necessary, and sought to make it through the agencies in church, state and education that were really available at the time. Above all, they shared an intellectual temper: they sought to see things how they are, with an eye to improving the the condition of society. But Burke was not Berkeley, and though their similarities indicate a shared philosophical orientation, Burke had his own way of developing it. To individuate him, we must turn to what he acquired from the Trinity syllabus, and how he used his acquisitions.

This syllabus, by the time Burke became an undergraduate student at the age of fifteen (1744), not only gave attention to Aristotelian manuals but also to 'the way of ideas' enshrined in Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Such a syllabus, in its Aristotelian aspect, indicated the unity of all departments of literature — or learning as we now call it — which was congenial to one with Burke's passion for knowledge — he wrote of his *furor mathematicus*, *furor logicus*, *furor historicus*, and *furor poeticus* .[3] It also indicated the range of achievements, and the range of needs, that people had generated. The extent and variety of human activity impressed itself upon Burke. If his practical situation in Ireland suggested that not reason alone but also Christianity and persuasion were necessary to improvement, Burke could now understand these needs in terms of a scheme of learning, and indeed had the opportunity to develop the corresponding skills. At Trinity he founded a debating society, where he developed his oratorical technique on theological, moral and political topics, as well as commenting on the economic and literary life of Ireland in a periodical run by himself and his friends. This acquisition of skills was complemented by an opportunity for philosophical development. This applied in particular to Burke's antecedent bent towards the imaginative branches of literature, especially romances of chivalry, such as the *Faerie Queen* by Edmund Spenser (the collateral ancestor from whom he derived his Christian name). Creations of alternative worlds by the mind now received a philosophical warrant from another part of the Trinity syllabus. Locke had recognized that the mind devised complex ideas. The mind had a power to receive simple ideas from the senses and from its own reflection on them, and to make out of this material further ideas that had no referent in the world of sensation. Burke's interest did not extend to the centaurs that Locke had mentioned, but the ability to make complex ideas and to assemble them in new ways was central to Burke's way of proceeding. His philosophical method involved thinking in terms of complex ideas about a connected range of matters, matters connected by their place in a programme of human improvement. Reason was fundamental to this method — but not reason alone,

as we see in Burke's sole work devoted wholly to philosophy, which made use of Locke on the way to an original destination.

[...]

7. Burke and the American Revolution

Political participation generated scepticism about Burke as a person, some of which was unjust, though all of it was to be expected. What was perhaps less predictable, and is certainly more interesting philosophically, is that this participation was a precondition of the practical thought which made Burke famous in his own time and has given him a leading place in the canon of Western political thought.

Burke's practical thinking about the dispute between the British parliament and its North American colonies began with a situation not of his making, that is to say the rejection of the Stamp Act by the colonists, and its withdrawal by the ministry headed by Lord Rockingham in 1765-6. The Rockingham ministry followed up this concession of letting the colonists alone with the assertion of Parliament's right to legislate for the colonies in the Declaratory Act of 1766. Burke's task was to demonstrate to the House of Commons the plausibility of this package. He did so by combining two complex ideas — or at least two abstract compound nouns — in a new way. One idea was empire, which involved command. The other was liberty. These, Burke thought, were ideas difficult to combine — a sound reflection as they are diametrically opposed — but that they were combinable in the further idea of a *British* empire — one which combined legislative command with civil liberty. This idea implied letting alone certain matters of concern to the colonists, and so allowing them in some respects civil liberty on a *de facto* basis (SDR, W & S 1981-, ii.317-18). This idea is considerably more ingenious than the average British position that ‘all the dominions of Great Britain are bound by Acts of Parliament’ .[8] Burke's view was explanatory, because it conceptualised the situation before Parliament in a way that made intelligible the points involved and established a connexion amongst them. It was also accommodating, because it made the British executive's policy intellectually and therefore practically respectable at the same time that it made room for colonial preferences. In short, it was a small masterpiece of thinking about policy.

The repeal of the Stamp Act was followed by the passing of the Declaratory Act. Burke was practically successful in 1766 with the House of Commons because he was speaking for the executive, and a majority amongst Members of Parliament, *ceteris paribus*, tended to vote for the king's ministers. In 1774 and 1775 he was practically unsuccessful, because he was now in opposition, but his conceptual achievement in dealing with the American question became much greater. By 1774, the issues dividing some American colonists from the British parliament had changed. The former now resented the attempts of the latter to levy taxation on them directly, rather than by the authority of their own colonial legislatures, and they resented still more the project of backing the attempt, if need be, with coercion. Burke's speech of 1774 on *American Taxation* did not delete the idea of imperial command, but rather elaborated his complex idea of the British empire in a new way in order to deal with the new situation.

Burke elaborated the complex idea in a way to which complex ideas lend themselves, that is to say, by adding a qualification. The sovereignty of the British parliament was an idea that certainly included a right to tax: but a right to tax could be understood to be consistent on principle with inaction as well as action. The right, in plainer language, need not be applied. Burke could accommodate, therefore, both the claims of Westminster and those of the colonists. To this point, of

course, one might reply that Burke was *merely* making concessions. But observe: this situation provided a cue for conceptual innovation — Burke inserted a distinction into the idea of sovereignty. He distinguished 'my idea of the constitution of the British Empire' from 'the constitution of Britain' unconnected with overseas rule. It could be inferred that

The Parliament of Great Britain sits at the head of her extensive empire in two capacities: one of the local legislature of this island, providing for all things at home…The other…is what I call her *imperial character*, in which…she superintends all the several inferior legislatures, and guides, and controls them all without annihilating any. As all these provincial legislatures are only co-ordinate to each other, they ought all to be subordinate to her….It is necessary to coerce the negligent, to restrain the violent, and to aid the weak and deficient, by the over-ruling plenitude of her power. She is never to intrude into the place of the others, whilst they are equal to the common ends of their institution. But in order to enable parliament to answer all these ends of provident and beneficent superintendence, her powers must be boundless

so that Burke's elaboration of the complex idea of the British empire suggests complementary roles for the British parliament and the colonial legislatures, an elaboration which would make the question of taxation irrelevant at a stroke, whilst simultaneously emphasizing the authority of Westminster.

Conceptual refinement provided a practical avenue that other, less gifted politicians had not devised. Burke's position was altogether subtler than the implied tautology of a minister's claim that 'to say we have a right to tax America and are never to exercise that right is ridiculous' (Sir Edward Thurlow, quoted in Gore-Brown 1953, 85), and of another politician's despairing sense that 'we must either insist upon their submission to the authority of the Legislature or give them up entirely to their own discretion.' .[9] These pundits, by failing to conceive a sufficiently complex idea of sovereignty and the sovereign's right to tax, failed also to see that sovereignty did not imply an unpleasant choice between abrogating this right by disuse or applying it by force.

Events soon required a further elaboration of Burke's idea of the British empire. The continued use of coercion made the colonists more, not less recalcitrant. The practical need seemed to be for terms on which they would stay, at least nominally, under British rule. Their crucial claim was now that their right to tax themselves by their own legislatures rested on charters from the Crown, and that they were subordinate to the Crown alone, and not to Parliament. Burke gave still closer attention to the idea of sovereignty. It would be tactless to emphasize the sovereignty of Parliament, but it would be self-defeating to withdraw it explicitly and concede a sovereign right over taxation to the colonial legislatures. So now, in Burke's speech on *Conciliation with America* (1775), he focussed upon only one aspect of the complex idea of a parliamentary sovereign. The latter comprised in the British instance not only Lords and Commons, but also the king. Hence, by judicious emphasis, the item acquiesced in by the colonists could do some conceptual work: 'my idea of an Empire…is…that an Empire is the aggregate of many States, under one common head; whether this head be a monarch or a presiding republick'; and it was emphasized that the rights of the colonists depended on this superior, for 'the claim of a privilege seems rather, *ex vi termini*, to imply a superior power.' As to a right to tax, Burke added on a later occasion, that though it 'was inherent in the *supreme power* of society, taken as an *aggregate*, it did not follow that it must reside in any *particular* power in that society', and therefore Parliament could delegate it to local legislatures. In short, 'sovereignty was not in its nature an idea of abstract unity; but was capable of great complexity and infinite modifications.' (SSC, W & S 1981-, iii. 193).

Whether Burke's ‘infinite modifications’ would have assisted in keeping the thirteen colonies within the fold of the British empire is unknowable, for nothing like his proposals were tried until 1778, which was too late. It is clear, however, that Burke's ability to make conceptual changes depended on his philosophical thinking. To think in terms of complex ideas is to recognize that they can be elaborated by adding further ideas; to distinguish between the roles of Parliament is to make that addition; and to analyse the powers of a sovereign parliament as a preface to relocating one of them is to use philosophy as a tool in practical reasoning. It is noteworthy, also, that these philosophical exercises were the means of coping, as Burke hoped, with practical changes. Neither was his work here primarily ideological, for though Burke had a practical goal in view, and at that one consistent with the Rockingham achievements of 1766, he worked philosophically to modify the conceptions in terms of which his contemporaries viewed their situation, rather than using his conceptual tools as ways of defending those conceptions without modifying them. Thus he added ideas to the stock of his day. It is fitting, though Burke's proposals were not implemented in time, and though his goal was not attained, that his American speeches figured prominently in the schools and universities of both the U.K. and the U.S.A. well into the twentieth century. Burke, after all, was suspicious of poor ideas: he concluded that ‘one of the main causes of our present troubles’ was ‘general discourses, and vague sentiments’, and urged instead study of ‘an exact detail of particulars’ (SSC, W & S 1981-, iii. 185).

8. Philosophical Character of Political Disposition

Burke's thinking about America also suggests a political disposition that owed something to his philosophical conceptions. Burke's complaint in *American Taxation* against ministers was that ‘they have taken things…without any regard to their relations or dependencies’, and had ‘no one connected view.’ This was in part a straightforwardly cognitive position being emphasized with prudential point: the world with which politicians dealt was complex, and to use ideas which were insufficiently complex to capture its contents and *their* relations was a short way to meet the rough side of reality. It was also, implicitly an ethical position: governments ought not to apply force to existing relations, at least those that were legitimate. This is, in one way, an obvious point from natural jurisprudence, and one that Burke had made transparently with respect to inroads by the government of Ireland against Catholic property. In another, and more interesting way, it reflected his view that abstract compound nouns and complex ideas evoke specific past experiences. To interfere forcibly with someone's experientially-based expectations would be to break their mental association between experience and idea or word: and so the idea or the word would become meaningless and cease to influence action. If, therefore, ‘my hold of the Colonies, is in the close affection which grows from common names’, amongst other sources that were ‘though light as air…as strong as links of iron’, then ‘let the Colonies always keep the idea of their civil rights associated with your Government; — they will cling and grapple to you…But let it be once understood, that your Government may be one thing, and their Privileges another; that these two things may exist without any mutual relation; the cement is gone; the cohesion is loosened; and every thing hastens to decay and dissolution.’ (CWA, W & S 1981-, iii. 164). To break such mental associations was to break communities.

This point suggested that a genuinely prudent conduct of affairs would proceed without assaulting the mental associations of the governed, and, as change was omnipresent, would conduct its share under accepted names — in other words, by gradual and by moderate reform of institutions and practices rather than by immediate and total replacement, which Burke stigmatised as ‘innovation’. This, indeed, was what Burke claimed to be doing in his contributions of 1780-82 to the recasting of the royal household. The intellectual counterpart of this prudent conduct, namely the refinement of

our existing ideas, rather than replacing them, is what he had done in his revisions of the idea of sovereignty.

This style of thinking gave Burke a very lively sense of the corrosive power of new ideas. Even new *questions* could have unpleasant results. When the innovations of the British government unsettled the colonists, 'then…they questioned all the parts of your legislative power; and by the battery of such questions have shaken the solid structure of this Empire to its deepest foundations.' The proper way to avoid such shakes to civil society was to 'consult and follow your experience' (ATX, W & S 1981-, ii.411, 457), for 'experience' according to Burke's philosophy of language was a condition of continuity of mind, and, on the basis of mind, of a sustainable practice. His was therefore a philosophically conditioned attitude to practice, and one that was very sensitive to the hiatus that speculation could cause in the latter. Burke's sensitivity can produce apodictic language in order to persuade people to make use of the ideas they have inherited, by urging 'a total renunciation of every speculation of my own; and… [by recommending] a profound reverence for the wisdom of our ancestors' (CWA, W & S 1981-, iii.139). Indeed, Burke can be found, sometimes, on rational grounds, deprecating all explicit appeal to speculation of whatever hue, if it had a disturbing effect: 'reason not at all — oppose the ancient policy and practice of the empire, as a rampart against the speculations of innovators on *both sides of the question*' (italics added) (ATX, W & S 1981-, ii.166). His deprecation of speculation was logically anterior to taking sides in politics.

It was also, in effect, an appeal for ideas adequate to governing. This is evident in Burke's criticism of 'vulgar and mechanical politicians',

a sort of people who think that nothing exists but what is gross and material; and who therefore, far from being qualified to be directors of the great movement of empire, are not fit to turn a wheel in the machine. But to men truly initiated and rightly taught,…ruling and master principles, which, in the opinion of such men as I have mentioned, have no substantial existence, are in truth every thing, and all in all,

so that 'little minds' could not govern 'a great empire' (CWA, W & S 1981-, iii.139), or, evidently, any empire at all, whereas better results might be expected from 'men truly initiated and rightly taught.'

Burke himself, however much he might try to hide the logic of his thought under the rich foliage of words generated by his skill with words — he is perhaps the only classic of political thought in the English language who is also a literary classic — was a philosophical thinker. As such, his practical conclusions could change, and did, as we have seen. Practical conclusions changed because they were meant to be serviceable in a world that itself was changing. Burke's philosophical equipment, however, served him in the face of all external changes.

9. The Revolution in France

Burke's name is indissolubly connected to his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, though a more perceptive account of the causes of the Revolution of 1789 can be found in *A Letter to William Elliot* (1795), and the *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1795-7) investigate the character and consequences of the Revolution from 1791 in a more thoroughgoing way. In an important sense, however, the judgement of posterity is right for our purposes, because *Reflections* illustrates very clearly the central importance of philosophy and 'philosophical' history for Burke's writing about one of the greatest changes of his day.

This is true, in the first place, in terms of insight. *Reflections* was published on 1 November 1790, less than eighteen months after the storming of the Bastille. The intervening period had been characterised by a mixture of popular violence and peaceable, if feverish political activity in France, as its absolute monarchy gave way to a constitutional monarchy. A detached observer would be unsure of the future — whether destruction and violence would predominate or whether an enduring constitutional order would emerge was a question which events had not answered. In the event, of course, the Revolution would be characterised by both violence and constitutional development, at different times, but this was as unknowable in 1790 as it is obvious in 2009.

Burke's *Reflections* may be divided (for the author did not provide any formal divisions) into two portions of unequal length. Both of these are concerned with relations. The first portion, about two-thirds of the text, suggests that the French, in their enthusiasm for the idea of liberty, had failed to understand that liberty was only one amongst a range of benefits, *all* of which were required in mutual connexion for a life under civil government that was civilized in the proper sense. The results which flowed from this deficiency of understanding included constitutional arrangements which, because they did not reflect an understanding of liberty that was subtle enough to grasp that the liberty of the many was power, did not qualify popular sovereignty in a way that would restrain the *demos* effectively. As if an unrestrained populace was not bad enough, an understanding of life only in terms of liberty swept away preceding elaborations of our ideas. This mattered, because the refinement of ideas had been a precondition of refinement of conduct and therefore of the progress of society in many respects. One key instance of these was the respectful treatment of women encouraged since the middle ages by Christian learning and by chivalry. But there was a newer philosophy: ‘on this scheme of things, a king is but a man; a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order’. The retrogression of humanity itself to animality was not far in the future with ‘a swinish multitude’. The result, as people would no longer be moved by opinion, which had embodied refined ideas, would be that they would need to be governed by force. Force, too, was the ultimate destination of the second portion of *Reflections*. This suggested that the idea of equality had been connected only too pervasively with the institutional arrangements of the judiciary, the legislative and the executive power — and therefore had produced not the authority of command in government but institutionalised feebleness. At the same time, the perverse results of equality in fiscal arrangements had caused popular discontent and financial instability. The result was a situation which could be controlled only by the force of the military — if, indeed, military order was sustainable when soldiers had absorbed the idea of equality. France, it seemed, tended towards either the rule of force or the disintegration of order.

Burke's philosophical repertoire and historical understanding thus provided the structure of *Reflections*, and, perhaps more importantly, suggested insights into the character of the Revolution. The inattention of the revolutionaries to the relations that needed to be comprised in a modern government, especially in connexion with liberty, was matched by the inappropriateness to a sovereign regime of structuring its institutions around equality rather than around effective command. These insights suggested that a mis-structuring of the new constitution that proceeded from an inadequate philosophical grasp. Such misunderstanding was matched by a failure to understand the history which had produced the elaboration of ideas about conduct that had underwritten government by opinion, and this failure suggested that the Revolution would cause retrogression from this civilized condition towards a less gentle way of proceeding, as well as a less effective one. In other words, Burke's understanding of philosophy, and of the history of Europe, conceived ‘philosophically’, provided grounds for making fundamental claims about the Revolution.

Whether Burke was right in these claims about the Revolution, of course, is another question, and one that can never be answered: French readers of *Reflections* could take its lessons to heart, and,

anyhow, events have a way of modifying tendencies independently of intention and interpretation. Indeed, none of this is to say that *Reflections* was intended as an academic work, or even an accurate factual statement, about the Revolution. It was calculated to produce a practical result, which was to dissuade the British from admiring the Revolution and so to dampen any propensity they might feel to imitate it: and thus to protect civilization in Britain. In the course of pursuing this goal, Burke was willing to satirize the Revolution and its English sympathizers unmercifully in order to make them as unattractive as possible to any sane reader, and he matched the satire with a panegyric on British social and political arrangements. There is, indeed, much in *Reflections* besides the elements that have been emphasized here (and indeed much in Burke's later views on the Revolution which is not in *Reflections*): but without those elements, the book, and Burke's understanding of the Revolution would have been impossible.

10. Problems of Interpretation

Whilst Burke's thought has never lacked interpreters, on the whole they have lacked the persistence of historical insight and the strength of conceptual grasp required to do justice to him. Hence he has suffered an ironic fate for one who urged breadth and precision of thought. That is to say, he has figured as the spokesman for a very limited number of points. This type of treatment began in the nineteenth century, when Burke was invoked as an antidote to the confidence of the French Revolution by liberal thinkers who prized its principles, saw their narrowness, and required a sense of historical development to situate them properly in a viable civil society. It was continued when Matthew Arnold tried to treat Burke as a (pre-Home Rule) Gladstonian spokesman about Ireland. It went further still in the twentieth century, when Burke was pressed into service as a counter-revolutionary agent in the anti-Communist cause, and when the twenty-first dawned some treated Burke as proponent of postmodernism. He himself could hardly have complained that his work has been put to *practical* use, but it remains true that academic justice has yet to be done to him. Chapters and essays on individual themes in his writings have been more plausible than attempts at general interpretation, which usually concentrate on a theme of choice, or subordinate Burke's thought to it, and give the impression (deliberately or otherwise) that this is the whole of Burke, or at any rate that this is what matters about him.

In attacking the Revolution, Burke constructed a rogues' gallery for French politicians, and stocked it also with quite a number of French thinkers. The figures who appeared to be rogues, however, were most of them really straw men, stuffed according to the prejudices of a British audience. More significantly for our purposes, Burke's censure of the *philosophes* attributed to them complicity with the style of thought that had set up a limited range of simple principles as the norm for politics, and which was wholly inadequate to satisfy the connected and various needs of human nature under modern conditions. Burke preferred to emphasize that numerous principles, and practical thinking to combine them, were necessary to meet these needs, and so to sustain improvement, and emphasize, too, that such accommodation involved much more practical activity than speculative design. Correspondingly his own writings develop less a political philosophy than a political style that had at its core philosophical elements — a style which, indeed, implicitly suggested that *political* philosophy was not a feasible activity, and, if it was, certainly not one sufficient to the task of 'the philosopher in action'.

These views emphasize the importance of combining a wide range of principles, and of remembering that principles, however numerous, are only one element in a satisfactory conduct of practice. There can be no doubt that analysis was involved in Burke's proceedings: ‘let this position be analysed,’ he instructed the House of Commons critically in 1794, ‘for analysis is the deadly enemy of all declamation.’ [10] Though Burke could certainly conduct effective analyses of ideas and words even

after more than twenty years at Westminster, as his *Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe* (1792) demonstrates, his accent lay upon the necessity of synthesising ideas, and including non-conceptual elements in any adequate treatment of politics. There is nothing in a style of doing philosophy that centres upon analysis that is logically inconsistent with these procedures. One temper of mind, however, which sometimes accompanies this manner of philosophising is antipathetic to Burke, and there is much in contemporary opinions about politics, including those held by some analytical philosophers, that he would have found dangerously naive. Amongst these a belief in a continuing popular sovereignty (the modern term of art for this is 'democracy')—rather than parliamentary sovereignty is only the most obvious example. If Burke is unlikely at present to be the darling of some philosophers and of some pundits; still less will he be of those who suppose that in discussing a small number of principles they provide a prescriptive and sufficient guidance for the conduct of policy; and even less of anyone who supposes it logically adequate to claim that 'one very simple principle' is 'entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control' or any other matter(Mill 1859, 'Introductory'). The complex character of ideas, their connexions with each other, the need to understand practice in terms of such relations, and to conduct it with attention to habitual linkages amongst people's ideas and activities, suggest a different sort of thinking. So it is not surprising that Burke has been quietly ignored by many recent thinkers, or dismissed from consideration by being labelled as a 'conservative' — but it is of great interest that he has found many admirers amongst those who succeed in the conduct of practical politics. Whilst Burke would have been the first to point out that his specific conclusions belong to a time and a place, his intellectual style, is one with which any serious thinking about politics, whether reflective or practical, needs to engage.

11. Conclusion

Burke's thought is philosophical in at least two senses. One is that it is constituted in part by thinking in terms of philosophical conceptions, especially complex ideas, particularly those of relation, as well as involving significant positions in philosophical psychology and the philosophy of language. The other sense is that it develops an account of the American, British and European past which is philosophical history, as the eighteenth-century understood the term. These senses, once put together, inform a style of practical thinking about politics which emphasizes the importance of synthetic as well as analytical thinking for practice, and suggests that a progressive practice requires not only the yields of past effort but also the intelligent application of mind to their further development if progress, rather than regress, is to result. Burke is perhaps the least studied of political classics, but he is certainly amongst the small number with whom anyone who aspires to have an adequate political education must engage.

Fonte: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/burke/)