



The Portable Edmund Burke

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The intellectual wellspring of modern political conservatism, **Edmund Burke** is also considered a significant figure in aesthetic theory and cultural studies. As a member of the House of Commons during the late eighteenth century, Burke shook Parliament with his powerful defense of the American Revolution and the rights of persecuted Catholics in England and Ireland; his indictment of the English rape of the Indian subcontinent; and, most famously, his denouncement of English Jacobin sympathizers during the French Revolution. **The Portable Edmund Burke** is the fullest one- volume survey of Burke's thought, with sections devoted to his writings on history and culture, politics and society, the American Revolution, Ireland, colonialism and India, and the French Revolution. This volume also includes excerpts from his letters and an informative Introduction surveying Burke's life, ideas, and his reception and influence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Portable Edmund Burke Details

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Satkirath Singh says

I found this collection to be just as the title suggests: portable. Great to carry around in your bag and whip out for a read whenever you're out. Unsurprisingly, his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and *Vindication of Natural Society* have been abridged, alongside a few other works, but by and large this is a pretty good collection for the casual reader. Regarding Burke himself, his outlook on the world put into (very eloquent) words how I've always felt despite not being able to articulate those feelings myself. He knew when to be ruthless and when to be charitable, and I often laughed out loud from his witty exposition. He is too often caricatured as a fire-breathing reactionary, but Burke is nonetheless indispensable for anyone seriously interested in the roots of conservatism and classical liberalism.

Jackson Cyril says

Burke is, in many ways, our conscience, eternally questioning and eternally fighting for whatever shred of decency can be salvaged from this 'nasty, brutish' world; he railed against the injustice perpetrated by the British in India and Ireland and defended the secession of the American colonies (this he does less convincingly in my view-- Dr. Johnson gets the last word here, "why do we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from the drivers of negroes?"). His writings on the French Revolution, which I once disliked very much, I have now come to appreciate for their acute analysis and measured judgement. Gladstone's maxim that "Freedom must not be based on visionary ideas but on the long experience of many generations" is entirely Burkean and can easily be applied to the rest of this volume, which contains the writings of one who seriously studied human history and wrote with passionate fervor on topics which were pressing to his contemporaries, and which, taken in the abstract, will be pressing for all posterity.

Craig Bolton says

The Portable Edmund Burke (The Viking Portable Library) by Edmund Burke (1999)

Beth says

For my Modern Europe class, I read most of Part I: "Culture and History", (which includes selections from "A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful" and his speeches on religious toleration) most of Part III: "America and Revolution" and Part VI: The French Revolution.

Burke's essay distinguishing between the sublime and the beautiful was an important influence on the Romantic movement in art and literature. Beauty, as Burke describes it, is what we find aesthetically pleasing, while the sublime is aesthetically attractive even when it is terrifying. Burke associates beauty with love and fear with the sublime. Contemplating the vastness and danger of the ocean, for instance, is closer to a sublime experience than a beautiful one. But vast size isn't always associated with the sublime (some venomous snakes are small, but since they are dangerous they can inspire feelings of the sublime). The sublime has a mysterious quality that the beautiful lacks, so it's easier to portray in writing or music than painting, Burke says, because visual images necessarily reveal more than the images that are suggested in

writing and music. Something that is genuinely terrifying has to be hidden ("dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions, than those have which are more clear and determinate").

Burke connects religious feelings with the sublime. He argues that the fear a powerful God inspires is a necessary part of real religious experience:

"Though in a just idea of the deity perhaps none of his attributes are predominant, yet, to our imagination, his power is by far the most striking. Some reflection, some comparing, is necessary to satisfy us of his wisdom, his justice, and his goodness. To be struck with his power, it is only necessary to open our eyes... And though a consideration of his other attributes may relieve, in some measure, our apprehensions; yet no conviction of the justice with which it is exercised, nor the mercy with which it is tempered, can wholly remove the terror that naturally arises from a force which nothing can withstand."

In his speeches on religious toleration, Burke spoke in support of the rights of Catholics and Dissenters (non-Anglican Protestants). He argued that because the church was "built up with the strong and stable matter of the gospel of liberty" it had nothing to fear from allowing other Christian groups to worship as they wished. But his tolerance only extended to what he saw as apolitical version of religious dissent. He thought that some of the Dissenters, such as the Unitarians, were as much political factions as religious sects, and should be excluded from public office. He viewed their opposition to establishment and sympathy for the French Revolution as a danger to the state.

In the "Speech on American Taxation" (1774) Burke appealed to the House of Commons to be more conciliatory toward the American colonies and recognize that their objections to British taxation were based on English tradition, but his argument is motivated more by pragmatic concerns than purely moral ones: "I am not here going into the distinctions of rights, nor attempting to mark their boundaries. I do not enter into these metaphysical distinctions; I hate the very sound of them. Leave the Americans as they anciently stood, and these distinctions, born of our unhappy contest, will die along with it."

In the "Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies" Burke gave four objections to the use of force against the American colonists. His first concern was that the use of force would have to be temporary, and that the uprisings and objections to British governance in America would not be. Second, Burke worried about the uncertainty surrounding the outcome of conflict. He also brought up the risk that a war might do so much damage that the territory won by a British victory would be unusable. The fourth reason to avoid the use of force was experience; the British had never attempted to rein in an unruly colony by force before.

Burke gives several reasons why "the fierce spirit of liberty is stronger in the English colonies, probably, than in any other people of the earth." One reason is that the influence of England: "the colonists emigrated from you at a time when this part of your character was most predominant; and they took this bias and direction the moment they parted from your hands. They are therefore not only devoted to liberty, but to liberty according to English ideas and English principles." He describes how controversies over the authority to tax have been uniquely important to English history, more than in the "ancient commonwealths" (Greece and Rome). Burke argues that in the colonies, where only a minority belong to the Church of England, the influence of Dissenting Protestant churches has led people to be very attached to their independence. He has a different explanation for this phenomenon in the south - he says that holding slaves has made them unusually attached to their own freedom:

"There is, however, a circumstance attending these colonies, which, in my opinion, fully counterbalances this difference, and makes the spirit of liberty still more high and haughty than in those to the northward. It is, that in Virginia and the Carolinas they have a vast multitude of slaves. Where this is the case in any part of the world, those who are free, are by far the most proud and jealous of their freedom. Freedom is to them not only an enjoyment, but a kind of rank and privilege. Not seeing there, that freedom, as in countries where it is a common blessing, and as broad and general as the air, may be united with much abject toil, with great misery, with all the exterior of servitude, liberty looks, amongst them, like something that is more noble and

liberal. I do not mean, Sir, to commend the superior morality of this sentiment, which has at least as much pride as virtue in it; but I cannot alter the nature of man."

Part VI, "The French Revolution" starts with the "Speech on the Army Estimates" from February 1790. In a parliamentary debate about funding for the Army, Burke broke with his Whig colleagues over the French Revolution. He described how in the last century, Louis the Fourteenth had established a despotic monarchy which influenced other governments in Europe, encouraging authoritarianism and the establishment of standing armies. With the French Revolution the threat from France has changed, but "the present distemper of France is far more likely to be contagious than the old one" because people are more naturally inclined to support the excesses of democracy than the excesses of monarchy. He calls the revolutionary government "an irrational, unprincipled, proscribing, confiscating, plundering, ferocious, bloody and tyrannical democracy." (I really like Burke's prose, which is why I keep quoting it...)

Burke distinguishes the French Revolution from the English Revolution (1688) (also called the "Glorious Revolution," which led to the 1689 Bill of Rights, one of the models for the US Bill of Rights) because the purpose of the English Revolution was to preserve the traditional authority of Parliament, not to level all social distinctions. In England, a legal monarch had attempted to exercise arbitrary power; in France, Burke thought that even though the monarchy was originally "arbitrary" (with no Constitutional basis) it had the potential to be made legitimate. Burke thought the revolutionaries should have established a constitutional monarchy like the English one.

His defense of the French aristocracy who "had their mansions pulled down and pillaged, their persons abused, insulted and destroyed... and themselves and their families driven to seek refuge in every nation throughout Europe" partially reflects a pragmatic concern about violence, but he seems a little too dismissive of the inherent injustices in aristocracy when he says that they were only resented because "without any fault of theirs, they were born gentlemen and men of property, and were suspected of a desire to preserve their consideration and their estates."

Burke's most famous work is "Reflections on the Revolution in France" published in November 1790. It began as a response to the Dissenting minister Richard Price's praise for the French Revolution, which Price argued further developed the principles of the English Revolution. Burke was actually a radical by 18th-century standards, in that he opposed the divine right of kings, the idea that monarchy had a unique divine sanction. He does not reject what he calls "the real rights of men" but for Burke the right to have a say in government is not one of those inherent rights.

Burke also attacks the atheism of the French Revolution, asserting that "man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only our reason, but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long" and that if England followed France's example, a "great source of civilization" would be lost.

Jonathan Meckel says

Amazing works with a good introduction; horrid edition—the text is small, and none of the works are complete but abridged with ellipses points showing where sections have been removed. I would recommend E.J. Payne's 3-volume set of Burke's Select Works. The original is out of print but there are several new imprints of it. The best one is published by the Liberty Fund, and has an additional volume of miscellaneous works.

Matt says

Good stuff. A little over the top sometimes, and I think that the degree of many of his otherwise brilliantly articulated positions is indefensible. Nonetheless, I questioned many of my deepest and longest held beliefs while reading this. That's the mark of a great writer and thinker, if you ask me.

Briana says

Yeay, back to politics! My head is still spinning from American theology...predestination is scary...

"Burke shook Parliament with his powerful defense of the American Revolution and the rights of persecuted Catholics in England and Ireland, his indictment of the English rape of the Indian subcontinent, and, most famously, his denunciation of the French Revolution"

I have fallen in love with this blurb.
Burke might become my new hero.

Ironically, I bought a copy of Burke's "Reflections on the French Revolution", but thought I'd have to put it off til summertime...I'm so happy now?

EDIT

Burke, my darling, will you marry me?
I'm seriously developing a crush on Edmund Burke. It's scary. Because...he's dead...

1. Burke's "denunciation of the French Revolution" is AWESOME. I've never been so creeped out by a political analysis before...people howling in the streets for blood, blood, blood; parents betraying children, children betraying parents; the Queen of France fleeing from the palace with mad citizens hacking off limbs and swimming in gore...

Which makes me indignant/furious along with Burke when he says, "And you want to SUPPORT these barbarians??!!!"

2. Yet, in contrast, in his "Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful" Burke analyzes beauty with lots and lots of happy, fluffy images, like, "Aw, look at the pretty dove...so cute...and all the soft, sweet colors in the world..." I love how he can write about scary murderers *and* pretty doves.

3. OH OH OH!! Okay, Burke says the most adorable thing ever. He's describing beauty based on somewhat objective terms, and just guess what he said?! "It is the little things we are inclined to be fond of...beautiful objects are comparatively small."

Never been so happy to be 5'2".

Although I must admit, we made fun of Burke a lot in class. "Ah, my love, you're so small, smooth, and multi-colored..."

4. Burke loves Montesquieu too!! He calls him "a man...with an Herculean robustness of mind, and nerves not to be broken with labor--a man who could spend 20 years in one pursuit." He writes about murderers and doves, he likes small things, and he's a Montesquieu fan?! Be still my beating heart...

And yes, I would stay up til 4 am for Burke. It must be love...
