
Burke and the Imaginative Grasp of Reality

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Edmund Burke for Our Time: Moral Imagination, Meaning, and Politics, by William F. Byrne. *DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011. 246 pp. \$40 cloth.*

Although this important contribution to Burke scholarship at first appears to limit itself to examining an unexplored area of the Whig statesman's social and political thought, it achieves a depth of philosophical insight that will be of considerable value to scholars across a wide range of subjects. The author's aim is to use Burke's concept of the "moral imagination" as an entrée into his thinking that, if properly understood, will help to resolve some of the apparent inconsistencies that have confounded or misled his interpreters and brought about an astonishing diversity of conclusions over his philosophical positions. Byrne is adept in his concise yet thorough survey of these interpretations of Burke, which have read him variously as natural lawyer, utilitarian,

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historicist, pragmatist, and romantic. The problem Byrne identifies is an unwillingness to jettison old categories of thought that inappropriately pigeonhole Burke's novel epistemological approach. By confining Burke to a conceptualization of moral judgment which establishes strict dichotomies between reason and emotion, universality and particularity, objectivity and subjectivity, his interpreters have failed adequately to grasp his insight into how sound moral decision-making actually operates.

To show how Burke circumvents these reifications, Byrne relies principally (though not exclusively) on careful examinations of his aesthetics, on the one hand, and his latent moral-philosophical outlook, on the other. Byrne's phenomenology of aesthetic experience traces the intellectual development in Burke of insight into our intuitive or interpretive capacity, an exposition centered in large part on his *A Philosophical En-*

quiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful but which covers the wide range of his adult writings. Though nominally influenced by the British empiricists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Byrne explains, Burke in fact resists the atomistic inclinations that tended to characterize this philosophical tradition. In Burke's aesthetics, we are instead provided with a view of human experience that, conversely, sees us as intuitively conceiving wholes of meaning from among our particular sense impressions, a process which is primary in understanding, insofar as our consciousness is thus always equipped with an interpretive lens that it uses to make sense of, or process, all input that it receives from the outside world. Significantly, Byrne says, Burke sees these frameworks of meaning with which we process our experience as capable of corresponding more or less closely to reality. Our imaginations can be led on flights of fancy or be grounded in the hard realities that those of sober intuitive dispositions readily recognize. Drawing useful insights from Burke's early writings on taste, Byrne thus shows how Burke sees this interpretive capacity as a sort of non-intellectual, or non-rational, form of judgment with which we organize our experiential realities. What is more, since these interpretive orientations are a prerequisite for all action in the world, Byrne explains, Burke possesses an awareness of how the stakes are thus raised for the acculturative process by which these orientations are

formed. The ultimate implication, which Byrne convincingly shows us is latent throughout Burke's political and philosophical writings, is that the soundness of the wholes that are conceived, i.e., the organization of life that is portrayed by the art, literature, music, theatre, and virtually all forms of entertainment we encounter, is of vital importance for the interpretive dispositions with which we process information, and thus in part determines the range of actions of which we are capable.

Further developing this rather tacit notion of our imaginative framework, Byrne mines Burke's original and subtle conception of the moral good, which he shows has been a source of much disagreement and confusion among his interpreters. Byrne acknowledges that, while there is evidence in his writings for the traditional natural law reading of Burke, there are also undeniably moments when he appears to reject the conventional manner of conceiving moral universality, as articulated by most in this intellectual tradition. While confronting the abstract rationalism of the French Enlightenment, Burke thus goes so far as to speak pejoratively about "metaphysics," "natural rights," and even "truth," and one is pressed to consider just how far Burke is taking his predilection for the practical and the historical over the philosophical and the rational. Here, Byrne exhibits a perceptive attention to Burke's concrete, experiential understanding of moral standards. Although this is a theme that is reverted to and expounded

repeatedly throughout, the culminating discussion in the chapter entitled “Burke and the Good” is among the best in the book. According to Byrne, Burke sees right or virtuous conduct as existing only within particular instantiations in historical experience. And, because of the variability of such experience, our models of action are incapable of formulation in fixed, abstract formulas or principles separate from changing historical circumstances. Instead, our guides for action can only be found in historical models that emerge within a truly ethical tradition and which provide touchstones of judgment, to which we must appeal in an analogical or imitative fashion. Drawing on the interpretation of Burke pioneered by the early twentieth century literary scholar Irving Babbitt, Byrne argues that, while Burke retains an overall aspiration to conduct that achieves moral universality, there is nonetheless a shift in emphasis away from the application of rational principles. Here, there are anticipations of the contemporary philosophical movement known as “virtue ethics,” which tends to focus less on moral precepts in the abstract and more on the aim of cultivating good character within the individual decision-maker. However, Byrne’s use of Babbitt, together with his more recent interpreter Claes G. Ryn, helpfully locates the source of such ethical attunement in the individual will, which, to the extent that it achieves moral universality, becomes the ultimate standard of right conduct. Still, like Aristotle, Burke stresses habituation

for virtue, which Byrne correctly identifies as not only historical in nature—hence his desire to conserve sound prejudice—but also as defined by a deeply aesthetic dimension. In sum, we see that the moral imagination—properly conceived as the synthesis of aesthetic and practical attunement—prepares the normative framework for right action by guiding and habituating the will toward ethical conduct.

Coming to terms with this complex relationship between the moral and the imaginative—what might be seen as an aesthetically and historically-informed reworking of *phronesis*—is no easy task, and Byrne is successful because of the subtlety and limited scope of his project. He aims not to resolve all of the tensions within the corpus of Burke’s writing, but merely to apply an analytical lens that minimizes the apparent contradictions and makes better sense of them. One particularly noteworthy example of this is Byrne’s nuanced treatment of Burke’s appearing to simultaneously use and disparage the language of rights. Rather than simply relying upon the familiar distinction between the particularistic “rights of Englishmen” and the universal “rights of man,” Byrne is careful to observe that, despite its ability to shed light on Burke’s rights usage, a strict application of this distinction is not sufficient to explain the variety of locutions throughout his writings. For example, Byrne says that, when rejecting the claims made by the East India Company in response to an alleged invasion of their prop-

erty rights by Fox's India bill, Burke actually acknowledges the sacredness of "the rights of men," while denying that the claims qualified as an instance of their abridgment (161). Clearly, Byrne shows, there is a complexity to Burke's method of selection regarding what rights are real and what are not that cannot be explained exclusively with reference to prescription. As an alternative, Byrne argues rather convincingly that it is possible to connect Burke's individual uses of the term "rights" to their being grounded in a moral-imaginative framework, which he also assumes on the part of his audience, one that ties rights references to particular "examples, prototypes, [and] metaphors" (164), which narrow the scope and serve to limit the possibilities of meaning behind such claims. Without such concrete points of reference, there will always be the danger of rights claims devolving into trivial assertions of expediency and, ultimately, their being supported by nothing but willful interests. Admittedly, Byrne argues, the relegation of rights claims to a particular history and people, as one finds in the famous distinction between the "rights of Englishmen" and "the rights of man," will provide this essential narrowing of meaning. However, only a sound, imaginative framework of meanings can connect such claims to the way in which fundamental human needs have come to be met by the particular customs and practices in question. Burke thus sees the legitimacy of rights language, on Byrne's reading, only when it is situ-

ated within such a moral-imaginative framework in which the concrete claim is no light matter, but points to an abiding human need that would go unmet without its being respected. Byrne explains that Burke seems to believe that a sacredness is being preserved in his selective invocations of rights, insofar as the latter are not made in the hyper-flexible manner of the *philosophes*, but neither are they made in the defense of just any mundane custom.

The philosophical relationships that Byrne establishes provide not only a new perspective on Burke's social and political philosophy, but also a new set of conceptual tools for making sense of our ethical lives. The concept of a "moral imagination" which Byrne unpacks might, then, be seen as much more than a synthesis of Burke's aesthetic and moral-philosophical outlook, useful as that endeavor might be. More significantly, this concept might also be seen as a synecdoche for the way we are able to confront the moral-epistemological crisis of modernity. In his conclusion, Byrne suggests some of these broader implications of Burke's thinking, and it is here that the epistemological position that has been set forth comes into sharper relief against the prevailing paradigms. For, while Burke's thought is broadly compatible with the standard conception of moral universality articulated in the natural law tradition, it has been shown that he nonetheless resists the unfortunate Enlightenment tendency to over-emphasize *a priori* principles and, in

some articulations, an instrumentalist understanding of reason, both of which result in an excessively intellectualist approach to morality. At the same time, there is an admission in Burke's thinking—corresponding to the reality of moral experience—of what might loosely be described as certain “postmodern” dimensions of our moral knowing. This observation refers to the emphasis in Burke's epistemological outlook on historical particularity, on the one hand, and the undeniable role played by affect and emotion in moral decision-making, on the other. However, as Byrne notes, such acknowledgement does not, for Burke, appear to result in any radically skeptical conclusions with respect to what we are able to know. Rather, Byrne rightly contends, the originality of Burke's thinking is its pointing to an alternative between the hubris of an abstract, moral absolutism, which tries to claim direct, clear insight into the unchanging principles of natural right, and the corresponding hubris of a dogmatic moral relativism, which alleges the impossibility of

knowledge of universals and a radical confinement to our own temporal horizons. The former, while claiming access to high-minded ideals, actually serves to conceal the fallibility of those who profess them, while the latter seems to eliminate the mystery and possibility of a higher order under the guise of a false humility. Appearing to find a way beyond these problematic alternatives, Burke's thinking suggests a third option. We may have to acknowledge that, in fact, we can only ever grasp moral truth hazily and partially amidst the messiness and flux of a reality that is always changing. We may, as Byrne says, never be completely sure or absolutely confident that we have done what is right. And yet, if our imaginations have been furnished with the proper ethical supports, we will have the tools continually to check ourselves against real standards, incapable of ever being articulated as precepts but nonetheless accessible to us and, indeed, constitutive of who we are, as we go about confronting real moral dilemmas.