
Edmund Burke: The Perennial Political Philosopher

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Edmund Burke: The Enlightenment and Revolution, by Peter J. Stanlis, with a foreword by Russell Kirk. *New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1991. 259 pp. \$34.95.*

Professor Peter Stanlis has done perhaps more than any other scholar of this century to explicate the thought of Edmund Burke as both philosopher and statesman. His *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law*, first published in 1958, did much to dispel the myth propagated by nineteenth-century utilitarian and positivist scholars that Burke was opposed to the classical and Christian natural law tradition. *Edmund Burke: The Enlightenment and Revolution*, based on Professor Stanlis' chief articles and critical review essays on Burke over the past 40 years, continues this work.

Stanlis begins by discussing what he sees as the cardinal principles of Edmund Burke's political thought—"the moral Natural Law; the political sovereignty of constitutional law and legal prescription; prudence as the su-

preme principle in practical politics; a corporate and Christian view of human nature; and a providential as well as an empirical conception of history." In discussing these principles, Stanlis shows that for Burke the spirit of the natural law was embodied in the English constitution and common law, both of which were the products of organic growth, incorporating the customs, traditions, and beliefs of many generations. Stanlis argues that Burke frequently appealed to the natural law in opposing arbitrary power—whether it be the arbitrary power of George III and parliament toward Ireland and the American colonies, the arbitrary government of Warren Hastings and the East India Company, or the arbitrary rule of the French Jacobins in the name of what Burke called "the pretended rights of man."

Stanlis argues that those who have seen in Burke's supposed expediency the mere calculations of a conservative utilitarian have failed to understand Burke's view of prudence as an essential part of the natural law. Burke recognized the fact that statesmen are rarely presented with a simple choice between good and evil. Frequently they are called upon to choose between the lesser of two evils; and such a choice is itself an attempt to bring about the greatest good possible under the circumstances.

Burke had what Professor Stanlis calls a "natural skepticism toward abstract reason and speculation," a skepticism which is reflected in his critique of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Burke rejected the unquestioning faith in abstract reason that the Enlightenment philosophers possessed; and he criticized the strict application of mathematical principles to human affairs as the most fallacious kind of reasoning.

But perhaps Burke's most important criticism was reserved for the Romantic "sensibility" of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his disciples. According to Stanlis, "sensibility preached the untaught goodness of the natural human being, whose instinctive expressions of tender pathos . . . and humanitarian pity toward suffering humanity . . . were taken as proof of moral soundness." Yet this humanitarian pity requires neither self-discipline nor individual moral responsibility. For Burke, the life and writings of Rousseau were adequate evidence of the danger of such a doctrine for traditional Christian ethics: "Benevolence to the whole

species, and want of feeling for every individual with whom the professors [of this new doctrine] come in contact, form the character of the new philosophy He [Rousseau] melts with tenderness for those who only touch him by the remotest relation, and then, without one natural pang, casts away, as a sort of offal and excrement, the spawn of his disgustful amours, and sends his children to the hospital of foundlings."

The greatest threat that this doctrine of sensibility posed was its claim that man in a simple society, close to nature, was morally superior to man in the complex and highly developed society of eighteenth-century Europe. Such a doctrine—preached by Rousseau and put into practice in the French Revolution—threatened to destroy traditional Western civilization and put in its place the tyrannical will of a mob or of a military despot.

Burke contrasts the fanatical attempts to remake society by the leaders of the French Revolution with the essentially conservative goals of the English Revolution of 1688 and the American Revolution. The two latter revolutions, Burke makes clear, were attempts to defend ancient liberties and established constitutions of government against violent innovations by those seeking arbitrary power. Thus, the goals of the English and American revolutions were almost the exact reverse of those of the French Revolution. While Stanlis concentrates on Burke's view of the Revolution of 1688, his comments on the American Revolution are very instructive for those who have been taught that America was strug-

gling in the name of abstract notions of equality and natural rights.

Professor Stanlis' book is an excellent work of historical and interpretive scholarship, but it may place too much emphasis on Burke's reliance on the natural law tradition. Stanlis explicitly states that Burke's appeals to the natural law were often indirect; and he recognizes the distinction between the "relative simplicity" of the natural law as a code of ethical principles and its "enormous complexity in practical application." Yet, in attempting to refute the claims of Burke's utilitarian admirers, Stanlis at times seems in danger of going to the opposite extreme. Stanlis so frequently refers directly to the natural law when explaining Burke's principles of government that one almost loses sight of Burke's reliance on prescription and experience and his hesitancy to make claims based on principles perceived directly by the naked reason. There can be little doubt, thanks largely to Dr. Stanlis' efforts over the last 40 years, that Burke adhered to the classical and Christian natural law tradition. Yet he sought whenever possible to avoid discussions of abstract right, lest he enter "the great Serbonian bog, betwixt Damietta and Mount Casius old, where armies whole have sunk." Burke assumed a close reciprocal relationship between natural law and the prescriptive rights of the British constitution; and he preferred to speak in terms of the latter rather than the former, lest his private reason lead him astray.

Similarly, Stanlis places too much emphasis on natural rights in Burke's thought—far more than is justified by

Burke's statements on the subject. While Burke recognized the existence of natural rights, he was quick to qualify such an abstract concept by reference to man's existence within civil society. Stanlis' attempts to draw an explicit natural rights teaching out of the classical and Scholastic tradition also appears somewhat strained, considering the fact that that older tradition placed far more emphasis on men's duties than on their rights. Moreover, he is rather vague about what constitutes "the natural rights of the classical and Scholastic moral Natural Law," and his references to "life, liberty, and property" sound closer to the Lockean natural rights doctrine than to traditional natural law principles. However, these observations deal more with Stanlis' emphasis than with the essential substance of this fine book.

Edmund Burke is, indeed, the perennial political philosopher (as Professor Stanlis calls him); and he has much to teach us in these declining years of the twentieth century. Stanlis points out, for example, that Burke distinguished between civil and natural rights—a distinction which Burke used to refute the extreme claims of the Jacobins in France and their supporters in England. The franchise, he argued, belongs not to man as man, but to man as citizen: "As to the share of power, authority, and direction which each individual ought to have in the management of the state, that I must deny to be amongst the direct original rights of man in civil society. . . . It is a thing to be settled by convention." While Burke supported democracy as an element of a well-constituted

political order, he did not see democracy as a panacea or as a “human right,” as is so commonly the case in contemporary Western societies. Burke opposed arbitrary power in all of its forms—be it the power of a monarch, an aristocracy, or a “tumultuous and giddy” democracy.

Moreover, Burke recognized the limits of government’s competence. “To provide for us in our necessities is not in the power of government,” Burke wrote in his “Thoughts and Details on Scarcity.” “It would be vain presumption in statesmen to think they can do it. . . . It is in the power of government to prevent much evil; it can do very little positive good in this, or perhaps in anything else.”

But Burke’s greatest relevance in the

context of contemporary politics, Professor Stanlis argues, “lies in his criticism of the respective crimes and follies of totalitarian tyranny in all its modern forms, and of the anarchy of selfish egoists who think they can live in society as though they existed as isolated, atomized individuals in a pre-civil state of nature.” While the threat of totalitarian tyranny appears to be declining (thanks to the demise of the Soviet Union), the social fabric of Western society is being torn apart by “selfish egoists” who seek a purely voluntary relationship to society. Burke knew that social anarchy would inevitably lead to the very tyranny which the advocates of absolute freedom should most fear.