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# *History As Transcendence: What Leo Strauss Does Not Understand About Edmund Burke*

**Claes G. Ryn**

*The Catholic University of America*

There is a prominent aspect of the thought of Edmund Burke that political theorists and others have had great difficulty understanding and that has made even his admirers underestimate his philosophical importance. At the core of the difficulty is how Burke relates an emphasis on concrete historical circumstances and tradition to the ancient idea of a universal norm for life and politics. A wide variety of terms have been used over the centuries to speak about different aspects of this higher norm or reality—"the Good," "the Beyond," "the transcendent," "the eternal," "God," "the Ground of Being," "universal values," "the Universal," "natural right," "the good, the true, and the beautiful," to mention just a few. One may use "universality" or "the universal" for short. Of the many thinkers who have had difficulty making sense of Burke's historical consciousness the most celebrated in recent decades has been Leo Strauss. His extended criticism of Burke in *Natural Right and History* is familiar to most political theorists. For Strauss, Burke is a pioneer of "historicism," a powerful modern philosophical current that Strauss considers highly destructive. According to historicists, he writes, "all human thought is historical and hence unable ever to grasp anything eternal." In their

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CLAES G. RYN is Professor of Politics at The Catholic University of America and Founding Director of the Center for the Study of Statesmanship.

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preoccupation with historical particularity and circumstance historicists dissolve the ancient notion of an enduring higher good for man and politics. According to Strauss, historicism aggravates a crisis of natural right.<sup>1</sup>

What is distinctive, original, and important about Burke's view of history and universality and that has caused so much misunderstanding can be brought out by juxtaposing Burke's thought with Strauss's anti-historicism and criticism of Burke. We may place alongside each other Burke's most famous statement of his view of history and higher values, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, and the book in which Strauss presents his criticism of Burke, *Natural Right and History*.<sup>2</sup>

Burke  
reconstitutes  
ancient idea of  
universality.

Strauss is certainly right that Burke attaches more importance to the role of history and tradition than previous thinkers. It does not follow that he is rejecting the belief in an enduring higher good. It can be argued that he does the very opposite, that he reaffirms and deepens this notion and that Strauss misunderstands his argument and does not even grant it a real hearing. Burke's respect for tradition and the emphasis that he places on historical circumstance are due to his reconstituting, not abandoning, the ancient idea of universality. He is a pioneer in recognizing that universality and historical particularity are not, as previously thought, mutually incompatible and repellent but, rather, are potentially implicated in each other, potentially aspects of one and the same higher reality. Searching for universal values, we should not, according to Burke, look to "metaphysical abstraction" but to concrete, historically formed, experiential manifestations of value.<sup>3</sup> It is in historical particulars that human beings encounter the universal—in their highest achievements and in the traditions that these have engendered, in religion, politics, the arts, philosophy manners, and elsewhere. It is in and through these

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 12. "The Crisis of Modern Natural Right" is the title of the lengthy final chapter of the book, which deals extensively with Burke.

<sup>2</sup> A separate article might be written about the many possible meanings of the word "historicism." It has been used to describe everything from post-modernist anti-foundationalism to positivistic historical fact-gathering. Here attention will be focused on how Burke and Strauss view history.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 7.

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concrete particulars that human beings come to know and are drawn more deeply into the higher reality. Though a political and literary figure rather than a professional philosopher, Burke precedes the German idealists in discovering what would become known as the “concrete universal.” The higher reality is for Burke not merely “beyond” man’s historical existence but *in* history. It discloses its own special dignity and authority in historical experience at its best. Leo Strauss regards Burke as an “historicist,” and so he is, but not, as Strauss asserts, in the sense that he abandons “natural right” in favor of historical relativism. Burke draws attention to a previously poorly understood possibility, the potential union of universality and particularity. Implicit in Burke’s respect for historically evolved beliefs, what he calls “prejudice,” and in his emphasis on circumstance and historical complexity is that true universality is not something ahistorical, disembodied, distant, and abstract. It shows itself in the historical concrete. That human history is full of mediocrity and outright depravity means that goodness, truth, and beauty must always be gained in struggle against opposing forces, but it is in and through that struggle that man discovers more of what makes life worth living. Human existence at its best is for Burke revelatory of life’s higher purpose. Here and there societies emerge that are unusually charged with higher values. Wherever the universal acquires concrete form humanity establishes contact, however faint and tenuous, with the Eternal. One might say, interpreting Burke, that, to this extent, Eternity is not merely in the future but has already started. History manifests the Eternal, though incompletely and in chronic tension with everything that counteracts it in the world. This view of the potential union of universality and history does not do away with the need for terms like “the beyond” or “transcendence,” because the magnetic higher power has but a partial and fragile foothold in the historical world, forever threatened as it is by opposing forces.<sup>4</sup>

*True universality not ahistorical.*

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<sup>4</sup> Burke does not express his central ideas in the manner of a systematic philosopher, but attentive readers can formulate his ideas more fully and in more “technical” terminology. There can be no question of presenting here all of the philosophical arguments about the sense in which union of universality and particularity is possible or about why Burke’s historicized notion of universality represents a significant advance over earlier notions. This author has presented such arguments in many places, notably in *Will, Imagination and Rea-*

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### *The Universal Beyond*

It may be useful to sketch the ancient philosophical disposition regarding higher values that Burke questions and that makes it difficult for Leo Strauss and others to understand him. That tendency is to look for life's meaning beyond the experiential sphere known to human beings. A kind of disdain has often attached to ordinary life in its concrete particulars. These particulars have been assumed to be inherently separate from a sphere beyond this world, indeed, to be positively detrimental to the realization of life's ultimate meaning. Plato is paradigmatic. Goodness, truth, and beauty are not really in the concrete specifics where we may think that we encounter them. Phenomena so described are a mere reflection of something more profound and intense that does not itself belong to the shadowy, transitory world of experiential particulars. Goodness, truth, and beauty are transcendent forms. They are universal and changeless. The task of human beings, or of those capable of it, is to extract themselves as far as possible from the flux of multiplicity and particularity. The latter, "the Many," are the source of disorder and meaninglessness. They are opposed by "the One," which is the source of all order and meaning. Life becomes what it should be in proportion as the Many yield to the unifying, elevating power of the One.

One reason why it seems plausible to look for meaning beyond the experiential world of particulars immediately suggests itself. Ordinary life is full of indignities, ugliness, perversities, and suffering as well as mere mediocrity and dullness. An existence truly worth having must surely be free of such pollution or dilution. Goodness, truth, and beauty must in this grossly imperfect world appear only in flimsy, muted, reflected form. These phenomenal reflections of universality point to something much finer, more intense, elevated, and rewarding.

Plausible as this way of thinking may seem, it comes up against a major complication, which is that higher values are known to human beings only in some specific concrete form:

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*son: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality*, 2nd exp. ed. (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1997; first published in 1983) and *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2003). They draw in turn on a large body of philosophy. The purpose here is to indicate in broad philosophical terms how Burke affirms universality and how Strauss misunderstands him.

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in particular spiritual experiences or moral acts, in particular insights, or in particular aesthetic visions. But the philosophers have desired something purer and more rarified. On the basis of particular experiences they have relied on abstract rationality and romantic imagination to project into the void a purported Universality that is uncontaminated by concrete experience.

The notion of a self-subsisting normative reality disconnected from and unaffected by particularity has had great influence in moral philosophy, including political philosophy. Many of those who accept the notion that politics is subject to a moral imperative conceive of the standard as wholly independent of the circumstances of time and place. Plato emphasizes the contrast between justice and the ways of all particular societies. Justice is understood to be always and everywhere the same.

*Normative  
reality disconnected from  
particularity.*

Why this compulsion to conceive of the standard as bearing little or no resemblance to the opportunities offered by actual politics and human life generally? The latter are characterized by the moral, cultural, intellectual, economic, and geographical circumstances of time and place. Life is full of twists and turns and of human wickedness, ignorance, and bewilderment. Should not a standard for human life be such that it takes into account what might be possible? Should the standard not be relevant in the sense that it is attuned to real life and guides human beings to attainable goals? Should it not inspire the person to act for good even in discouraging circumstances? But instead of taking their bearings with reference to actual historical situations, many philosophers have sought what is normative in a world beyond all changeability, particularity, diversity, evil, and confusion. They have conjured up a static and reified universality. Plato says of the true philosopher, who alone can discern the ultimate good, that "His eyes are turned to contemplate fixed and immutable realities, a realm where there is no injustice done or suffered, but all is reason and order."<sup>5</sup>

The Platonic standard is, thus, very distant and different from the here and the now. It is bound to distract the person from actual life and from what might actually be possible in

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<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Republic* (2nd rev. ed.: Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 296-97, 500b.

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the present situation. So sharply does the standard contrast with the variable, complex, imperfect, cloudy world of concrete phenomena in which human beings have to make their way that it is likely to produce moral discouragement, disillusionment, and melancholy. That a moral standard should be such is incongruous in that it is actual historical circumstances and situations that provide the opportunities for and the obstacles to right conduct. Yet for Platonizing moralists human existence in the concrete should have nothing to do with defining what is normative. To grasp the standard for human conduct, Leo Strauss writes, it is necessary to go above and beyond “what is actual in the here and now.” Sound philosophy must assume the existence of a “universal and unchangeable norm.” Right is what it is regardless of concrete circumstances. Strauss calls the autonomous, independently existing norm for politics “the simply just” or “the simply right.”<sup>6</sup>

The responsible actor and thinker should not, then, associate the moral norm itself with the concrete challenges and uncertainties of actual situations, as Burke the historicist does. But it is far from clear how a static norm or model whose lack of concreteness separates it from the texture and limitations of ordinary human life could enter into contact with that sphere of life. Disembodied, ethereal, and “abstract,” the norm has no integral relationship with the world in which human beings must find their way.

In Plato himself there are philosophical impulses that qualify or contradict his strong tendency in epistemology and moral philosophy to assume an ahistorical, purely transcendent higher good. Plato’s belief that human beings must “turn” their souls, change their character, in order to become aware of what is highest, indicates an appreciation, however limited, for the close connection, in practice, between the world of concrete particulars—specifically, the lower desires that need to be disciplined—and the higher standard.<sup>7</sup> Although in epistemological theory Aristotle says that all knowledge is of the universal,

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<sup>6</sup> *Natural Right*, 13, 307.

<sup>7</sup> For an in-depth discussion of contradictory tendencies in Plato’s view of political morality and of the weakness of his understanding of political virtue, see Claes G. Ryn, “The Politics of Transcendence: The Pretentious Passivity of Platonic Idealism,” *Humanitas*, Vol. XII, No 2, 1999.

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he shows in his philosophical practice, not least in his ethics and politics, that taking “empirical” particulars into account and adapting to them is indispensable to promoting not only good but knowledge.

The abstractionist propensity of the Greek thinkers, much more pronounced in Plato than in Aristotle, was strongly challenged by Christianity, more so than many Christians realized. The idea that the divine, the “Word,” had assumed human form—that it had been incarnated, become “flesh,” in a historical person—questioned the old habit of separating the universal good from the human world. While sharpening the sense of evil in the world, Christianity modified the old disdain for the world. According to the Old Testament, the Creator pronounced His creation good. The break with a disembodied higher good gave Christianity a sense, initially groping, that normativity and particularity might belong together. Some of what happens in history might be intrinsically meaningful. Thomas Aquinas’s notion of natural law and his idea that custom and natural law tend to coincide are examples of a budding and partial recognition of the potential dignity and worth of life in the here and now.<sup>8</sup> Still, philosophy had to wait for a more fundamental and systematic questioning of the old tendency to place normativity outside of history and to gain a deepened awareness of how historicity and normativity can come together.

This possibility became a central subject in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Eric Voegelin’s reaction to the emerging historical consciousness was shaped and truncated by the exaggerations and extravagancies of Hegel. Despite Voegelin’s interest in the “experiential” aspect of the higher life, he did not explore elements of historicism in Hegel or in others that might have enhanced his notion of “experience.” It seems that most admirers of Voegelin have been discouraged by his sweeping warning against immanentizing the Eschaton from really exploring alternatives to what he opposed. The historical sense of Edmund Burke did not have the “egophanic” aspect that so bothered Voegelin in Hegel. As Leo Strauss writes of Burke, “Burke denies the possibility of an absolute moment;

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<sup>8</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, “Treatise on Law,” in *Summa Theologica*.



man can never become the seeing master of his own fate.”<sup>9</sup> Burke might have increased Voegelin’s awareness of the immanent, historical aspect of the Eschaton, but Burke was one of several prominent intellectual figures whom Voegelin appears deliberately to have neglected.<sup>10</sup>

The tendency to place universality beyond and above historical particularity gave philosophy the task of linking two spheres regarded as ultimately incompatible. The problem produced a proliferation of methods for “translating” ahistorical normativity into practical guidance. Aristotle assigned the task to what he called “practical reason.” Natural law theorists and various metaphysicians engaged in elaborate casuistry to apply supposedly universal principles to particular situations. In recent decades, the “new” natural law theory of people like Germain Grisez, John Finnis, and Robert George has made natural law speculation and casuistry more abstractly rationalistic and legalistic than ever. A similar kind of abstractionism, although with a different assumed normativity, is found in supposed liberals like John Rawls. But none of these approaches to universal principles and casuistry has overcome the old incongruity of universality and particularity, a problem to which Burke’s historicism suggests a solution.

### ***Universality as Transcendent and Immanent***

For thinkers accustomed to conceiving of universal right in highly abstract ways, Burke’s understanding of universality must seem self-contradictory, so far-fetched, indeed, that he

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<sup>9</sup> *Natural Right*, 315-16.

<sup>10</sup> Three persons who are conspicuously omitted in Voegelin’s review of major thinkers are Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Edmund Burke, and Irving Babbitt. Since Voegelin could hardly have thought each of them historically insignificant or philosophically unimportant, what might account for his silence? There is a highly plausible explanation. Though very different in other respects, these neglected thinkers have in common that for them the role of the *imagination* and how it relates to moral questions was central. That Voegelin should have passed over each of these thinkers is hardly coincidental. It is highly likely that he was mystified by their emphases and that when first encountering them he felt philosophically ill-prepared to comment upon them. Because of their obvious importance, he may have planned to return to them at a more opportune moment, but he never did. For a discussion of Voegelin’s neglect of Babbitt and Rousseau, see Claes G. Ryn, “Eric Voegelin and Irving Babbitt,” *Voegelin View*, Nov. 7, 2014. The same explanation can be applied to Voegelin’s neglect of Burke.



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must be up to something different from what he is telling us. For abstractionists, the normative One and historical multiplicity and particularity are in the end separate and incompatible. The gist of Burke's argument about the higher values of life—the universal for short—is that they are at once transcendent *and* immanent, universal *and* particular, historical *and* more than historical. Such an idea is alien to Plato, at least in his explicitly stated epistemology, and to medieval or modern rationalists for whom the ancient logical principle of identity or non-contradiction—"A is A and not non-A"—is the law of thought. For the universal to be universal *and* particular would be contradictory.

Those who have this reaction and want to understand the meaning of Burke's historicism should be asked to think again. They should consider life as they actually know it, not in abstract theory but in lived, immediate experience. It is necessary to resist the impulse to impose upon this direct experience an explanatory scheme that turns life into a vast conglomeration of "things," "this" being "this," and "that" being "that." Actual human experience—as distinguished from "experience" chopped up into pieces for convenient classification—is a comprehensive, continuous, living whole in which phenomena and relationships are not "external" or "mechanical." Phenomena in lived experience are more deeply related, though often in relations of dissonance or tension. In so far as the universal values of goodness, truth, and beauty are concerned, they selectively blend with but also struggle against particularity. Where they are realized they come together with particularity in *synthesis*, which means that universality and particularity are mutually implicated in and are conditioned by each other. Purely abstract, reifying theorizing about life can be useful and even necessary for some pursuits. It is indispensable in natural science. It has a limited role in philosophy itself in that philosophy cannot avoid using ideas it knows to be simplified and preliminary to more philosophical exploration. In philosophy proper, abstract and reifying theorizing yields to a more deeply human kind of thought that is as faithful as it can be to the facts of complex immediate experience. Voegelin is properly concerned about rationalism violating experiential reality, but he shows little awareness of the truly

*The synthesis of universality and particularity found in lived experience.*

*philosophical* rationality that does the opposite and that respects the universality/particularity of actual experience.<sup>11</sup>

As in morality and aesthetics, philosophizing aspires to the fullest possible development of its own office; it seeks the most comprehensive and profound truth. But it does so in awareness that it can never completely overcome ignorance. Because omniscience keeps eluding humanity, further clarification is always needed. There is no definitive truth, only human, incomplete, tentatively formulated truth. This means that knowledge is at the same time and indistinguishably possession of truth and a *striving* for deeper insight. Since philosophical truth is always to some extent provisional, it is "truth-in-the-making." The logic of philosophy is in this sense dialectical. If a formula be required for how we think philosophically, it is, " $A=A$  and non- $A$ ." It is still not fully known just what is and what is not truth. Only in abstract theorizing, which draws conclusions from purely abstract premises, are ideas assumed to have complete self-identity. The premise of the old principle of non-contradiction is that without such "pure" ideas there can be no intellectual coherence, yet only purely abstract reasoning, as in geometry and mathematics, satisfies this condition. There ideas are *defined* as fully self-consistent. Philosophy, by contrast, does not let a demand for a purely abstract consistency and certitude do violence to life as known in living human experience. Philosophy is attentive to moral, intellectual, and aesthetical universality as actually known to man, that is, as embodied in experiential, historical particulars. These particulars both are and are not finished. The dialectical logic of philosophical reasoning is but the intellectual aspect of the struggle for higher values that marks all of human life.

It is to Burke's great credit to have drawn attention to the historicity of universality as actually experienced by human beings.

### *Incomprehension or Avoidance?*

Despite his strictures against Burke's "historicism," Strauss is not wholly hostile to him. Burke was, Strauss

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<sup>11</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the difference between philosophy proper and abstract, simplifying rationality, see Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason*, esp. chs. 3-7.

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concedes, “deeply imbued with the spirit of ‘sound antiquity.’” Strauss sees in Burke’s “discovery” of history and in his attention to particular circumstances a kind of partial return to the traditional awareness of the “essential limitations of theory.” While, according to Strauss, theory is characterized by “simplicity,” politics must apply theory to complex circumstances.<sup>12</sup> Burke thus echoes the Aristotelian emphasis on the need for practical reason and prudence.

American scholars who were more sympathetic than Strauss to Burke’s overall thought published writing on Burke contemporaneously with Strauss or a few years later. Among them were Russell Kirk, Peter Stanlis, and Francis Canavan. Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind* appeared in the same year as *Natural Right and History*. These three men saw a strong resemblance between Burke and ancient writers. They interpreted Burke as standing, more or less, in the tradition of natural law that encompasses Aristotle, Cicero, and Aquinas.<sup>13</sup> Although this interpretation is supported by plentiful evidence, it forces Burke too much into a preexisting category. These scholars do not, except indirectly and intuitively, go into what may be regarded as most truly original in Burke. When Strauss charges Burke with “historicism” he is in a way more alert than they are to what is philosophically groundbreaking in Burke. Strauss at the same time misunderstands that dimension of thought.

*Most admir-  
ers of Burke  
neglect his  
historicism.*

What Strauss is strangely unable to grasp is that Burke’s strong interest in history is indistinguishable from a profound interest in higher values and the divine and that Burke sees history with its particularity-individuality as a possible channel for interaction between God and man.

The main reason why Strauss has difficulty understanding

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<sup>12</sup> *Natural Right*, 323, 304, 307.

<sup>13</sup> On the element of natural law thinking in Burke, see, in particular, Peter Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958) and Francis Canavan, *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1960). Canavan goes particularly far in claiming Burke for a natural law interpretation of life and politics. Before these studies, in *The Conservative Mind* (Chicago: Regnery, 1953), Russell Kirk had offered a not unrelated view of Burke but one that, due in large part to Irving Babbitt’s influence on Kirk, brings out more of Burke’s originality, including the central role that he assigns to the imagination.

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Burke's historicism is undoubtedly that, more than most, he regards some kind of symbiosis between universality and particularity-individuality as out of the question. Universality must, he thinks, be precisely that, *universal*, which in his definition means that it is non-specific and purely abstract. To contemplate universality, which is the province of the philosopher, is for the world of individuality to fade into the background and lose interest. To give as much attention to historical particularity as Burke does is, Strauss believes, to drift away from normativity and philosophy. Strauss concedes that Burke has a genuine concern with virtue, but his historicism undermines that concern and greatly aggravates "the crisis of modern natural right."<sup>14</sup>

*For Strauss,  
Burke's  
historicism  
contradicts  
natural right.*

At the very end of *Natural Right and History* Strauss sums up what places Burke and historicists in general on the wrong side of the most important divide: "The quarrel between the ancients and the moderns concerns eventually, and perhaps even from the beginning, the status of 'individuality.'" "Individuality" is another word for historical particularity in general as well as a term for personal individuality. It has for the ancients and even more for Strauss no inherent value or purpose. It belongs to the flux. Burke's deep interest in "individuality" shows, Strauss contends, his moving away from the ancient belief in natural right. He becomes a founder of "the historical school." Burke is, for Strauss, one of the thinkers who rejects "the idea of philosophy as the attempt to grasp the eternal." Historicism "destroyed the only solid basis of all efforts to transcend the actual." Historicism was, Strauss says in a sweeping and telling formulation, "a much more extreme form of modern this-worldliness than the French radicalism of the eighteenth century."<sup>15</sup>

Strauss shows a remarkable lack of receptivity to what Burke is trying to say. Burke's reason for emphasizing historicity is virtually the *opposite* of what Strauss claims. Burke's sensitivity to tradition and particular historical circumstances grows out of a desire to *protect* and *improve* humanity's grasp of the eternal. Burke's consciousness of the intimate connection between universality and particularity was

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<sup>14</sup> This is the title of the final chapter of *Natural Right*.

<sup>15</sup> *Natural Right*, 323, 12, 15.

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unquestionably due in large part to his realizing how much was being threatened by the French revolutionary radicals with their abstract theories for how to remake society. The historical situation sharpened and deepened his awareness of how much “latent wisdom” and value was contained in the ways of life and thought that the radicals were attacking.<sup>16</sup> Indiscriminately to rob human beings of their heritage was to rob them of myriad and specific connections to higher values.

Basic to Burke’s view of the human condition is that life is ultimately a mystery of great complexity and exceedingly difficult for human beings to grasp. Not only are human beings morally flawed, but they have limited intellectual and other resources. Even the wisest and most brilliant are far from all-seeing. But while the individual person thrown back on his own resources has very limited capacity, entire peoples and humanity as a whole have over time made important discoveries, though none of them final. Burke argues that, without their historical inheritance, flawed as it might be, human beings would be sadly and dangerously lacking in guidance. The insights and values that they do possess as individuals they owe largely to the civilization into which they were born. Burke writes about the British: “We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason, because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages.”<sup>17</sup> To disdain and reject tradition and to invoke supposedly universal abstract rights, as the French revolutionists were doing, is to place an inordinate trust in abstract individual reason and to show enormous conceit. It is because of his view of the human condition and of how human beings get to know the universal that Burke approaches history and tradition with respect.

*Historical  
inheritance  
indispensable  
to individual.*

Burke repeatedly and emphatically affirms higher values and faith in God. The reason he rejects normative abstractionism is that he thinks that it misrepresents the real nature of the higher standard. It is as people become familiar with the best that humanity has previously done, thought, and created—making it their own by recapturing it in personal

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<sup>16</sup> *Reflections*, 76.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

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*Higher  
values show  
themselves in  
particularity.*

experience—that they begin to know, and are oriented to, higher values. It is in particular historical manifestations, not in ahistorical abstractions, that higher values show themselves and have inspiring force. Thinkers who turn universality into an abstraction accessible through unassisted rationality or metaphysics rob these values of the magnetic pull that attracts ever new interest and invites ever new articulation. Important as it is, tradition with its favored canons is never the final word. Absorbing and transmitting what is most admirable in a society's past is not a matter of repeating it. It must be recreated and, to some extent, revised by each generation. Individuals who interact seriously with a heritage will be moved to regenerate, deepen, and expand it and to oppose routinization and empty formalism. People whose moral, intellectual, or aesthetical sensibility has been honed in interaction with the best of tradition will autonomously challenge what is deemed less than conducive to values that they have now experienced for themselves.

Burke believes that in vibrant, healthy societies there is a natural and continual rejuvenation of inherited ways and adaptation to changed historical circumstances. Practices that no longer serve society's higher purpose are weeded out. Referring to human society as "the state," Burke writes, "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its own conservation."<sup>18</sup>

*History lives  
in the present.*

A problem with using the word "history" in connection with universality is that it makes most people think of "the past." "History" is for them "what happened then," something back there that can be dated and classified and that is not tied in any essential way to the present. The great contribution of the kind of historicism that Burke pioneered is to have brought into conscious awareness the great extent to which the past moves in the present, for good or ill. It is an integral part of what constitutes the here and the now. The present would not be what it is without all that has already taken place, yet most people never recognize the prominent historical dimension of their own thoughts and actions. As individuals absorb and rearticulate the past and put their own imprint on it, the past becomes the present. In a properly traditional society,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 19.

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Burke believes, the best of the human heritage is recreated and developed. To use a phrase not found in Burke, the heritage becomes a “living past.” It is in this present past that universality and historical particularity come together.

None of Burke’s many formulations suggesting a close connection between historical particularity and universality makes Strauss want to examine that possibility with care. To him, what is historical must be different from and even detrimental to natural right. He agrees with “classical philosophy” as he understands it that “the distinction between nature and convention is fundamental.” Strauss makes it clear that the traditions of humanity—what he calls “the ancestral,” or custom, or the conventional—have nothing to do with discerning or respecting natural right. “The simply good, which is what is good by nature,” is “*radically distinct* from the ancestral.”<sup>19</sup> His University of Chicago disciple and colleague Joseph Cropsey, with whom he co-edited a widely read work on political philosophy, goes so far as to say about “the conventional” that “it is *antithetical* to the natural.”<sup>20</sup> Whence this inclination to perceive traditional ways as hostile? Might they not be at least compatible with the natural? Strauss writes of true philosophers, who alone understand universality, that they are ill at ease in the societies in which they find themselves. They feel like outsiders. “The recognition of universal principles . . . tends to prevent men from wholeheartedly identifying themselves with, or accepting, the social order that fate has allotted to them. It tends to alienate them from their place on the earth. It tends to make them strangers, and even strangers on the earth.” Strauss believes that, with regard to convention, philosophy is revolutionary. Natural right as such acts as “dynamite for civil society.”<sup>21</sup>

*For Strauss  
natural right  
is incompat-  
ible with  
tradition.*

Why this assumption that philosophizing must take place in an atmosphere of alienation and have revolutionary implications? Why this seemingly automatic and sweeping dismissal of the idea that an historical heritage can be a support and conduit for or embodiment of higher values? It is

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<sup>19</sup> *Natural Right*, 11, 153 (emphasis added).

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Cropsey, *Political Philosophy and the Issues of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 117-18 (emphasis added).

<sup>21</sup> *Natural Right*, 13-14, 153.



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hardly sufficient to look to “the ancients” for an explanation for Strauss’s radically anti-historicist notion of natural right, because in their day “history” had not yet, as Strauss himself recognizes, been “discovered.” History was vaguely associated with what is changeable, transitory, in flux and was not sharply differentiated from universality. The “ancients” were also far from univocal on the epistemological status of particularity. Plato’s philosophical predisposition is in some ways similar to Strauss’s abstractionism, but there are in Aristotle strong contrary tendencies. Aristotle’s epistemological assumption that there can be knowledge only of what is universal is belied by much of his philosophical practice. He showed in his strong interest in historical evidence and in his emphasis on the socio-political nature of man that he had a budding awareness that history-particularity may be connected to good and should be studied for philosophical enlightenment and as a guide to conduct. Strauss’s term “the ancients” suggests a greater like-mindedness among them regarding history and universality than is warranted.

*Strauss  
radicalizes  
rejection of  
history.*

It is significant that Strauss rejects historicism, as he understands it, long *after* the issue of life’s historicity and the role of tradition had come into focus. The challenge of historicism makes him sharpen the distinction between universality and particularity. His rejection of history as a source of guidance and knowledge becomes more radical than it could be among the “pre-historical” ancients.

Why not, one wonders, allow for the possibility recognized by Burke, that you can be at one and the same time respectful of the human heritage and alert to its possible weaknesses? Aquinas had something like that attitude, showing in his view of natural law and custom at least a vague premonition of Burke’s historical consciousness. Strauss’s suspicion of tradition and his desire to separate it from natural right might have partly psychological reasons. One can imagine that for a Jewish refugee from Germany, understandably traumatized by the Nazi horror, any affirmation of historical particularity, however distant from the perverse nationalism of the Nazis, might be a source of great unease. The experience of Jews in different countries over the centuries may also have contributed to a distrust of and alienation from traditional societies and to

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a desire to have universal values be something very different.

Burke, in contrast, does not believe that wisdom must involve alienation and homelessness. Although he does not systematically explore the epistemology of philosophy, the implication of his view of wisdom and of what he rejects is that philosophy is best served by a combination of historical consciousness and critical distance to both past and present.

Although historical factors and personal sensitivities may have deeply affected Strauss, he makes it seem as if historical context is irrelevant to understanding ideas. He has little interest in the historical circumstances—including the French Revolution and its Rousseauistic utopianism and the triumph of Enlightenment rationalism—in which Burke wrote the *Reflections*.

### *Experience as Normative*

If in history evil is contending with good, how can human beings know what is what? Like other moral rationalists, Strauss assumes that sound choice requires a preexisting, rational standard, according to which degrees of good or evil can be assessed. Burke's view is that the principle of selection is not a matter of abstract cogitation but of discrimination evolving out of experience. The deeper, more rewarding human experience judges, demotes, or disqualifies what is inherently inferior. Aristotle has a very similar idea. What is for him ultimately normative is the special, inherently authoritative experience of *eudaimonia*. It is with reference to it that other aspects of our humanity can be judged beneficial or detrimental. Burke deepens this notion by recognizing what *eudaimonia* owes not only to social supports but to historical evolution. According to Burke, a central role is played in a soundly traditional society by people of refined sensibility and broad range. These people know something about what is popular at the moment but can compare it to previous moral, intellectual, and aesthetical claims. For example, people of musical breadth and mature tastes have more influence than people of narrow musical experience and undeveloped sensibility. Superior judgment and taste are such by virtue of the fact that from this point of view it is possible to encompass and understand not only one's own position but any lesser,

*Moral discrimination evolves out of experience.*

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more constricted positions. An inferior position is one from whose standpoint it is possible to appreciate one's own primitive standpoint but not to appreciate and do justice to any other position. The strength of the soundly traditional society is that its elites have high qualifications for comparing everything to everything else, "the bank and capital of nations and of ages" providing a heavy but movable anchor. Civilization at its best is, thus, an ongoing comparative process in which claims are continually assessed in relation to each other. In the end, wisdom and refined sensibility are able to persuade by virtue of their own intrinsic merit. They show other claims to be lower-grade, confining, or just plain crude. That society can consider itself fortunate whose leaders have a vivid experiential familiarity with universal values.

Burke assumes, then, that a principle of selectivity is operating within the historical experience of human beings. It is through their historically informed moral-spiritual, intellectual, and aesthetical striving and discrimination that rankings of varying kinds are produced. There is, however, nothing automatic about proper rankings becoming efficacious in society. In anti-traditional, presentist societies, superficiality and forgetfulness may wholly overwhelm what is intrinsically superior.

To moral rationalists, talk of "experience" as a standard makes goodness, truth, and beauty much too diffuse and indefinite and subject to unending controversy. It leaves experience standing against experience. To which a Burke would say: precisely. There is no alternative. There are for human beings no final, definitive standards of goodness, truth, and beauty if what is meant are fixed principles or definitions unaffected by the complexity and variety of human existence. Genuine standards are in a sense independent and autonomous and beyond historical particularity: they are a compelling, inspiring source for an infinite number and variety of actions yet to come. Human beings also have no control over the special qualities that define and make them authoritative. But to become real and normative—truly *persuasive*—for human beings, they have to acquire concrete form in particular moral actions, particular philosophical insights, particular artistic creations. Before assuming some definite shape they are but groping, inarticulate intuitions. It is as individuals give concrete

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expression to the inspiring power of universality that human life is deepened and enriched and that sound standards are formed and refreshed. The likelihood of this happening is greatly enhanced in a society that is accustomed to transmitting the best of the old as a guide and challenge for the rising generation. Fortunately, societies do not need to start from some primitive, open-ended beginning. Exceptional, path-breaking individuals can play central leadership roles, but the civilized society is not created by a single enlightened generation and even less by a few exceptional minds, or by a "lawgiver." Those who are so called turn out to have been formed by an already existing culture, even if partly in opposition to it.

Civilization emerges over the centuries as mankind discovers more and more of its own strengths and weaknesses. The most perceptive, discriminating, and original make their contributions in myriad different forms and contexts, and, though their collective activities may share in the ethos of universality and give society its general direction, unanimity among them is impossible. This is because of humanity's intellectual predicament and life's complexity and diversity, but also because the norm is not some abstract, preexisting static model of which human beings might take a picture to share with others. The magnetic qualities of goodness, truth, and beauty are revealed only as particular human beings are inspired to give them concrete form in their corner of the world. Universality "preexists" specific contributions in the sense that prior to articulation it is undefined as to particularity. It must be brought to the attention of others through the creativity of individual persons. No society will be guided solely by the most qualified, but in a soundly traditional society there will be a strong tendency for leaders of moral-spiritual, intellectual, and aesthetical discernment to set the tone, which means that openness to life's higher values is encouraged. Care is taken not to repeat mistakes made by previous generations. What gives society its sense of higher direction is a good that is both in and beyond man's historical existence.

*Creativity  
of individuals  
expresses  
universality.*

Even a person generally sympathetic to Burke's point of view may be bothered by how seemingly fragile it makes man's connection to the universal. If respecting and transmitting the human heritage is indispensable to maintaining an acute sense

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*Intense effort needed to repair civilizational disruption.*

of higher values, what about the danger that a society will drift away from the heritage or, perhaps because of too much routinized and rigid traditionalism, fall prey to anti-traditional paroxysms? Cultural radicals, full of their sense of superiority, may cut the rising generation off from the hard-earned lessons of mankind. Where does this kind of situation leave Burkean traditionalism? Where to turn for guidance in the midst of civilizational disruption? Competing “traditions” may have emerged. Such a time places a very heavy burden on persons with a strong sense of what is being lost. They must exert intense effort to keep alive in themselves and to transmit to others as much as possible of the wisdom of the past. Given the unpropitious circumstances, this will require exceptional creativity, including feats of imagination. Burke does not speak explicitly of how to carry out this task of emergency repair, but shows in his own opposition to cultural radicalism what may be required of those who would protect and restore the bond to “the bank and capital of nations and of ages.”

For moral rationalists, the possibility of social upheaval and dissension is but further proof of the need for a standard outside of history. If, as Burke intimates, contending claims must ultimately be assessed in experiential terms, there can be no final determination of right, only assertions and counter-assertions and fruitless debate. A standard supposedly emerging through interaction with the human past could only be amorphous and arbitrary. Universality must, moral rationalists assume, be understood as consisting of a definite, rational, abstract standard—“principles”—with which to assess the merit of competing claims, and it must be accessible in a more direct, straight-forward manner.

*Rationalists claim inherent validity for abstract standard.*

But how does this notion of universality overcome the supposed problem? Does not the rationalist, too, have to show why, given a plethora of contending rational claims, his particular claim should be privileged? If it is not adequate for an historicist to cite an *experiential* standard as inherently valid, why should Strauss or other rationalists be permitted to cite an *abstract* standard as inherently valid? How can we know that Strauss’s notion of natural right is what it should be? Surely some higher standard is needed to verify his claims? Straussians and others are fond of asserting that certain rights are “self-

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evident." But so far from self-evident are they that they are rejected by most and embroiled in controversy among others. Strauss would object that the superior intellectual position is inherently such and that those who have it know it to be such. But why should the argument of inherent superiority be granted to rationalists but denied to a thinker like Burke?

In reflecting on the nature of the ultimate norm, ignore for a moment the rationalist prejudice in favor of abstract "principles" and ask what is most likely to persuade a person of the intrinsic authority of a standard. Take, for example, the standard of beauty. Will it persuade because of its abstract definition or "principle"? Or will beauty persuade of its intrinsic merit because of the experiential value of a sublime symphony, poem, or painting? It is not the direct experience of beauty that requires further verification. Beauty in the concrete stirs the whole personality with its own inherent authority and makes the person yield in gratitude and joy. What does lack verification is the allegedly normative abstract standard, empty as it is of the experiential particulars that might command human interest.

*Experiential value inherently persuasive.*

Whereas Strauss is markedly disinterested in connecting universality with concrete particulars, Burke believes that norms and ideas that are not conceived in relation to some particular set of circumstances are virtually meaningless and potentially tyrannical in their abstract simplicity. "I cannot stand forward and give praise or blame to anything 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."<sup>22</sup>

Strauss has a very different inclination. It deeply bothers him that Burke rejects a rationalistic conception of the just social and political order. Burke believes, Strauss points out, that a good society must emerge over time. A present good owes greatly to human effort already made. Putting his finger on what he considers "the novel element" in Burke that is thought to be so destructive of philosophy and natural right, Strauss writes: "He rejects the view that constitutions can be 'made' in favor of the view that they must 'grow.'" You might think

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<sup>22</sup> *Reflections*, 7.

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For Strauss,  
good society  
implements  
abstract  
model.

that most constitutional historians would concede the truth of Burke's belief. Who could study, for example, the framing of the U.S. Constitution without being struck by how much it owes to British constitutionalism, the common law, "the rights of Englishmen," etc., to say nothing of the older, more general background of classical and Christian civilization. But Strauss seems compelled to resist any connection between a heritage and social-political good. Good must originate in abstract contemplation, the results of which are applied to a society. Strauss's indictment of Burke is that "he rejects in particular the view that the best social order can be or ought to be the work of an individual, of a wise 'legislator' or 'founder.'" Strauss finds missing in Burke the belief in incontrovertible, universal, rationally accessible truth. Strauss claims that according to historicism "there cannot be *the* true account of the universe" and "that man can never arrive at true and final knowledge of the universe." Burke abandons the supposedly ancient belief in *the* "best regime." According to the ancients, Strauss says, the best society, is "identical with the perfect moral order," as understood by the philosopher, but Burke believes "that the best constitution is . . . not 'formed according to a regular plan or with any unity of design' but directed toward 'the greatest variety of ends.'" <sup>23</sup>

We may leave aside Strauss's typically broad use of the word "ancients." He is correct that Burke challenges any merely abstract and static standard of perfection. "A regular plan" and "unity of design" ignores for him the complexity and manifold needs of human society and the impossibility of anticipating all major consequences. Burke argues that government cannot be made according to ideas that "exist in total independence of it and exist in much greater clearness and in much greater degree of abstract perfection." "Their abstract perfection is their practical defect." Burke points out that "the liberties and the restrictions vary with times and circumstances and admit to infinite modification." "They cannot be settled upon any abstract rule; and nothing is so foolish as to discuss them upon that principle." <sup>24</sup> Burke has in his sights chiefly the French radicals, but his criticism applies to any attempt to substitute

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<sup>23</sup> *Natural Right*, 313, 98, 144, 314

<sup>24</sup> *Reflections*, 52, 53.



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purely abstract thought for historically informed and adapted reflection as to what is desirable and possible.

For Strauss, universal normativity has to be accessible to independently and abstractly operating minds. He sides with what he takes to be the classical mind, according to which “philosophizing means . . . to ascend . . . to essentially private knowledge.”<sup>25</sup> To think of universality instead as emerging in history in diverse ways as human beings strive in their circumstances to articulate their sense of higher good seems to him to deny natural right. Strauss is wholly unreceptive to Burke’s point of view and flagrantly misrepresents it, sometimes embarrassingly so.

### *History as Vehicle for Transcendence*

As against those who would radically remake society according to an allegedly virtuous abstract central plan, Burke argues that the British constitution is the result of historical evolution and that its authority among the British people is derived not from some anterior abstract rights but from its having existed for a very long time. On that basis Strauss attributes to Burke the view that “transcendent standards can be dispensed with if the standard is inherent in the process.”<sup>26</sup> But this is not Burke’s view at all. This is only the awkward conclusion that Strauss draws from Burke’s emphasis on what present good owes to previous human effort. The longevity of a way of life may induce respect but is by itself not normative. Transcendence most certainly cannot be “dispensed with.” Burke’s real position is that transcendence guides history to the extent that morally, intellectually, and aesthetically discerning people are moved by it and draw upon, revise, and develop what has been previously achieved. Transcendence is for Burke not a static model but a power that seeks historical embodiment. But, as far as Strauss is concerned, a standard of good that both transcends history and emerges over time is oxymoronic.

Burke mentions that sometimes in history great currents seem to sweep everything before it. People who oppose such trends then become perceived as perverse and obstinate.

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<sup>25</sup> *Natural Right*, 12.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

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*Historical  
trends not  
normative for  
Burke.*

Caught up in his own notion of what historicism entails, Strauss here carelessly interprets Burke as saying that an historical force should not be resisted. To do so would be perverse and obstinate. But Burke means nothing of the sort. He is merely indicating the difficulty faced by people who criticize an historical current with powerful momentum. Burke's strenuous opposition to the French Revolution and the mighty historical force that it represented is sufficient to show that Strauss has Burke wholly wrong. Showing courage and integrity in opposing disturbing trends was a pattern in Burke's life. Strauss does not—or will not?—see that it is possible to be at one and the same time respectful of the human heritage and sensitive to destructive historical forces. For Strauss, history is always one and the same essentially meaningless process and cannot set its own standard. What Strauss does not consider is that an historicist may be sharply critical of an historical current precisely *because* "the bank and capital of nations and of ages" is a source of moral, intellectual, and aesthetical discrimination. According to Burke, sound "prejudice" enhances the ability of human beings to identify and oppose ominous developments. The historical sense—the consciousness of how history moves in human beings and how the universal and particular coincide or struggle against each other—is, in effect, a catalyst for acute ethical, intellectual, and aesthetical judgment in the present. But the idea of history as assisting wise selection is foreign to Strauss. He badly misunderstands Burke and at times even seems to engage in deliberate distortion.<sup>27</sup>

*Strauss  
attributes  
absurdity to  
Burke.*

That Strauss misrepresents Burke's historicism is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the following summary statement of Burke's supposed meaning: "The sound political order for him, in the last analysis, is the unintended outcome of accidental causation."<sup>28</sup> So confused by Burke's way of speaking about history is Strauss that he attributes to Burke a virtual absurdity. As has been discussed, Burke's real view is that the people in a decently good society, especially their leaders, have a strong

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<sup>27</sup> For a penetrating discussion of Burke's historicism and for a critique of Strauss's mischaracterization of Burke on the subject of opposing historical currents, see Joseph Baldacchino, "The Value-Centered Historicism of Edmund Burke," *Modern Age*, Spring 1983.

<sup>28</sup> *Natural Right*, 314-15.

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sense of general direction. This is the case although they address an infinite number of different needs in their own spheres of life. All of these activities can be influenced, however indirectly, by the same general sense of purpose. People in different walks of life proceed according to their own insight, but in the light of their heritage. If the outcomes are in some ways “accidental,” it is not because of a lack of purpose but because human intention may when refracted through complex and only partially known circumstances produce results either better or worse than expected. An analogy to modern medical research is apposite. It often happens that research into one illness “accidentally” discovers a treatment for a seemingly unrelated illness. This does not mean that the researchers are indifferent and have no purpose. On the contrary, the “accidental” discovery is a by-product of a desire to promote health. It goes without saying that sometimes in history developments outside of human control have profound consequences.

It has been shown that for Strauss emphasizing historical particularity and respecting tradition or convention is the same as to abolish the notion of right. It is to believe that whatever history produces is acceptable and normative. But Burke’s view simply does not fit Strauss’s preconception. The distinction between good and evil is so fundamental to Burke that he feels no need to dwell on it as a special topic. The distinction is taken for granted in all that he argues. Evil is a prominent part of the human condition. Burke regards history as in large measure a struggle against the lower nature of man—greed, brutality, power-seeking, crudeness, ignorance, deceit, rashness, shortsightedness, and so on. The history of mankind is to a great extent a record of human depravity. It is partly out of a sense of higher values and to protect against that lower part of human nature that human beings have sought to build societies that can protect them against their lower nature and encourage their better nature. Human beings have organized protections against attack, instituted the rule of law, fostered philosophy, education, art, and other elevating, softening activities and structures. Some particularly successful societies have been able to achieve an advanced culture, learning from their mistakes along the way and adding to previous achievements. One way of understanding Burke is

*For Burke, history is struggle against man’s lower nature.*

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to think of the decently civilized society, wherever it exists, as a “beachhead” in hostile territory, the hostile territory being all the sordidness to which human beings are perpetually prone. The beachhead and the inner moral-spiritual, intellectual, and aesthetical compass that it protects is all that human beings have. If they do not hold on to their hard-earned victories over themselves, goodness, truth, and beauty will give way to barbarism. It is wholly implausible to think that the abstract thought of an enlightened person, such as a “lawgiver,” could take the place of the guidance that humanity has built up over millennia. The idea of rationality or wisdom achieved autonomously and independently of the heritage of mankind is, for Burke, superficial and hubristic. The conceit of the French radicals terrified him. It could only bring tyranny and large-scale suffering.

*Burke favors  
liturgical way  
of life.*

No serious reader of Burke can miss his deep religiosity or his respect for classical and Christian thought and standards. His reverence for the power that ultimately guides human existence amounts to awe. That power is in an important way “transcendent,” “beyond,” “above,” etc., but the work of Providence is for him not the impersonal, mechanical enactment of a plan. God has a relationship of mutuality with human beings. Assisted by grace, including the grace reflected in the human heritage at its best, they are attempting to act in concert with His will. To the extent that human beings recognize and respect the authority of God, their actions signal this relationship. They treat other human beings, including their forebears and descendants, as collaborators in a great continuing work of worship. Their way of life blends into and draws attention to the transcendent. To use a single word for something very large and many-faceted, life becomes “liturgical.” The term is not Burke’s, but conveys the kind of disposition, including decorum and good manners, that is of the essence of the higher life. The solemnity of this liturgical way of life might strike a radical as mere show and aesthetic pretense, but for Burke it expresses the intrinsic great importance of what is being done. Calling the general demeanor of the higher life “liturgical” helps indicate its connection with Eternity.

Burke pays much attention to the relationship between God and man. Referring to human society as “the state,” he

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describes God's relationship to it in this manner: "He [God] who gave our nature to be perfected by our virtue willed also the necessary means of its perfection. He willed therefore the state." He willed also "its connection with the source and original archetype of all perfection," that is, with God Himself. According to Burke, people properly express their "corporate fealty and homage" in their social existence. Society should be "a worthy offering on the high altar of universal praise." Everything that human beings undertake, ranging from the trivial to the crucial, should express reverence for the divine and related higher values. This "corporate fealty and homage" "should be performed as all public solemn acts are performed, in buildings, in music, in decoration, in speech, in the dignity of persons."<sup>29</sup> In proportion as human beings elevate their existence in this manner they are entering into communion with the divine; they are already living in Eternity. Universality and history form a union.

Considering Burke's emphasis on mankind's dependence on and responsibility before a higher power, one might have thought that Strauss would examine in depth his way of connecting history-tradition-particularity with this power—which is a truly "novel element" in Burke. A possible explanation for Strauss's never coming close to the philosophical heart of the matter is that he is simply philosophically ill-prepared for this kind of exploration. Or he is ill-disposed. His picture of Burke and historicism is oddly selective and reductionistic. He seems unwilling to give any credence to what he is criticizing, as if it suggested an unpleasant possibility. His primary objective seems to be to show that Burke disparages abstract, ahistorical thinking and that, *ipso facto*, he rejects a universal standard of human conduct. It is as if Strauss were so determined to keep the universal standard at odds with history-tradition that he had to conceal, perhaps even from himself, ideas in Burke that deviate from his strawman "historicism." Did he fear that Burke's historicism might appeal to others? Some of his criticisms of Burke are so far off the mark as to suggest a non-philosophical motive.<sup>30</sup> A separate study might be devoted exclusively to

*Strauss's view  
of historicism  
reductionistic.*

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<sup>29</sup> *Reflections*, 86.

<sup>30</sup> That Strauss's interpretation of Burke is curiously one-sided could

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exploring *why* Strauss presents such a curious picture of Burke. Here the emphasis has been on *how* he misunderstands and misrepresents him.

Given Strauss's deficient, rather strained treatment of Burke and historicism in *Natural Right and History*, one might wonder whether he reconsidered his moral and epistemological stance of 1953. He did not. In 1971, in the preface to the seventh edition of *Natural Right and History*, he explicitly reaffirmed his belief in supposedly "classical" natural right and his rejection of any association of universality with tradition.<sup>31</sup>

### ***The Problem of Unchangeable Natural Right***

That Strauss retained his belief in abstract universality is all the more revealing in that he was not unaware of the problem that such a notion of normativity presents to practical politics. He concedes that abstract universal principles have a simplicity and exactitude that is lacking in politics. It is indicative of limited attention to issues of epistemology that when he goes into this topic he falls prey to self-contradiction. In chapter III of *Natural Right and History*, which is on "The Origin of Natural Right," he lays it down as an incontrovertible premise, "granted on all sides," that "there cannot be natural right if the principles of right are not *unchangeable*." Note the word "unchangeable." In the next chapter when addressing the problem of the practical applicability of natural right, he notes as "surprising" Aristotle's belief that "all natural right is *changeable*." Trying to settle on a proper definition of natural right, Strauss contrasts Averroës and Thomas Aquinas.

*For Strauss,  
principles of  
natural right  
must be un-  
changeable.*

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be demonstrated at length. His paying such slight attention to Burke's deep and obvious belief in universality might be construed as an attempt to divert attention from Burke among people seeking a higher-law-alternative to modern nihilism and relativism. If such was Strauss's intention, he succeeded. For many American natural law-oriented intellectuals of limited philosophical education, Strauss's anti-historicism and criticism of Burke reinforced a rationalist inclination that must have been considerable to begin with. On Strauss's seemingly deliberate downplaying of Burke's belief in a higher law, see Steven J. Lenzner, "Strauss's Three Burkes," *Political Theory* 19, no. 3 (August 1991). It needs to be repeated that, while Burke's connection to the natural law tradition is obvious, it is the way in which he is connected to it and the way in which he reconceives it that is of most philosophical interest.

<sup>31</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, Preface, 7th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

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According to Strauss, Averroës's view of natural right as a creature of convention "implies the denial of natural right." Thomas, by contrast, believes that "the principles of natural right . . . are universally valid and immutable; what are mutable are only the more specific rules." Strauss asserts that Thomas's view is not so much philosophical as a kind of codification of Patristic beliefs. Strauss opts for what he calls "a safe middle road" between Averroës's moral conventionalism and Thomas's quasi-philosophical rigidity. Strauss is here trying to make room within natural right for what he has previously said is incompatible with it, that it might be *changeable*. He wants to stay clear of moral conventionalism and yet allow for adjusting to circumstance. Strauss associates this "safe" road with Aristotle and asserts that when Aristotle speaks of natural right as "changeable" he does not question the mentioned basic premise of natural right. He is not thinking of "general propositions"—the "principles of right"—but of "concrete decisions" belonging to practice. Trying to make natural right relevant to practice, Strauss modifies to the point of self-contradiction his assertion in a previous chapter that it is agreed by all that there cannot be natural right unless what is normative is unchangeable. About 100 pages before he takes up his criticism of Burke and historicism, Strauss reaches for a position on natural right that is much like Burke's. Strauss writes: "All action is concerned with particular situations. Hence justice and natural right reside, as it were, *in concrete decisions rather than general rules*." But this is just the view that Strauss will later condemn in Burke! Strauss is here not moving with confidence or speaking with precision, as is clear from his qualifier "as it were," but he goes on in the same paragraph to formulate what seems to him the correct view of natural right. What he says does not prepare the reader for his later attacks on Burke. Indeed, what he now suggests as natural right could be read as a summary of Burke's position.

*Strauss tries to reconcile natural right and need to heed circumstance.*

Note the language in which Strauss describes how we should look for the right course: "In every human conflict there exists the possibility of a just decision *based on a full consideration of all the circumstances*, a decision *demand*ed by the situation. Natural right thus understood is obviously mutable." But this is just what the historicist Burke is arguing! Morality must find

*Strauss unknowingly approaches Burkean view of morality.*



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its way, come alive in particular circumstances, in concrete situations. Strauss is using the kind of terminology that makes him very uncomfortable when it is employed by Burke. Strauss seems ready to recognize the importance of considering historical circumstances and to reassess his earlier assertion of the unchangeability of natural right, but this apparent opening to historicist considerations is tentative and transitory. He shows little inclination to examine how moral universality and particularity are related. It is suggestive of his underlying and operative assumptions that, having made the brief comment about morality needing to adapt to circumstance, he quickly reverts to his previous notion of natural right. The sentence that follows immediately upon the just-quoted statement about natural right consisting of justice in the concrete situation reads as follows: "Yet one can hardly deny that in all concrete decisions general principles are implied and presupposed."<sup>32</sup> Strauss is here back where he started—with natural right as abstract "principles." The reader of *Natural Right and History* will discover that he is not willing to grant Burke the kind of philosophical leeway and experimentation that he allowed himself, however briefly.

A person interested in comprehensively and systematically exploring the thought of Leo Strauss might want to take an inventory of scattered statements in his writings, including ones in *Natural Right and History*, that hint at a less rationalistic epistemology and a less abstract and confining notion of normativity than those dominating *Natural Right and History*. A much-discussed subject, which involves distinguishing between supposedly "exoteric" and "esoteric" elements in Strauss's writing, is whether he might have been in some respects quite different from what he seemed to be. The focus here has been on what Strauss explicitly argues in *Natural Right and History* against Burke and in defense of natural right. Suffice it to say in this context that, had Strauss been able to overcome his deep prejudice against "historicism," certain undeveloped potentialities in his thought might have carried him in a Burkean direction.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Natural Right*, 97 (emphasis added), 157 (emphasis added), 159 (emphases added).

<sup>33</sup> For a more detailed and extensive examination of Strauss's promising

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### *Disdain for Historical Particularity*

The influence of Strauss among supposedly traditional Christians raises questions about the state of philosophical culture in that quarter. It is easy to see what in Strauss might appeal to them—his defense of universality and natural right against relativism and nihilism, his fondness for “the ancients,” his use of nature as a standard, and his defense of virtue. Yet these themes must be understood in the context of his thought as a whole. That Strauss’s anti-historicism has been widely influential in the teaching of philosophy, especially in Catholic institutions, suggests that many Catholic intellectuals have had some of the same disinclination to look for universality in its concrete historical manifestations, probably under the influence of highly rationalistic versions of natural law. The readiness among some Christians to align themselves with Straussian anti-historicism is paradoxical, to say the least. Christianity does, after all, place the Incarnation, the supreme union of transcendence and immanence, at the very center of the faith. Straussian anti-historicism rules out such historicization of the universal. Moreover, the Catholic Church and other Christian churches have always stressed the central role of tradition. It is curious that intellectuals of this background should embrace a thinker for whom a central objective seems to have been philosophically to discredit tradition.

It has been the purpose here to outline what is distinctive and important about Burke’s view of universality and history and to show how it has been misunderstood by an influential twentieth century thinker. An inability to do justice to the best of historicism and to make sense of Burke illustrates a debilitating weakness in philosophy and political theory in particular. To absorb Burke’s way of thinking about universality and life in general it is necessary to abandon formulaic, reductionistic notions of historicism. Some American academics may be not very comfortable with foreign languages and German philosophy, but in Burke they can study in their own language the origins of a major intellectual development that

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but tentative and inconclusive flirtation with a more historical conception of moral order and knowledge, see Claes G. Ryn, “History and the Moral Order,” in Francis Canavan, ed., *The Ethical Dimension of Political Life* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1983).

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*Burke-Strauss  
divide has  
wide signifi-  
cance.*

no serious thinker can afford to ignore.

The dissonance regarding universality here discussed has large philosophical and practical ramifications. It makes a big difference whether we associate higher values with ahistorical ratiocination or with transcendence seeking historical expression. The former approach breeds disinterest in history and particularity. The latter fosters an historical perspective and looks in concrete circumstances for opportunities to connect universality and particularity. In his criticism of Burke and historicism Strauss wants it understood that being attentive to life's historical dimension and to what is distinctive to time and place is to have the wrong priorities and to undermine or abandon a higher standard. As has been shown, Burke believes that a purely abstract universality is not genuine. An abstractly conceived rectitude spurns the world far too much and is potentially tyrannical.

In his account of how Burke and historicists think, Strauss notes their criticism of a preoccupation with the "universal" or "general." Burke and the historicists think, Strauss writes, that "the concern with the universal or the general is likely to create a kind of blindness in regard to the particular and the unique."<sup>34</sup> On the basis of the above comparison of Burke and Strauss, it is fair to ask whether Strauss's insistence on keeping universality abstract does not in fact threaten to induce just the "kind of blindness" that worried the historicists, especially with respect to the French radicals. Strauss is no French revolutionary, but he too wants his standard "pure" of historical considerations. More radical in its anti-historicism than Greek philosophy, Strauss's notion of natural right tends to draw attention away from the opportunities and challenges of actual life. It is hard to see how favoring interest in an abstract model distant from real life and from what is in fact possible could be conducive to understanding universality and be an asset to political philosophy. This deficiency is no less detrimental to political practice, where abstract universalism predisposes to arrogance, confrontation, and imperial ambition. The universalism of Burkean historicism, by contrast, is indistinguishable from humility and self-restraint.

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<sup>34</sup> *Natural Right*, 305.