

EDMUND BURKE AND THE LIMITATIONS OF HISTORICAL THOUGHT



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I. The Demands of Historical Consciousness in Ahistorical Times

Scholars and public intellectuals use Edmund Burke's writings and speeches for a variety of reasons. Some look to Burke in an attempt to find inspiration for contemporary action; others see Burke as a means of uncovering—one might say unmasking—the real meaning of conservatism. Yet any attempt to utilize these works faces certain difficulties. Burke used a very specific understanding of the structure of history, its meaning, and importance. In his thought, a people's consciousness of their history and the myriad practices that convey its wisdom serves as the principal guide to practical reason, moral judgment, and political

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action. But if scholars wish to draw doctrines rather than political dispositions out of Burke, it seems reasonable to ponder what the author himself believed about the limits of historical thinking.

We can readily identify a wide range of ways that individuals use a kind of historically conditioned prudence in their lives. People cope with the world's sheer complexity through a set of experiential inferences and categories that let us use our accumulated knowledge of various contexts to make decisions every day.¹ Burke built upon this basic claim that historical wisdom grounds our thinking, developing a sophisticated analysis of the major issues of his day, but his writings nevertheless speak to the present day. However, Burke himself meticulously detailed the manner in which the *authority* of this historical wisdom fades in the face of egalitarian thought, rapid social mobility, and skepticism toward orthodox religious faith. Moreover, late in his life, he emphasized the ways our inheritance fails as a means of navigating the world's complexities. Because historical reasoning relies on the use of analogies, in the absence of illustrative examples that bear upon our subject, we cannot expect to find a reliable guide in the past.²

A robustly Burkean mindset seems to require a social context that recognizes the importance of historical wisdom, and accepts its dictates as authoritative. This should chasten any attempt to develop a critique of contemporary conservatism on the basis of Burke's particular arguments about aesthetics, or the specific claims by which he arrived at his policies.³ At the same time, it casts doubt on the idea conservatives can easily use many of Burke's basic prescriptions for healthy politics – for example, the twin supports of an aristocracy and general notion of Christendom. Broadly conservative work on Burke sometimes suggests that a culture such as he relied upon might be necessary for the West to restore itself to decent politics.⁴ Both of these lines of interpretation present difficulties, which I aim to explain over the course of this essay.

A fully Burkean politics would require the general recognition of history's authority—that is, a renewed appreciation for the value of the unspoken wisdom and common sense tradition grants us. Thus, determining some Burkean ethic and applying those ideas in the present may require accepting the many ways liberal democracy cannot embrace what Burke would see as legitimate historical wisdom. But despite the

failure of authority in his day, Burke did not relent. He never looked to the past *alone* for knowledge that orients men to action. This suggests that despite the limits to historical reason, conservatives might still extract a Burkean disposition from his writings and apply it in the present. This essay aims at reminding us of the potentials and perils involved in such an effort.

II. The Basic Conditions of Historically Conditioned Prudence

In a draft of a long letter written in late 1771 defending himself and his family from various criticisms, Burke observes that

My principles enable me to form my judgment upon Men and Actions in History, just as they do current life; and are not formed out of events and Characters, either present or past. History is a preceptor of Prudence not of principles. The principles of true politics are those of morality enlarged, and I neither now do nor will ever admit of any other.⁵

If history does not directly convey the moral and political principles Burke references, and instead might convey prudence to the diligent student, how are we to understand this practice?

Burke's vision of historical wisdom as the bedrock of prudential judgment rests on a few essential concepts that seem quite distant today. If all legitimate authority rests on some kind of assent to one's established order, then the members of that society need a common view of the past. Reinforcing this ideal, Burke insists that the past should not serve as a "repertory of cases and precedents for a lawyer," but rather a source of "much political wisdom" and "an exercise to strengthen the mind, as furnishing materials to enlarge and enrich it."⁶ We should engage in this effort via acts in "the spirit of philosophic analogy," so that our attitude toward the past would be neither antiquarian nor argumentative, but rather a sensibility that allows men to inherit the gifts of the past with affection.⁷

"The spirit of philosophic analogy" Burke references in the *Reflections* as the common method of English thinking suggests a

broad agreement about the way to interpret the past. His insistence that at least “where no passions deceive” men are and should remain “very uncorrupt and tolerably enlightened judges of the transactions of past ages” suggests a level of common sense about moral and political matters impossible since the French Revolution—if it ever existed at all.⁸ Rather than lessening contentiousness, time seems to have no effect upon the intensity of our evaluation of the past. Burke’s analysis of the conditions under which real historical prudence operates suggests why this might be.

Agreement about the nature of this common past implies the presence of a stable inheritance of practices, rules, and wisdom upon which social life rests. He terms these constitutions, and generally links them to a people’s national origins. Burke draws a distinction between his writings and the older rhetoric of the ancient constitution, sharply criticizing those who would make too direct a link between the British Constitution and older laws.⁹ Burke admits that we should not inquire too deeply into the origins of the constitution: “There is a secret veil to be drawn over the beginnings of all governments,” for their beginnings never exhibit a pristine quality.¹⁰ The correct attitude to the past is that of solicitude and charity, because aside from its usefulness and efficacy as a guide to action, the real authority of the British Constitution rests in its age, for “it is a Constitution, whose sole authority is, that it has existed time out of mind.”¹¹ This grants any nation’s history a sort of mythic quality, providing a gentler sense of the past that conveys certain moral lessons about that people. Ultimately, the inherited constitution binds the social order and orients individuals to the most important matters of life without prejudicing them against the best in their people’s past.¹² Where individual experience fails to provide like cases for judgment, the constitution itself supplements that individual’s reason—at least in situations that fit within the confines of that historical inheritance.

This way of interpreting the past grants the society’s members a unique perspective. They see the order as a partnership not simply between the living, but “between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”¹³ Burke understands this institution as more than any mere contract. Under the right conditions, the nation forms a “permanent standing covenant, coexisting with the society”

that relies on “the heart of the citizen” as “a perennial spring of energy to the State,” and that individuals may not abandon or imagine doomed at every crisis. Conversely, those who rule—or who claim expertise about government—must respect the people, and never regard the public’s distempers as “incurable.”¹⁴ This echoes Burke’s early description of the representative’s role in public life as one of reciprocal trust from God, “the abuse of which he is deeply answerable.”¹⁵ Throughout his writings, Burke emphasizes the way in which all those involved learn their duties through an acquaintance with their inherited constitution.

Burke argues that the result of this implicit moral and historical training is a society where individuals rule themselves through reference to their cherished “old prejudices,” their common sense and intuitive judgments about the way the world works and ought to be. The English, he claims, “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 ages.”¹⁶ This accumulation of wisdom suggests both limitations on human action, as well as a means of testing one’s plans and contrivances in the present. Individuals can consult history and common sense before proceeding—and in a society that thinks in these terms, all novel public actions “react upon the primitive constitution, and sometimes improve the design itself, from which they seem to have departed.”¹⁷ Burke understood that no human plan or purpose survives its execution in practice, and that one of the benefits of this historical order flows from the way it checks men against unduly rash or excessively theoretical action.

Parallel to this understanding of political judgment, and grounding it appropriately, Burke further insisted that any genuine moral order flows from an understanding of the historical context that guides it. Of course, he grounded this in a vision of humanity’s fixed moral nature. All people, equally images of the “great Pattern,” share a moral nature and this necessitates some version of natural law.¹⁸ Because of this, Burke denied any robust sort of moral relativism. While it might seem appropriate or prudent to act in ways that respect local cultures and traditions, no one can rightfully assert “that actions in Asia do not bear the same moral qualities which the same actions would bear in

Europe.” But while Burke decried Warren Hastings’ “*geographical morality*, by which the duties of men, in public and in private situations, are not to be governed by their relation to the great Governor of the Universe, or by their relation to mankind, but by climates, degrees of longitude, parallels, not of life, but of latitudes,” the natural law to which he alludes does not provide a *complete* guide for moral, prudent action in daily life. Indeed, the length and contextual depth of his arguments prosecuting Hastings suggests this incompleteness.¹⁹ Elsewhere, Burke claimed that he

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... Circumstances (which with some gentlemen pass for nothing) give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing color and discriminating effect.²⁰

Our historical order mediates our understanding of morality, and that history helps provide the second nature that members of every culture inculcate into their children to perpetuate themselves.²¹

The inherited culture that guides us superimposes itself upon this basic nature. Given the limitations of the human person – our deep weaknesses, flaws, and sin – Burke draws an appropriately chastening set of ideas from the past. In history’s hard-earned lessons, Burke tells us that we find “a great volume for our instruction, drawing the materials of future wisdom from the past errors and infirmities of mankind.” He continues, claiming that

History consists for the greater part of the miseries brought upon the world by pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy, ungoverned zeal, and all the train of disorderly appetites which shake the public... Wise men will apply their remedies to vices, not to names; to the causes of evil which are permanent, not to the occasional organs by which they act, and the transitory modes in which they appear.²²

Note here again that the past conveys its lessons *analogically*, which bears significantly on the reasons this wisdom seldom appeals to modern peoples—I return to this topic in the next section. Even more signif-

icantly, Burke suggests that the past's inheritance provides a true record that outlines man's severe limitations, corrects foolishness, instructs us about the conditions of real liberty, and allows us to apportion praise and blame within a larger context.²³

Because of the relative weakness of natural law, and the general inexactness of moral judgment, Burke fixes our attention on experience, context, and history. This creates a significant moral problem in that one can always identify crimes and errors in the past—those origins Burke so consciously suggests we must pass in silence—but this cultivates little more than the skepticism so deadly to the sort of historical consciousness Burke valued so highly. The difficulty lay in exercising restrained judgment: “It is no inconsiderable part of wisdom, to know how much of an evil ought to be tolerated; lest, by attempting a degree of purity impracticable in degenerate times and manners... new corruptions might be produced for the concealment and security of the old.”²⁴ Without the deep contextual understanding that a sense of history provides, Burke suggests that we cannot discriminate between the bearable difficulty and the ultimately destructive one. Nor can we determine when a threat has reached such a level that it necessitates we deviate from historical precedent to develop a response—an important fact because sometimes “[a]n irregular, convulsive movement may be necessary to throw off an irregular, convulsive disease.”²⁵ Without a sense of history, Burke insists that men can make no sound judgments.

Without historical guidance, all the restraints against rapid change fall away, and indeed, lead to a situation where individuals embrace novelty for its own sake, resulting in little more than “a blind and furious spirit of innovation, under the name of reform.”²⁶ Ultimately, without the solid “public principles and national grounds” for action that the British Constitution provides, Burke argues that all law and hope of limits in politics and society will disappear, and be replaced with rule by the whims of the moment.²⁷ Losing historical boundaries opens a great problem: “to find a substitute for all the principles which hitherto have been employed to regulate the human will and action.” Without the wisdom of history to serve as guidance, we revert to our mere nature, and will inevitably adopt practices that match the desires of this nature. Burke argues that we inevitably develop a “philosophy of vanity” like

that he accuses Rousseau of endorsing and a politics of will and power follow from this thinking.²⁸

Without institutions that convey historical wisdom, society embarks on precisely this path. At the same time, we nonetheless retain some echoes of the means that remain vital for conveying something like Burke's idea of a constitution. An outline of the challenges to our consciousness of the past provides some of the context necessary for understanding the uses and limitations of Burkean thinking today.

III. The Assault on Historical Reasoning

The stark contrasts between the new age of egalitarian democracy and what came before clarify the many ways that the past becomes incoherent as a source of stable wisdom for the present. Burke identifies at least two dimensions to this. First, radical egalitarianism promotes ways of thinking and habits of action that undo the very attitudes that would allow us to take any historical authority seriously. Second, at the same time, a world in constant motion and change undercuts man's ability to pass on the literal mechanisms of inheritance that assist him in instructing the next generation in the old ways and modes of thought.

Burke understood the English Constitution as the result of an accumulation of choices stretching from "Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right," that resulted in a "uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties as an *entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity... without any reference whatever to any other more general or prior right." He tells us that this policy trusted a sort of "wisdom without reflection" that respected society's basic institutions as one's ancestors passed them down.²⁹ In the *Reflections*, Burke confronted a basic premise of egalitarian thought that directly challenged this old order: that all individuals should be equally free and autonomous. But Burke's historical institutions restrain men in myriad ways. They dictate the terms of our participation in politics, our duties to others, and perhaps most unpalatable to the egalitarian mind, they advise us about the appropriateness of our thoughts. His liberty "was a Liberty inseparable from order, from virtue, from morals, and

from religion, and was neither hypocritically nor fanatically followed.”³⁰ Observing what he saw as the revolutionaries’ boundless vanity, Burke argued the hope for essential liberty from all constraint animates egalitarian thought. Such a desire must deny the limitations of the past in favor of constructing an open horizon in the future.³¹

Asserting the right to overturn all inherited—and presumptively irrational—institutions, Burke argued that the revolutionary egalitarian must strip away the essential authority of history.³² The ties that restrain politics also stand in the way of both revolutionary change and outrage at historical inequality. Because sincere egalitarians cannot allow such barriers to progress to stand, Burke thought the consequences of their inevitable assault on history would be profound. He reminded his readers about the nature of historical relationships:

Men are not tied to one another by papers and seals. They are led to associate by resemblances, by conformities, by sympathies. It is with nations as with individuals. Nothing is so strong a tie of amity between nation and nation as correspondence in laws, customs, manners, and habits of life.... They are obligations written in the heart.... The secret, unseen, but irrefragable bond of habitual intercourse, holds them together, even when their perverse and litigious nature sets them to equivocate, scuffle, and fight about the terms of their written obligations.³³

These correspondences and habits of mind lead men into conformity with the lessons and wisdom of history, and furthermore, Burke argued that this historical ideal helped teach them the civic morality of their times. Such a constitution might instill blindness to historical wrongdoing, but Burke constantly reminded his readers that all human society bears the stain of man’s moral weakness.

The danger Burke saw in the egalitarian attitude rests in the way he believed that historical wisdom restrained excesses in the present. Against the sort of constitution that provides the necessary “public principles” that citizens might judge actions against,³⁴ the egalitarian must undermine that past to “temper and harden the breast in order to prepare it for the desperate strokes which are sometimes used in extreme occasions.”³⁵ In France, Burke argued that the revolutionaries eventually “demolished the whole body of that jurisprudence which France

had nearly in common with other civilized countries,” and that as a result, “[n]o man, in a publick or private concern, can divine by what rule or principle her [the nation’s] judgments are to be directed.”³⁶ But where in the French case Burke identified a series of direct consequences flowing from the disruption of that nation’s historical inheritance, he also points out other perils for those who even *think* in such terms. The very disposition that leads men into contemplating truly revolutionary action—whether or not the opportunity to act arises—imprints the mind with “a gratuitous taint,” and deprives the moral sentiments of their natural limits and boundaries. The search for novel moral and political teachings can undo the would-be revolutionary’s very humanity, “[w]ithout opening up one new avenue to the understanding, they have succeeded in stopping up those that lead to the heart.”³⁷ But part of the danger Burke saw came in that none of these consequences appear immediately; the damage this ahistorical worldview does to any society’s inheritance comes indirectly.

Inheritance stands at the center of many of Burke’s arguments about the nature of a decent society, and the idea haunts him precisely because of its fragility. I argue Burke understood that all successful peoples renew their sense of self through both tangible and intellectual inheritances. This begins most literally and concretely with the physical, landed property families pass on through the generations, for it is this “power of perpetuating our property in our families” that is “one of the most valuable and interesting circumstances belonging to it, and that which tends the most to the perpetuation of society itself.”³⁸ Any society that wishes to persist must view the security of property as—after the protection of life itself—the most important function of state.

These literal physical inheritances matter because we develop our ties to concrete people and places through them; we learn how to establish moral affections and bonds through these relations that we can generalize outward through the whole of our society. In this reasoning, Burke partially follows Adam Smith, who argues that our ability to empathize with other people depends in large part on our awareness of their situation because “our sympathy with the grief or joy or another, before we are informed of the cause of either, is always extremely imperfect.”³⁹ The difference between the two lay in that while Smith fo-

cuses on describing the nurturing and operation of sympathetic fellow-feeling, Burke more explicitly ties the development of these sentiments to his teaching on inheritance. But in a world where long family ties to property vanish, yet another basis for the conveyance of our historical bonds steadily passes away. This would not be so significant if our relations to people and places did not also cultivate our more general attitudes toward time and the obligations the world imposes upon us.

Burke believes that in a rightly constituted historical order, people will recognize the way we come into a world of relationships that Providence ordains and inherit a set of concrete obligations from that simple fact.⁴⁰ These duties inhere

not in consequence of any special voluntary pact. They arise from the relation of man to man, and the relation of man to God, which relations are not matters of choice. On the contrary, the force of all the pacts which we enter into with any particular person... depends on those prior obligations.⁴¹

Family stands as the natural home of all inheritance, and it obliges us to undertake certain acts:

When we marry, the choice is voluntary, but the duties are not matter of choice.... Parents may not be consenting to their moral relation; but consenting or not, they are bound to a long train of burthensome duties towards those with whom they have never made a convention of any sort.⁴²

For Burke, the foundation of our entire moral order rests not on any sort of rational consent but a historical order superintended by Providence: "there we are; there we are placed by the Sovereign Disposer: and we must do the best we can in our situation. The situation of man is the preceptor of his duty."⁴³ Our only choice in the matter may be one of willful rejection, which becomes the basis for the unmaking of inheritance and man's historical nature.⁴⁴

The turn toward an entirely voluntary and rationally chosen notion of society implies a rejection not only of any historical inheritances, but also scorn of any binding *moral* codes that each generation simply accepts as authoritative. Moreover, Burke fears that those who choose this path will invert the old form of conceptualizing time itself. Rather

than the solid connections between generations that restrain present action, he argues that those who fail to respect the limits the inherited past imposes upon us will not give much thought to the dangers their choices create for the future.⁴⁵ The damage egalitarianism does to the authority of history, as well as the society of rapid change such an ideal helps authorize, makes historical reasoning seem particularly weak to modern eyes. At the same time, Burke also argues that some of the concrete effects of the egalitarian ideal call even the *efficacy* of historical reasoning into some question.

IV. The Unraveling of Historical Analogies

Over the course of Burke's later writings on the French Revolution, he made a series of observations about the limitations of historical reasoning in those deeply troubled times. At least partially criticizing many of his Scottish contemporaries, Burke saw no iron laws of historical development, no "sure theory on the internal causes which necessarily affect the fortune of a State."⁴⁶ As we have seen, Burke nevertheless argued strongly for the necessity of using historically inherited wisdom to judge well by weighing the moral costs of any possible decision. In his statecraft, all political decisions weigh gradations:

the decisions of prudence (contrary to the system of the insane reasoners) differ from those of judicature: and that almost all of the former are determined on the more or the less, the earlier or the later, and on a balance of advantage and inconvenience, of good and evil.⁴⁷

Prudence rests on a foundation of intuitive morality that Burke insists we all share, but it bears certain limits. Though we can identify "some fundamental points in which Nature never changes," these remain "few and obvious, and belong rather to morals than to politics."⁴⁸ He ultimately suggests that men conduct this sort of careful weighing only in reference to their historical inheritance—and that they must do so whether they respect the authority of their culture's past or not.

Acting as a substitute for one's own necessarily limited personal

experience, this sort of reasoning from history serves as a check on one's plans, and a guide to evaluating the possibilities circumstance presents. History provides a storehouse of moral and political examples, of course, and Burke frequently made use of this sort of rhetoric in his writings and speeches to various effects.⁴⁹ In many circumstances, Burke suggests that past "[m]istakes may be lessons" that suggest a change in future action, and that these lessons can lead us to evaluate both one's principles and concrete plans for action.⁵⁰ But greatness also serves a purpose, as examples of accomplishment and greatness serve as "the guide-posts and land-marks in the state," and their persuasive power rests in large part on a kind of historical authority.⁵¹ If we wish to use such an analysis from the past to publicly justify action in the present, at a minimum it seems that we have to expect that others will respect the source of this claim.

Rightly understood, history can serve as "the guide of life," but Burke adds several warnings to this. Our attitude in examining the past matters a great deal, however:

It is a great improver of the understanding, by showing both men and affairs in a great variety of views. From this source much political wisdom may be learned,—that is, may be learned as habit, not as precept,—and as an exercise to strengthen the mind, as furnishing materials to enlarge and enrich it, not as a repertory of cases and precedents for a lawyer.... This method turns their understanding from the object before them, and from the present exigencies of the world, to comparisons with former times, of which, after all, we can know very little and very imperfectly; and our guides, the historians... are often prejudiced, often ignorant, often fonder of system than of truth.⁵²

Much earlier in his career, Burke made the claim that if we read the past correctly, it becomes less a source of partisan argument than a repository of wisdom that all might draw upon.⁵³ The great dangers he points toward seem to flow from reading the past solely as an analogue to the present, and assuming that by simply accumulating precedents and evidence, one might determine a proper course of action today. That is to say, Burke argues that no historical evidence can actually *dictate* our decisions in the present. In order to interpret history with any clarity, and to avoid the confusion and complexity of distant events, he suggests

that historians and their audience all too often turn to a philosophical “system” that allows us to categorize the past more neatly.⁵⁴

The passage above also suggests a deeper danger in looking to the past for the wrong sort of answers. Where in moral judgment, we should look toward the past for clarity, in contemplating future action, Burke points us to a disposition and a habit of thinking that might allow us to “look steadily” on the present day, and use our historically developed wisdom to decide our course “without being diverted by retrospect and comparison.”⁵⁵ His point was not that no analogies exist between past and present. After all, that would presuppose all moments in human history to be unique. Instead, the essence of human nature remains all too stable for there to be no discernable patterns in history. Hence man’s ability to see “philosophical analogies” between one circumstance and another, and because of this, we can recognize man’s capacity for developing historically conditioned prudence.⁵⁶ Burke rejects the idea we can just accumulate evidence and use cases from the past to simply pronounce a sterile analytical judgment on the present or future. He does so because the “world of contingency and political combination is much larger than we are apt to imagine.”⁵⁷ Good judgment requires that we look to the spirit of a historical constitution for guidance that mediates between past, present, and future.⁵⁸

But the ultimate danger in losing awareness of the past comes in the explosion of novel forms of politics unburdened by the restraints of a historical constitution. Without a deep sense of history, many previously unthinkable courses of action start to seem at least theoretically possible. For Burke, the French Revolution did more than simply undermine the authority of the past to the present; it inaugurated an age of innovation in social and political forms that interrupts the very ground of cultural and legal inheritance upon which Burke’s preferred form of historical reasoning operates.

Burke presents Louis XVI as the principal example of a man deceived by history, a man who acquired his knowledge from reading: “but nobody told him (and it was no wonder he should not himself divine it) that the world of which he read, and the world in which he lived, were no longer the same.” Burke reminds us the king was “a diligent reader of history,” who inherited a world where attentiveness to history

availed little. Instead of being able to rely on a stable source of inherited wisdom, “the very lamp of prudence blinded him,” and that “guide of human life led him astray.” A “silent revolution” had undermined the culture of historical authority well before the revolution itself.⁵⁹

Burke’s claim that the French Revolution merely signaled a change that had already transpired reinforces some of his contentions about the limitations of historical reasoning in revolutionary times. At least in the French case, Burke went so far as to claim that in light of these changes, “[a]nalogical reasoning from history or from recent experience in other places is wholly delusive.”⁶⁰ For Burke, this meant that men must take even greater care with the historical and moral examples upon which they draw to justify action in the present, and the specific measures they employ.⁶¹ Because men “never can say what may, or may not happen, without a view to all the actual circumstances,” one’s context matters more than ever: “Experience upon other data than those, is of all things the most delusive. Prudence in new cases can do nothing on grounds of retrospect.”⁶² Without the anchor of historical authority to bind men, they move in unpredictable paths. Under such circumstances, the past provides little guidance for those who would predict the future. Conservatives who wish to seek wisdom in the past and persuade others of its value may also find this task nearly impossible.

V: Thinking Aristocratically in Democratic Times?

Together, the undermining of a culture that fosters a historical consciousness alongside a world of innovation that eschews the very use of historical analogies creates various obstacles for those who seek a path away from the excesses of modern life in Burke’s thought. I argue that the difficulty rests not so much in the passing of time as the transformation of how individuals think about the past, and of course, the ways this change in thinking authorizes ever more radical alterations in our society today. Burke’s awareness of the way people in his time rethought their relationship to the past echoes in many nineteenth-century ruminations on the passing of the old regime. I wish to highlight one of these in relation to Burke.

Alexis de Tocqueville's professed friendship with democracy led him to observe the many ways Burke's fears about the transformation of historical consciousness might not go deep enough. In his sober *Recollections*, Tocqueville remarked on the tendency of both men of letters and political actors to explain the world through extremes. In their attempts to evaluate the past,

the first are always inclined to find general causes, whereas the others, living in the midst of disconnected daily facts, are prone to imagine that everything is attributable to particular incidents, and that the wires which they pull at are the same that move the world.⁶³

Burke highlights the danger of using intellectual systems to interpret the past, and also counsels a similar humility to statesmen who wish to affect their world. But he could not see where the tendencies that so deeply troubled him might lead.

Tocqueville's analysis of the stereotypical attitudes betrayed by democratic souls furthers the analysis Burke began. Tocqueville tells us that egalitarians—or at least Americans—embarked on a way of thinking unburdened by the past:

To escape from imposed systems, the yoke of habit, family maxims, class prejudices, and to a certain extent national prejudices as well; to treat tradition as valuable for information only and to accept existing facts as no more than a useful sketch to show how things could be done differently and better; to seek by themselves and in themselves for the only reason for things, looking to results without getting entangled in the means toward them and looking through forms to the basis of things—such are the principal characteristics of what I would call the American philosophical method.⁶⁴

The habits of thought and action Tocqueville evokes undercut all of the basic requirements Burke links to the successful transmission of historical inheritance, and its acceptance as authoritative. At the same time, however, what Tocqueville says Americans embrace seems at first glance a logical response to the failure of the past as a useful predictor of the future—recall Burke's claim that Louis XVI was a diligent student of the past. Because of the way Tocqueville traces the erosion of a historical consciousness, he allows us to see more of the effects our modern

egalitarian ethos brings in its wake.

In light of all this, one might argue that the elimination of historical wisdom as an authoritative source of guidance leaves little for us to learn from Burke. As a preeminently unsystematic, historical, and contextual thinker, Burke's various statements of specific policy and belief do not easily lend themselves to the construction of any easily applicable doctrine. The failure of historical inheritance does present a severe problem for those who would be Burkeans in the present day. A great deal of his analysis rests on the way aristocratic transmission of property—or at least some ties to the land that result in stable communities—helps stabilize our mores and conveys a sort of embodied historical wisdom. Very little in contemporary society lends itself to that sort of link to one's own land or its civic parallel in deep, long-term affiliation with particular communities. As many contemporary traditionalists note, our mobility inhibits the transmission of a solid historical consciousness across the generations.⁶⁵ Short of radical changes in our way of life, Burke's deep form of historical wisdom will not return as a source of widely acknowledged political authority.

If history fails men as a guide, Burke's own political disposition suggests that they must turn to their context and revert to first principles derived from some thin conception of human nature and the permanent problems of our life together. However, because of his emphasis on the idea that “[a]rt is man's nature,” our moral natures require society for their perfection and discipline.⁶⁶ Any fixed principles of morality and politics we might draw out of Burke would remain little more than the images of that “Great Pattern” he references in his prosecution of Warren Hastings—they might give us intuitions about right and wrong, but for Burke they provide too little positive guidance to demand men undertake any specific act.

Even if Burke's specific claims represent fundamental truths, thoughts widely acceptable in Burke's era no longer carry any authority—tradition rarely appears to be a sufficient reason for men to act today. Self-proclaimed conservatives today seem to draw as much on doctrines as some sort of historical wisdom as their guiding lights.⁶⁷ Their critics view the past as good for Tocquevillian “information,” and both the recent and distant past serve as a source of partisan acrimony far different

than Burke envisioned. But it is interesting that those on the left who appropriate Burke for their own political purposes often take his specific arguments about the demerits of democracy, or the extremes Burke's rhetoric sometimes falls into as a cudgel with which to bludgeon those who would recover the statesman as inspiration for the present.

The question conservatives confront rests in how they adapt to the greatly diminished appeal of historically influenced arguments on behalf of tradition, community, and inheritance. Insofar as philosophical traditionalism rests on an attempt to inspire dreams and doctrines out of thinkers who developed their arguments in an essentially aristocratic key, in an egalitarian age this ideal loses much of its credibility.⁶⁸

Those who would defend a Burkean position in the present day must acknowledge that his society is not ours, and because of the structure of his thought and its relationship to authoritative historical wisdom, that bears profound consequences for any attempt to revive Burkean social order and politics. If we cannot recapture the essential elements of Burke's context, what remains is a Burkean disposition—an unsystematic mode of analysis that would, as he recommends, lead us to evaluate our context in a prudential light, with the aim of fostering action that men today can recognize and will bear. For traditionalists, this opens many paths. It suggests deep investigation into the needs of the human heart, to call men back to the forms of community and religion that satisfy our longings; this challenge will require appealing to the residue of our historical imagination.⁶⁹

Near the end of his life, Burke voiced a properly humble fear that despite his best judgment and his efforts to identify the dangers to a healthy social and political life, it might all have been in vain:

If a great change is to be made in human affairs, the minds of men will be fitted to it; the general opinions and feelings will draw that way. Every fear, every hope, will forward it; and then they who persist in opposing this mighty current in human affairs, will appear rather to resist the decrees of Providence itself, than the mere designs of men. They will not be resolute and firm, but perverse and obstinate.⁷⁰

In times such as his and ours, traditionalists might be led into despair and the love of apocalypse as the path back to sanity.⁷¹ Instead,

Burke's teaching as a whole speaks in favor of patience, forbearance, and humility—a disposition that all who study politics should remember.

Endnotes

1. An enormous literature exists on this general topic. For a few influential examples, see Arthur S. Reber, *Implicit Learning and Tacit Knowledge: An Essay on the Cognitive Unconscious* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1993); F.A. Hayek, *The Sensory Order: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Theoretical Psychology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952); and Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago: 2003).
2. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 30
3. Two examples of this attempt from a left-leaning perspective that suggest Burkean principles represent a dangerous strand of contemporary conservatism may be found in Issac Kramnick, *The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative* (New York: Basic Books, 1977) and Daniel I. O'Neill, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007). Steven K. White's *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics, and Aesthetics* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994) is a related effort to render Burke's thinking comprehensible by focusing on Burke's aesthetic thought as a key to understanding his whole politics, notably because of his attempt to link Burke to Heidegger (83-90). Finally, Bruce James Smith assaults Burke's later writings by claiming his principal contribution is to provide contemporary conservatism with a new language: "Thwart, control, bridle, subdue, these become the vocabulary of conservatism, the patrimony of Edmund Burke." See his *Politics and Remembrance: Republican Themes in Machiavelli, Burke, and Tocqueville* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 154.
4. For two readings of Burke that verge onto this terrain, see Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind from Burke to Eliot* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2001) and Bruce Frohnen, *Virtue and the Promise of Conservatism: The Legacy of Burke and Tocqueville* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993).
5. Burke, draft letter to Dr. William Markham, post 9 November 1771, in *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. Lucy S. Sutherland (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1960), 2:282
6. Burke, "Remarks on the Policy of the Allies with Respect to France," in *The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke* (London: John C. Nimmo, 1887), 4:468
7. Burke, *Reflections*, 30. On this passage and its importance for understand-

- ing Burke's orientation toward an objective moral order, see Joseph L. Pappin, III, *The Metaphysics of Edmund Burke* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993), 85-6
8. Burke, "Thoughts on the Present Discontents," in *Select Works of Edmund Burke*, ed. E.J. Payne (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 1:76
 9. Burke, "Fragment Towards an History of the Laws of England," in *Works*, 7:480. J.G.A. Pocock notes the differences in Burke's thought from the rhetoric of the ancient constitution, see his *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), esp. 379-84.
 10. Burke, "Speech in the Opening the Impeachment, Second Day," in *Works*, 9:401-2
 11. Burke, *Select Works of Edmund Burke: Miscellaneous Writings*, ed. Francis Canavan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 20; on the idea of charity toward the British Constitution, see Burke, *Reflections*, 84. See also chapter 6 in Francis Canavan, S.J., *Edmund Burke: Prescription and Providence* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1987).
 12. Burke, *Reflections*, 30. See also Pocock, "Burke and the Ancient Constitution: A Problem in the History of Ideas," in *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays in Political Thought and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 211-2
 13. Burke, *Reflections*, 85
 14. Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, in *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992), 159; and *First Letter on a Regicide Peace in Select Works*, 3:67
 15. Burke, "Speech to the Electors of Bristol," in *Miscellaneous Writings*, 11
 16. Burke, *Reflections*, 76
 17. Burke, *Reflections*, 151
 18. Burke to Mary Palmer, 19 January 1786, in *Selected Letters of Edmund Burke*, ed. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 381
 19. Burke, "Speech in the Opening the Impeachment, Second Day," in *Works*, 9:447-8. For discussions of Burke's relationship to the idea of the natural law, see chapter 4 in Pappin, *The Metaphysics of Edmund Burke*; chapter 4 in Canavan, *Edmund Burke*; and Peter J. Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958).
 20. Burke, *Reflections*, 7
 21. On the structure of the moral order in relation to history, see Pappin, *Metaphysics of Edmund Burke*, 76-87. Contrast to Smith, *Politics and Remembrance*, 122-133.
 22. Burke, *Reflections*, 124
 23. Abraham D. Kriegel, "Edmund Burke and the Quality of Honor," *Albion* 12, no. 4 (Winter 1980): 341-3; Burke, *Reflections*, 125-6

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24. Burke, "Thoughts on the Present Discontents," in *Select Works*, 1:141
25. Burke, *Reflections*, 22
26. Burke, "Letter to William Eliott," in *Further Reflections*, 271
27. Burke, "Thoughts on the Present Discontents," in *Select Works*, 1:99
28. Burke, "A Letter to a Member of the French National Assembly," *Further Reflections*, 35-36 and 47-50
29. Burke, *Reflections*, 29
30. Burke, "Letter to a Noble Lord," in *Further Reflections*, 287
31. On this, see Jeffrey Hart, "Burke and Radical Freedom," *The Review of Politics* 29, no. 2 (April 1967): 225, 231; and Pappin, *Metaphysics of Edmund Burke*, 160-173.
32. Burke, *First Letter on a Regicide Peace* in *Select Works*, 3:124-5
33. Burke, *First Letter on a Regicide Peace*, in *Select Works*, 3:132
34. Burke, "Thoughts on the Present Discontents," in *Select Works*, 1:99-100
35. Burke, *Reflections*, 56
36. Burke, *First Letter on a Regicide Peace*, in *Select Works*, 3:123-4
37. Burke, *Reflections*, 56
38. Burke, *Reflections*, 45
39. Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984), 10 (I.i.1.9). See also Burke's letter to Smith congratulating him on the *Theory*: "I am not only pleased with the ingenuity of your Theory; I am convinced of its solidity and Truth.... A theory like yours founded on the Nature of man, which is always the same, will last, when those that are founded on his opinions, which are always changing, will and must be forgotten" (10 September 1759, in *Selected Letters*, 92-3).
40. On this, see Canavan, *Edmund Burke: Prescription and Providence*, 159-161; and Pappin, *Metaphysics of Edmund Burke*, 121-6.
41. Burke, "An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs," in *Further Reflections*, 160.
42. Burke, "An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs," in *Further Reflections*, 160-1
43. Burke, "Speech on Mr. Fox's India Bill" in *Works*, 2:465
44. On this, Canavan notes that in "Burke's moral universe... obligation is antecedent to consent and compels consent. We must consent, rationally and freely, to the morally obligatory relationships that are knit into 'the predisposed order of things.'" See *Edmund Burke*, 119.
45. Burke, *Reflections*, 85. Also see Hart, "Burke and Radical Freedom," 213
46. Burke, *First Letter on a Regicide Peace*, in *Select Works*, 3:63. John C. Weston goes further, arguing that Burke denied the very possibility of reliable social science. See his "Edmund Burke's View of History," *The Review of Politics* 23, no. 2 (April 1961), 212-3. O'Neill traces some of the various influences that Scottish historical thinking exerted on Burke, see *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate*, 51-87
47. Burke, "A Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe," in *Miscellaneous Writings*,

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48. Burke, "Remarks on the Policy," in *Works*, 4:468-9
49. For one example, see "Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies," in *Select Works*, 1:259-66. For two analyses of Burke and the use of history as a precedent, see Frederick A. Dreyer, "Legitimacy and Usurpation in the Thought of Edmund Burke," *Albion* 12, no. 3 (Autumn 1980); and Paul Lucas, "On Edmund Burke's Doctrine of Prescription: Or, an Appeal from the New to the Old Lawyers," *The Historical Journal* 11, no. 1 (1968).
50. Burke, "Heads for Consideration on the Present State of Affairs," in *Works*, 4:388-9
51. Burke, "Speech on American Taxation," in *Select Works*, 1:208-9
52. Burke, "Remarks on the Policy," in *Works*, 4:468
53. Burke, "Thoughts on the Present Discontents," in *Select Works*, 1:76
54. Compare to Adam Smith, who more generally referenced the "man of system ... is apt to be very wise in his own conceit; and is often so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it.... He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board." See *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984), 233-34
55. Burke, "Remarks on the Policy," *Works*, IV:468-9
56. Pocock makes this point in regards to the law; it applies equally to Burke's idea of history. See "Burke and the Ancient Constitution," 224
57. Burke, "Thoughts on French Affairs," in *Further Reflections*, 232
58. Burke, *Reflections*, 83-4
59. Burke, *Second Letter on a Regicide Peace*, in *Select Works*, 3:184-5
60. Burke, "Thoughts on French Affairs," in *Further Reflections*, 235
61. Burke, *Second Letter on a Regicide Peace*, in *Select Works*, 3:185-6
62. Burke, "Thoughts on French Affairs," in *Further Reflections*, 232
63. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Recollections of Alexis de Tocqueville*, ed. J.P. Mayer, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 63-4
64. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper, 1969), 429
65. For one analysis of Burke's position on this, see Hart, "Burke and Radical Freedom," 232-3; on the link between law, aristocratic attitudes toward property, and a stable appreciation of the British constitution, see Pocock, "Burke and the Ancient Constitution," 210-12.
66. Burke, "An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs," in *Further Reflections*, 169
67. We might observe one notable exception in Michael Oakeshott and his followers; however, I do wonder whether even they fully escape from the need for doctrines. On this point, see Roger Scruton, *The Meaning*

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- of Conservatism*, 3rd ed. (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2002), 127.
68. Here, note Stanley Parry's essay "The Restoration of Tradition," which outlines many of these difficulties. See *Modern Age* 5, no. 2 (Spring 1961): 125-138.
69. Some recent books that attempt this in various ways are Vigen Guroian, *Rallying the Really Human Things: Moral Imagination in Politics, Literature, and Everyday Life* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2005); Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Moral Imagination: From Edmund Burke to Lionel Trilling* (New York: Ivan R. Dee, 2006); and Roger Scruton's two books, *Culture Counts: Faith and Feeling in a World Besieged* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007) and *The Meaning of Conservatism*, 3rd ed. (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2002).
70. Burke, "Thoughts on French Affairs," in *Further Reflections*, 254-5
71. This is one of Walker Percy's fears about southern conservatives, in particular. For example, see his 1965 essay "Stoicism in the South," in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway, S.J. (New York: Picador, 1991), esp. 84-88.