Section XII: The Post-Enlightenment Period

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3. Edmund Burke and Conservatism

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3. Edmund Burke and Conservatism

Abstract
Edmund Buxke (1729-1797) has often been compared to John Wesley, and there are several bases for such a comparison. Both infused a new life and meaning into the coin temporary formal structure of politics and religion, respectively. Both helped to bring the spoken word to a new level of influence. Both significantly changed the style of speaking and writing, emphasizing the particular and immediate problems rather than abstract and general principles. And both gave a strong moral emphasis to their thoughts and actions. Burke's style has long been considered one of the outstanding models for English prose and oratory.

Keywords
Contemporary Civilization, Post-Enlightenment, Conservatism, Edmund Burke, French Revolution

Disciplines
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Comments
This is a part of Section XII: The Post-Enlightenment Period. The Contemporary Civilization page lists all additional sections of Ideas and Institutions of Western Man, as well as the Table of Contents for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems. A second edition, retitled Ideas and Institutions of Western Man, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

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Edmund Burke (1729-1797) has often been compared to John Wesley, and there are several bases for such a comparison. Both infused a new life and meaning into the contemporary formal structure of politics and religion, respectively. Both helped to bring the spoken word to a new level of influence. Both significantly changed the style of speaking and writing, emphasizing the particular and immediate problems rather than abstract and general principles. And both gave a strong moral emphasis to their thoughts and actions. Burke's style has long been considered one of the outstanding models for English prose and oratory.

Burke was born in Dublin, Ireland, one of fourteen or fifteen children. He had a mixed Protestant and Roman Catholic background, and received some of his early education at a Quaker school. He attended Trinity College, Dublin, where among other activities he edited a school magazine, *The Reformer*. He studied law in London but never practiced, turning instead to literature and politics. After some very lean years, during which he published a major contribution to English aesthetics, *The Origin of our Ideas on the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), he started a more lucrative venture, the *Annual Register*, in 1759. This latter was a summary of each year's outstanding events.

which Burke continued to edit for almost thirty years, thus ac-
quiring a unique grasp of contemporary history. He finally
became secretary to one of the outstanding Whigs who helped
secure Burke's election to Parliament in 1765.

At this time George III (1760-1820) was trying to control
Parliament by bribery, and the leaders of the two political
parties were torn between a most rewarding loyalty to the king
and an unrewarding loyalty to their parties. The Tories relied
on their ancient landed estates for their political power and
position. Many Whigs had been buying up old estates to con-
solidate the political power they had enjoyed since the Glorious
Revolution. But the Whigs had only John Locke's individualistic
and contractual ideas as ammunition for the theoretical strugg-
gles which lay ahead.

It was Burke's role to supply a reinterpreted Locke as
the theoretical foundation of the Whig party. This he accom-
plished largely through his impassioned speeches in Parliament
and his writings. He tried to call the members of his own
party to what he conceived to be their role of leadership. He
introduced a reform bill designed to curtail the ability of the
king to corrupt Parliament. And he set an example by reducing
his own salary as paymaster to the armed forces from £20,000 to
£4,000 per year.

An Irish outsider who had worked his way up to a position
of leadership similar to that into which most of his peers had
been born, Burke was inclined to overlook some of the weaknesses
of the system of which he was now an important part. He could
introduce a bill to reform the king's activities, but he intro-
duced none to reform elections. Nor was he enough aware of the
conditions of all classes in prerevolutionary France, and of the
pressing need for reform there. What he did have, nevertheless,
was the zeal of a convert to English ideas and institutions, as
he interpreted them, a belief in morality at a time when this
was sorely needed, and the passion which gave his convictions
magnificent expression. This combination of factors can be
caught in a pair of sentences from one of his speeches to Par-
liament during the period when the relations between England
and the Thirteen Colonies were straining toward the breaking
point:

The question will be not whether you have the right to
render your people miserable, but whether it is not in
your interest to make them happy. It is not what a law-
yer tells me I may do, but what humanity, reason, and
justice tell me I ought to do.

There were four major issues which served to bring Burke's
talents to sharp focus and impassioned expression. The first
of these centered around the problem of Ireland. Burke, as a
Protestant from Ireland, who had the advantage of having been
there recently in an official capacity, wrote and spoke against
rule by the people is an impossible thing.
what he called short-sighted British colonialism. The second of these issues was the American Revolution. In this case too Burke aligned himself with the colonials and attacked the English government for lack of any long-range policy, and he put the basic question as he saw it in the quotation above. The third issue involved another colonial possession -- India. Here, in an area where his knowledge was more limited and his motivation perhaps political, Burke applied the same principles, criticizing the conduct of the British East India Company for the manner in which its huge monopoly was operated, and especially the wealth with which its returning officials ("nabobs" he called them) retired in England.

The final issue, and the one which drew from Burke his most lasting contribution to contemporary thought, was the French Revolution. Many Englishmen, including the leaders of his own party, saw this revolution, at least in its early stages, as an application of the English principles of 1688. Was not the whole idea of natural rights, including the right of revolution, an English contribution to political thought? And could not Burke be expected to produce a most resounding vindication of this revolution? But, when his Reflections on the Revolution in France appeared in 1790 there was dismay and consternation within his party and among his close friends. Burke seemed to have completely reversed his former position. What was good for Englishmen and Americans was not good for Frenchmen. He denounced the thoughts of Voltaire and Rousseau, and of all who saw in the French Revolution something liberal and free. The question that was asked by a great number of people was: Why? But one who had read Burke closely from his very earliest writings should not have been surprised.

Burke interpreted the spirit of the French Revolution as entirely different from that of the American. He saw the French situation as expressing not a continuity with its own past, but as evolving into a struggle between benevolent despots and despotic democrats. And he accurately predicted what the result would be:

It is besides to be considered, whether an Assembly like yours, even supposing that it was in possession of another sort of organ through which its orders were to pass, is fit for promoting the obedience and discipline of an army. It is known that armies have hitherto yielded a very precarious and uncertain obedience to any senate or popular authority; and they will least of all yield it to an Assembly which is to have only a continuance of two years. The officers must totally lose the characteristic disposition of military men, if they see with perfect submission and due admiration the dominion of pleaders, -- especially when they find that they have a new court to pay to an endless succession of those pleaders, whose military policy, and the genius of whose command, (if they should have any,) must be as uncertain...
as their duration is transient. In the weakness of one kind of authority, and in the fluctuation of all, the officers of an army will remain for some time mutinous and full of faction, until some popular general, who understands the art of conciliating the soldiery, and who possesses the true spirit of command, shall draw the eyes of all men upon himself. Armies will obey him on his personal account. There is no other way of securing military obedience in this state of things. But the moment in which that event shall happen, the person who really commands the army is your master, -- the master (that is little) of your king, the master of your Assembly, the master of your whole republic.

How did Burke so accurately predict what would befall France? What he had done was to go back even further than the recent past, back further than Locke, and tap something deeper. He pointed out that rights and obligations went together, that freedom involved responsibility, and that society was something more than an artificial contract of the moment. He was willing enough to turn to experience as the Enlightenment had insisted one should, but not to immediate experience or individual experience only. Rather he turned to English social and historical experience and found in it a source of meaning and moral values with which to evaluate the experience of the moment. But what this conservatism did not enable Burke to see was something which, for the Frenchman, was of even more importance.

Burke might admit the possibility of a revolution at the very beginning of a political association, but there were Frenchmen who thought that there were other times than the beginning which necessitated a revolution. Burke might welcome change as long as it was gradual, but there were those who insisted that sometimes it had to be precipitous, and that this was one of those times. Burke might give all honor to a king and queen, but there were many Frenchmen who thought this only served to blind him to the needs of their subjects. Burke might insist on the importance of religion for the welfare of the state, but religion had sometimes played quite a different role on the other side of the Channel. Burke might deprecate the leaders of the Revolution, but there were Frenchmen who believed that their leaders were as good or better than any that had come out of England. In short, Burke's conservatism led him to believe that a political institution which was able to stand must of necessity be strong and worthy of preservation.

The appearance of the Reflections unleashed a storm of criticism, one of the best examples of which was Thomas Paine's Rights of Man (1791). It also served to lose Burke many valued friends and his position in the Whig party. But the book went through eleven printings within the first year, was translated into several different languages, and may have sold as many as 30,000 copies before his death. All these things served to put
it in the forefront of men's minds and, as events in France
tended to bear out Burke's predictions, he enjoyed a wave of
popularity such as only the successful prophet can have. After
his death the French Revolution continued to follow many of his
predictions, elevating his book to a position of unusual sig-
nificance. Readers who turned to it because of its current
relevance, however, often found something more than what they
were expecting. They found current events treated from a
larger point of view, one which brought the universal to bear
on the particular, the ought on the is, and conscience on con-
tract. In producing such a balance of the necessary factors in
any political situation, Burke greatly influenced his own time,
and laid the philosophical foundations for much of modern polit-
cal conservatism.

On the forenoon of the fourth of November last, Doctor
Richard Price, a Non-Conforming minister of eminence,
preached at the Dissenting meeting-house of the Old Jewry,
to his club or society, a very extraordinary miscellaneous
sermon, in which there are some good moral and religious
sentiments, and not ill expressed, mixed up with a sort
of porridge of various political opinions and reflections:
but the Revolution in France is the grand ingredient in
the caldron. I consider the address transmitted by the
Revolution Society to the National Assembly, through Earl
Stanhope, as originating in the principles of the sermon,
and as a corollary from them. It was moved by the preacher
of that discourse. It was passed by those who came reeking
from the effect of the sermon, without any censure or qual-
ification, expressed or implied. If, however, any of the
gentlemen concerned shall wish to separate the sermon from
the resolution, they know how to acknowledge the one and
to disavow the other. They may do it: I cannot...

...Supposing, however, that something like moderation
were visible in this political sermon, yet politics and the
pulpit are terms that have little agreement. No sound
ought to be heard in the church but the healing voice of
Christian charity. The cause of civil liberty and civil
government gains as little as that of religion by this
confusion of duties. Those who quit their proper charac-
ter to assume what does not belong to them are, for the
greater part, ignorant both of the character they leave
and of the character they assume. Wholly unacquainted
with the world, in which they are so fond of meddling,
and inexperienced in all its affairs, on which they pro-
nounce with so much confidence, they have nothing of pol-
itics but the passions they excite. Surely the church is a
place where one day's truce ought to be allowed to the
dissensions and animosities of mankind....

...Dr. Price] tells the Revolution Society, in this
political sermon, that his Majesty "is almost the only
lawful king in the world, because the only one who owes
his crown to the choice of his people." As to the kings
of the world, all of whom (except one) this arch-pontiff
of the rights of men, with all the plenitude and with
more than the boldness of the Papal deposing power in its
meridian fervor of the twelfth century, puts into one
swEEPING clause of ban and anathema, and proclaims usur­
ers by circles of longitude and latitude over the whole
globe, it behooves them to consider how they admit into
their territories these apostolic missionaries, who are
to tell their subjects they are not lawful kings. That
is their concern. It is ours, as a (domestic) interest of
some moment, seriously to consider the solidity of the
only principle upon which these gentlemen acknowledge a
king of Great Britain to be entitled to their allegiance.

This doctrine, as applied to the prince now on the
British throne, either is nonsense, and therefore neither
true nor false, or it affirms a most unfounded, dangerous,
illegal, and unconstitutional position. According to this
spiritual doctor of politics, if his Majesty does not owe
his crown to the choice of his people, he is no lawful
king. Now nothing can be more untrue than that the crown
of this kingdom is so held by his Majesty. Therefore, if
you follow their rule, the king of Great Britain, who
most certainly does not owe his high office to any form
of popular election, is in no respect better than the
rest of the gang of usurpers, who reign, or rather rob,
all over the face of this our miserable world, without
any sort of right or title to the allegiance of their
people. The policy of this general doctrine, so qual­
ified, is evident enough. The propagators of this polit­
cical gospel are in hopes their abstract principle (their
principle that a popular choice is necessary to the legal
existence of the sovereign magistracy) would be overlooked,
whilst the king of Great Britain was not affected by it.

In the mean time the ears of their congregations would be
gradually habituated to it, as if it were a first prin­
ciple admitted without dispute. For the present it would
only operate as a theory, pickled in the preserving
juices of pulpit eloquence, and laid by for future use.

Condo et compono quae mox depromere possim. By this pol­
icy, whilst our government is soothed with a reservation
in its favor, to which it has no claim, the security
which it has in common with all governments, so far as
opinion is security, is taken away.

Thus these politicians proceed, whilst little notice
is taken of their doctrines; but when they come to be
examined upon the plain meaning of their words and the
direct tendency of their doctrines, then equivocations
and slippery constructions come into play. When they say
the king owes his crown to the choice of his people, and
is therefore the only lawful sovereign in the world, they
will perhaps tell us they mean to say no more than that
some of the king's predecessors have been called to the
throne by some sort of choice, and therefore he owes his
crown to the choice of his people. Thus, by a miserable
subterfuge, they hope to render their proposition safe by
rendering it nugatory. They are welcome to the asylum they seek for their offence, since they take refuge in their folly. For, if you admit this interpretation, how does their idea of election differ from our idea of inheritance? And how does the settlement of the crown in the Brunswick line, derived from James the First, come to legalize our monarchy rather than that of any of the neighboring countries? At some time or other, to be sure, all the beginners of dynasties were chosen by those who called them to govern. There is ground enough for the opinion that all the kingdoms of Europe were at a remote period elective, with more or fewer limitations in the objects of choice. But whatever kings might have been here or elsewhere a thousand years ago, or in whatever manner the ruling dynasties of England or France may have begun, the king of Great Britain is at this day king by a fixed rule of succession, according to the laws of his country; and whilst the legal conditions of the compact of sovereignty are performed by him, (as they are performed,) he holds his crown in contempt of the choice of the Revolution Society, who have not a single vote for a king amongst them, either individually or collectively: though I make no doubt they would soon elect themselves into an electoral college, if things were ripe to give effect to their claim. His Majesty's heirs and successors, each in his time and order, will come to the crown with the same contempt of their choice with which his Majesty has succeeded to that he wears.

Whatever may be the success of evasion in explaining away the gross error of fact, which supposes that his Majesty (though he holds it in concurrence with the wishes) owes his crown to the choice of his people, yet nothing can evade their full, explicit declaration concerning the principle of a right in the people to choose, -- which right is directly maintained, and tenaciously adhered to. All the oblique insinuations concerning election bottom in this proposition, and are referable to it. Lest the foundation of the king's exclusive legal title should pass for a mere rant of adulatory freedom, the political divine proceeds dogmatically to assert, that, by the principles of the Revolution, the people of England have acquired three fundamental rights, all of which, with him, compose one system, and lie together in one short sentence: namely, that we have acquired a right

1. "To choose our own governors."
2. "To cashier them for misconduct."
3. "To frame a government for ourselves."

This new, and hitherto unheard-of bill of rights, though made in the name of the whole people, belongs to those gentlemen and their faction only. The body of the people of England have no share in it. They utterly disclaim it. They will resist the practical assertion of it with their lives and fortunes. They are bound to do so by the laws of their country, made at the time of that very Revolution
which is appealed to in favor of the fictitious rights claimed by the society which abuses its name.

These gentlemen of the Old Jewry, in all their reasonings on the Revolution of 1688, have a revolution which happened in England about forty years before, and the late French Revolution, so much before their eyes and in their hearts, that they are constantly confounding all the three together. It is necessary that we should separate what they confound. We must recall their erring fancies to the acts of the Revolution which we revere, for the discovery of its true principles. If the principles of the Revolution of 1688 are anywhere to be found, it is in the statute called the Declaration of Right. In that most wise, sober, and considerate declaration, drawn up by great lawyers and great statesmen, and not by warm and inexperienced enthusiasts, not one word is said, nor one suggestion made, of a general right "to choose our own governors, to cashier them for misconduct, and to form a government for ourselves."........

You will observe, that, from Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right, it has been the 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, -- as an estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom, without any reference whatever to any other more general or prior right. By this means our Constitution preserves an unity in so great a diversity of its parts. We have an inheritable crown, an inheritable peerage, and a House of Commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties from a long line of ancestors.

This policy appears to me to be the result of profound reflection, -- or rather the happy effect of following Nature, which is wisdom without reflection, and above it. A spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views. People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors. Besides, the people of England well know that the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation, and a sure principle of transmission, without at all excluding a principle of improvement. It leaves acquisition free; but it secures what it acquires. Whatever advantages are obtained by a state proceeding on these maxims are locked fast as in a sort of family settlement, grasped as in a kind of mortmain forever. By a constitutional policy working after the pattern of Nature, we receive, we hold, we transmit our government and our privileges, in the same manner in which we enjoy and transmit our property and our lives. The institutions of policy, the goods of fortune, the gifts of Providence, are handed down to us, and from us, in the same course and order. Our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world, and with the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body
composed of transitory parts, -- wherein, by the disposi-
tion of a stupendous wisdom, moulding together the great
mysterious incorporation of the human race, the whole, at
one time, is never old or middle-aged or young, but, in a
condition of unchangeable constancy, moves on through the
varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and pro-
gression. Thus, by preserving the method of Nature in the
conduct of the state, in what we improve we are never
wholly new, in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete.
By adhering in this manner and on those principles to our
forefathers, we are guided, not by the superstition of
antiquarians, but by the spirit of philosophic analogy.
In this choice of inheritance we have given to our frame
of polity the image of a relation in blood: binding up
the Constitution of our country with our dearest domestic
ties; adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our
family affections; keeping inseparable, and cherishing
with the warmth of all their combined and mutually re-
lected charities, our state, our hearths, our sepulchres,
and our altars.

Through the same plan of a conformity to Nature in our
artificial institutions, and by calling in the aid of her
unerring and powerful instincts to fortify the fallible
and feeble contrivances of our reason, we have derived
several other, and those no small benefits, from consider-
ing our liberties in the light of an inheritance. Always
acting as if in the presence of canonized forefathers, the
spirit of freedom, leading in itself to misrule and ex-
cess, is tempered with an awful gravity. This idea of a
liberal descent inspires us with a sense of habitual native
dignity, which prevents that upstart insolence almost in-
evitably adhering to and disgracing those who are the first
acquirers of any distinction. By this means our liberty
becomes a noble freedom. It carries an imposing and ma-
jestic aspect. It has a pedigree and illustrating ances-
tors. It has its bearings and its ensigns armorial. It
has its gallery of portraits, its monumental inscriptions,
its records, evidences, and titles. We procure reverence
in our civil institutions on the principle upon which
Nature teaches us to revere individual men: on account of
their age, and on account of those from whom they are de-
scended. All your sophisters cannot produce anything bet-
ter adapted to preserve a rational and manly freedom than
the course that we have pursued, who have chosen our
nature rather than our speculations, our breasts rather
than our inventions, for the great conservatories and
magazines of our rights and privileges.

You might, if you pleased, have profited of our ex-
ample, and have given to your recovered freedom a corre-
pondent dignity. Your privileges, though discontinued,
were not lost to memory. Your Constitution, it is true,
whilst you were out of possession, suffered waste and
dilapidation; but you possessed in some parts the walls,
and in all the foundations, of a noble and venerable
castle. You might have repaired those walls; you might have built on those old foundations. Your Constitution was suspended before it was perfected; but you had the elements of a Constitution very nearly as good as could be wished. In your old states you possessed that variety of parts corresponding with the various descriptions of which your community was happily composed; you had all that combination and all that opposition of interests, you had that action and counteraction, which, in the natural and in the political world, from the reciprocal struggle of discordant powers draws out the harmony of the universe. These opposed and conflicting interests, which you considered as so great a blemish in your old and in our present Constitution, interpose a salutary check to all precipitate resolutions. They render deliberation a matter, not of choice, but of necessity; they make all change a subject of compromise, which naturally begets moderation; they produce temperaments, preventing the sore evil of harsh, crude, unqualified reformations, and rendering all the headlong exertions of arbitrary power, in the few or in the many, forever impracticable. Through that diversity of members and interests, general liberty had as many securities as there were separate views in the several orders; whilst by pressing down the whole by the weight of a real monarchy, the separate parts would have been prevented from warping and starting from their allotted places.

You had all these advantages in your ancient states; but you chose to act as if you had never been moulded into civil society, and had everything to begin anew. You began ill, because you began by despising everything that belonged to you. You set up your trade without a capital. If the last generations of your country appeared without much lustre in your eyes, you might have passed them by, and derived your claims from a more early race of ancestors. Under a pious predilection for those ancestors, your imaginations would have realized in them a standard of virtue and wisdom beyond the vulgar practice of the hour; and you would have risen with the example to whose imitation you aspired. Respecting your forefathers, you would have been taught to respect yourselves. You would not have chosen to consider the French as a people of yesterday, as a nation of low-born, servile wretches until the emancipating year of 1789. In order to furnish, at the expense of your honor, an excuse to your apologists here for several enormities of yours, you would not have been content to be represented as a gang of Maroon slaves, suddenly broke loose from the house of bondage, and therefore to be pardoned for your abuse of the liberty to which you were not accustomed, and were ill fitted. Would it not, my worthy friend, have been wiser to have you thought, what I for one always thought you, a generous and gallant nation, long misled to your disadvantage by your high and romantic sentiments of fidelity, honor, and loyalty; that events had been unfavorable to you, but that you were not
enslaved through any illiberal or servile disposition; that, in your most devoted submission, you were actuated by a principle of public spirit; and that it was your country you worshipped, in the person of your king? Had you made it to be understood, that, in the delusion of this amiable error, you had gone further than your wise ancestors, — that you were resolved to resume your ancient privileges, whilst you preserved the spirit of your ancient and your recent loyalty and honor; or if, deficient of yourselves, and not clearly discerning the almost obliterated Constitution of your ancestors, you had looked to your neighbors in this land, who had kept alive the ancient principles and models of the old common law of Europe, meliorated and adapted to its present state, — by following wise examples you would have given new examples of wisdom to the world. You would have rendered the cause of liberty venerable in the eyes of every worthy mind in every nation. You would have shamed despotism from the earth, by showing that freedom was not only reconcilable, but, as, when well disciplined, it is, auxiliary to law. You would have had an unoppressive, but a productive revenue. You would have had a flourishing commerce to feed it. You would have had a free Constitution, a potent monarchy, a disciplined army, a reformed and venerated clergy, — a mitigated, but spirited nobility, to lead your virtue, not to overlay it; you would have had a liberal order of commons, to emulate and to recruit that nobility; you would have had a protected, satisfied, laborious, and obedient people, taught to seek and to recognize the happiness that is to be found by virtue in all conditions, — in which consists the true moral equality of mankind, and not in that monstrous fiction which, by inspiring false ideas and vain expectations into men destined to travel in the obscure walk of laborious life, serves only to aggravate and embitter that real inequality which it never can remove, and which the order of civil life establishes as much for the benefit of those whom it must leave in an humble state as those whom it is able to exalt to a condition more splendid, but not more happy. You had a smooth and easy career of felicity and glory laid open to you, beyond anything recorded in the history of the world; but you have shown that difficulty is good for man. . . . .

...Believe me, Sir, those who attempt to level never equalize. In all societies consisting of various descriptions of citizens, some description must be uppermost. The levellers, therefore, only change and pervert the natural order of things: they load the edifice of society by setting up in the air what the solidity of the structure requires to be on the ground. The associations of tailors and carpenters, of which the republic (of Paris, for instance) is composed, cannot be equal to the situation into which, by the worst of usurpations, an usurpation on the prerogatives of Nature, you attempt to force them.
The Chancellor of France, at the opening of the States, said, in a tone of oratorial flourish, that all occupations were honorable. If he meant only that no honest employment was disgraceful, he would not have gone beyond the truth. But in asserting that anything is honorable, we imply some distinction in its favor. The occupation of a hair-dresser, or of a working tallow-chandler, cannot be a matter of honor to any person, -- to say nothing of a number of other more servile employments. Such descriptions of men ought not to suffer oppression from the state; but the state suffers oppression, if such as they, either individually or collectively, are permitted to rule. In this you think you are combating prejudice, but you are at war with Nature.

I do not, my dear Sir, conceive you to be of that sophistical, captious spirit, or of that uncandid dulness, as to require, for every general observation or sentiment, an explicit detail of the correctives and exceptions which reason will presume to be included in all the general propositions which come from reasonable men. You do not imagine that I wish to confine power, authority, and distinction to blood and names and titles. No, Sir. There is no qualification for government but virtue and wisdom, actual or presumptive. Wherever they are actually found, they have, in whatever state, condition, profession, or trade, the passport of Heaven to human place and honor. Woe to the country which would madly and impiously reject the service of the talents and virtues, civil, military, or religious, that are given to grace and to serve it; and would condemn to obscurity everything formed to diffuse lustre and glory around a state! Woe to that country, too, that, passing into the opposite extreme, considers a low education, a mean, contracted view of things, a sordid, mercenary occupation, as a preferable title to command! Everything ought to be open, -- but not indifferently to every man. No rotation, no appointment by lot, no mode of election operating in the spirit of sortition or rotation, can be generally good in a government conversant in extensive objects; because they have no tendency, direct or indirect, to select the man with a view to the duty, or to accommodate the one to the other. I do not hesitate to say that the road to eminence and power, from obscure condition, ought not to be made too easy, nor a thing too much of course. If rare merit be the rarest of all rare things, it ought to pass through some sort of probation. The temple of honor ought to be seated on an eminence. If it be opened through virtue, let it be remembered, too, that virtue is never tried but by some difficulty and some struggle.

Nothing is a due and adequate representation of a state, that does not represent its ability, as well as its property. But as ability is a vigorous and active principle, and as property is sluggish, inert, and timid, it never can be safe from the invasions of ability, unless it be, out of
all proportion, predominant in the representation. It must be represented, too, in great masses of accumulation, or it is not rightly protected. The characteristic essence of property, formed out of the combined principles of its acquisition and conservation, is to be unequal. The great masses, therefore, which excite envy, and tempt rapacity, must be put out of the possibility of danger. Then they form a natural rampart about the lesser properties in all their gradations. The same quantity of property which is by the natural course of things divided among many has not the same operation. Its defensive power is weakened as it is diffused. In this diffusion each man's portion is less than what, in the eagerness of his desires, he may flatter himself to obtain by dissipating the accumulations of others. The plunder of the few would, indeed, give but a share inconceivably small in the distribution to the many. But the many are not capable of making this calculation; and those who lead them to rapine never intend this distribution.

The power of perpetuating our property in our families is one of the most valuable and interesting circumstances belonging to it, and that which tends the most to the perpetuation of society itself. It makes our weakness subservient to our virtue; it grafts benevolence even upon avarice. The possessors of family wealth, and of the distinction which attends hereditary possession, (as most concerned in it,) are the natural securities for this transmission. With us the House of Peers is formed upon this principle. It is wholly composed of hereditary property and hereditary distinction, and made, therefore, the third of the legislature, and, in the last event, the sole judge of all property in all its subdivisions. The House of Commons, too, though not necessarily, yet in fact, is always so composed, in the far greater part. Let those large proprietors be what they will, (and they have their chance of being amongst the best,) they are, at the very worst, the ballast in the vessel of the commonwealth. For though hereditary wealth, and the rank which goes with it, are too much idolized by creeping sycophants, and the blind, abject admirers of power, they are too rashly slighted in shallow speculations of the petulant, assuming, short-sighted coxcombs of philosophy. Some decent, regulated preeminence, some preference (not exclusive appropriation) given to birth, is neither unnatural, nor unjust, nor impolitic.

It is said that twenty-four millions ought to prevail over two hundred thousand. True; if the constitution of a kingdom be a problem of arithmetic. This sort of discourse does well enough with the lamp-post for its second; to men who may reason calmly it is ridiculous. The will of the many, and their interest, must very often differ; and great will be the difference when they make an evil choice. A government of five hundred country attorneys and obscure curates is not good for twenty-four millions of men, though it were chosen by eight-and forty millions;
nor is it the better for being guided by a dozen of persons of quality who have betrayed their trust in order to obtain that power. At present, you seem in everything to have strayed out of the high road of Nature. The property of France does not govern it. Of course property is destroyed, and rational liberty has no existence. All you have got for the present is a paper circulation, and a stock-jobbing constitution: and as to the future, do you seriously think that the territory of France, upon the republican system of eighty-three independent municipalities, (to say nothing of the parts that compose them,) can ever be governed as one body, or can ever be set in motion by the impulse of one mind? When the National Assembly has completed its work, it will have accomplished its ruin. These commonwealths will not long bear a state of subjection to the republic of Paris. They will not bear that this one body should monopolize the captivity of the king, and the dominion over the assembly calling itself national. Each will keep its own portion of the spoil of the Church to itself; and it will not suffer either that spoil, or the more just fruits of their industry, or the natural produce of their soil, to be sent to swell the insolence or pamper the luxury of the mechanics of Paris. In this they will see none of the equality, under the pretence of which they have been tempted to throw off their allegiance to their sovereign, as well as the ancient constitution of their country. There can be no capital city in such a constitution as they have lately made. They have forgot, that, when they framed democratic governments, they had virtually dismembered their country. The person whom they persevere in calling king has not power left to him by the hundredth part sufficient to hold together this collection of republics. The republic of Paris will endeavor, indeed, to complete the debauchery of the army, and illegally to perpetuate the Assembly, without resort to its constituents, as the means of continuing its despotism. It will make efforts, by becoming the heart of a boundless paper circulation, to draw everything to itself: but in vain. All this policy in the end will appear as feeble as it is now violent.

The science of constructing a commonwealth, or renovating it, or reforming it, is, like every other experimental science, not to be taught a priori. Nor is it a short experience that can instruct us in that practical science, because the real effects of moral causes are not always immediate, but that which in the first instance is prejudicial may be excellent in its remoter operation, and its excellence may arise even from the ill effects it produces in the beginning: The reverse also happens; and very plausible schemes, with very pleasing commencements, have often shameful and lamentable conclusions. In states there are often some obscure and almost latent causes, things which appear at first view of little moment, on which a very great part of its prosperity or adversity may
most essentially depend. The science of government being, therefore, so practical in itself, and intended for such practical purposes, a matter which requires experience, and even more experience than any person can gain in his whole life, however sagacious and observing he may be, it is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or on building it up again without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes.

These metaphysic rights entering into common life, like rays of light which pierce into a dense medium are, by the laws of Nature, refracted from their straight line. Indeed, in the gross and complicated mass of human passions and concerns, the primitive rights of men undergo such a variety of refractions and reflections that it becomes absurd to talk of them as if they continued in the simplicity of their original direction. The nature of man is intricate; the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity; and therefore no simple disposition or direction of power can be suitable either to man's nature or to the quality of his affairs. When I hear the simplicity of contrivance aimed at and boasted of in any new political constitutions, I am at no loss to decide that the artificers are grossly ignorant of their trade or totally negligent of their duty. The simple governments are fundamentally defective, to say no worse of them. If you were to contemplate society in but one point of view, all these simple modes of polity are infinitely captivating. In effect each would answer its single end much more perfectly than the more complex is able to attain all its complex purposes. But it is better that the whole should be imperfectly and anomalously answered than that while some parts are provided for with great exactness, others might be totally neglected, or perhaps materially injured, by the over-care of a favorite member.

The pretended rights of these theorists are all extremes; and in proposition as they are metaphysically true, they are morally and politically false. The rights of men are in a sort of middle, incapable of definition, but not impossible to be discerned. The rights of men in governments are their advantages; and these are often in balances between differences of good, -- in compromises sometimes between good and evil, and sometimes between evil and evil. Political reason is a computing principle: adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing, morally, and not metaphysically or mathematically, true moral denominations....

We know, and, what is better, we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good, and of all comfort. In England we are so convinced of this, that there is no rust of superstition, with which the accumulated absurdity of the human mind might have crusted it over in the course of ages, that...
ninety-nine in a hundred of the people of England would not prefer to impiety. We shall never be such fools as to call in an enemy to the substance of any system to remove its corruptions, to supply its defects, or to perfect its construction. If our religious tenets should ever want a further elucidation, we shall not call on Atheism to explain them. We shall not light up our temple from that unhallowed fire. It will be illuminated with other lights. It will be perfumed with other incense than the infectious stuff which is imported by the smugglers of adulterated metaphysics. If our ecclesiastical establishment should want a revision, it is not avarice or rapacity, public or private, that we shall employ for the audit or receipt or application of its consecrated revenue. Violently condemning neither the Greek nor the Armenian, nor, since heats are subsided, the Roman system of religion, we prefer the Protestant; not because we think it has less of the Christian religion in it, but because, in our judgment, it has more. We are Protestants, not from indifference, but from zeal.

We know, and it is our pride to know, that man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only our reason, but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long. But if, in the moment of riot, and in a drunken delirium from the hot spirit drawn out of the alembic of hell, which in France is now so furiously boiling, we should uncover our nakedness, by throwing off that Christian religion which has hitherto been our boast and comfort, and one great source of civilization amongst us, and among many other nations, we are apprehensive (being well aware that the mind will not endure a void) that some uncouth, pernicious, and degrading superstition might take place of it.

For that reason, before we take from our establishment the natural, human means of estimation, and give it up to contempt, as you have done, and in doing it have incurred the penalties you well deserve to suffer, we desire that some other may be presented to us in the place of it. We shall then form our judgment.

On these ideas, instead of quarrelling with establishments, as some do, who have made a philosophy and a religion of their hostility to such institutions, we cleave closely to them. We are resolved to keep an established church, an established monarchy, an established aristocracy, and an established democracy, each in the degree it exists, and in no greater........

Society is, indeed, a contract. Subordinate contracts for objects of mere occasional interest may be dissolved at pleasure; but the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other such low concern, to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked on with other reverence; because it is not
a partnership in things subservient only to the gross
animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature.
It is a partnership in all science, a partnership in all
art, a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection.
As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in
many generations, it becomes a partnership not only be­tween those who are living, but between those who are liv­ing, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.
Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in
the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking
the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible
and invisible world, according to a fixed compact san­ctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical
and all moral natures each in their appointed place. This
law is not subject to the will of those who, by an obli­gation above them, and infinitely superior, are bound to
submit their will to that law. The municipal corporations
of that universal kingdom are not morally at liberty, at
their pleasure, and on their speculations of a contingent
improvement, wholly to separate and tear asunder the bands
of their subordinate community, and to dissolve it into an
unsocial, uncivil, unconnected chaos of elementary prin­ciples. It is the first and supreme necessity only, a
necessity that is not chosen, but chosen, a necessity
paramount to deliberation, that admits no discussion and
demands no evidence, which alone can justify a resort to
anarchy. This necessity is no exception to the rule; be­cause this necessity itself is a part, too, of that moral
and physical disposition of things to which man must be
obedient by consent or force: but if that which is only
submission to necessity should be made the object of choice,
the law is broken. Nature is disobeyed, and the rebellious
are outlawed, cast forth, and exiled, from this world of
reason, and order, and peace, and virtue, and fruitful
penitence, into the antagonist world of madness, discord,
vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow.