

in reaction to the very rules which uncontradicted previous experience pronounced to be universally valid: man is inventive in good and in evil. Therefore it may happen that "experience upon other data [than the actual circumstances of the case], is of all things the most delusive."<sup>83</sup>

It follows from this that history is only of very limited value. From history "much political wisdom may be learned," but only "as habit, not as precept." History is liable to turn man's understanding from "the business before him" to misleading analogies, and men are naturally inclined to succumb to that temptation. For it requires a much greater effort to articulate a hitherto unarticulated situation in its particular character than to interpret it in the light of precedents which have been articulated already. "I have constantly observed," Burke says, "that the generality of people are fifty years, at least, behind hand in their politics . . . in books everything is settled for them, without the exertion of any considerable diligence or sagacity." This is not to deny that the politician sometimes needs history for the sake of "the business before him." Reason and good sense absolutely prescribe, e.g., "whenever we are involved in difficulties from the measures we have pursued, that we should take a strict review of those measures" or that we should "enter into the most ample historical detail." History has this in common with practical wisdom—that both are concerned with particulars; and it has this in common with theory—that the objects of history, i.e., past actions or transactions (*acta*), are not objects of action proper (*agenda*), i.e., things which we have to do now. Thus history, or "retrospective wisdom," creates the delusion that it could "serve admirably to reconcile the old quarrel between speculation and practice."<sup>84</sup>

Another way in which men try to evade the hardship in-

83. *Ibid.*, I, 277-78, 312, 365; II, 372, 374-75, 383; III, 15-17; V, 78, 153-54, 257.

84. *Ibid.*, I, 311, 384-85; II, 25; III, 456-57; V, 258.

volved in articulating and handling difficult situations is legalism. They sometimes act on the assumption that political questions proper, which, as such, concern the here and now, can be fully answered by recourse to law, which, as such, is concerned with universals. It is with a view to this difference between the prudential and the legal that Burke calls the legal approach sometimes "speculative" or "metaphysical." He contrasts "the limited and fixed" character of the legal, which is "adapted to ordinary occasions," with the prudential, which alone can guide men "when a new and troubled scene is opened."<sup>85</sup>

Theory, then, is capable of a simplicity, uniformity, or exactness which practical wisdom necessarily lacks. It is characteristic of the theory which regards man and the affairs of men that it be primarily concerned either with the best or simply just order or with the state of nature. In both forms theory is primarily concerned with the simplest case. This simple case never occurs in practice; no actual order is simply just, and every social order is fundamentally different from the state of nature. Therefore, practical wisdom always has to do with exceptions, modifications, balances, compromises, or mixtures. "These metaphysical 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." Since "the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity," "the primitive rights of men" cannot continue "in the simplicity of their original direction"; "and in proportion as [these rights] are metaphysically true, they are morally and politically false." Practical wisdom, in contradistinction to theory, requires, therefore, "the most delicate and complicated skill," a skill which arises only from long and varied practice.<sup>86</sup>

85. *Ibid.*, I, 199, 406-7, 431, 432; II, 7, 25, 28; V, 295.

86. *Ibid.*, I, 257, 336-37, 408, 433, 500-501; II, 29-30, 333-35, 437-38, 454-55, 515; III, 16; V, 158; VI, 132-33.



On the other hand, Burke characterizes theory as "subtle" or "refined" and sees in simplicity or plainness an essential character of sound politics: "refined policy has ever been the parent of confusion." The wants for which society has to provide and the duties to which it has to conform may be said to be known to everyone through his feelings and his conscience. Political theory raises the question regarding the best solution to the political problem. For this purpose, to say nothing of others, it transcends the limits of common experience: it is "refined." The man of civil discretion is vaguely aware of the best solution but is clearly aware of which modification of the best solution is appropriate in the circumstances. To take an example from the present day, he is aware of the fact that at present only "a wider, if a simpler culture"<sup>87</sup> is possible. The clarity required for sound action is not necessarily enhanced by enhanced clarity about the best solution or by enhanced theoretical clarity of any other kind: the clear light of the ivory tower or, for that matter, of the laboratory obscures political things by impairing the medium in which they exist. It may require "the most delicate and complicated skill" to devise a policy which agrees tolerably well with the ends of government in a given situation. But such a policy is a failure if the people cannot see its soundness: "refined policy" is destructive of trust and hence of full obedience. Policy must be "plain" as regards "all broader grounds of policy," whereas it is not necessary that "the ground of a particular measure, making a part of a plan" should "suit the ordinary capacities of those who are to enjoy it" or even that that ground should be divulged to them. "In the most essential point," "the less inquiring" can be and ought to be, by virtue of "their feelings and their experience," "on a par with the most wise and knowing."<sup>88</sup>

87. Winston S. Churchill, *Blood, Sweat, and Tears* (New York, 1941), p. 18.

88. *Works*, I, 337, 428-29, 435, 454, 489; II, 26, 30, 304, 358, 542; III, 112, 441; V, 227, 278; VI, 21, 24; VII, 349.

Furthermore, practice presupposes attachment to a particular or, more precisely, to "one's own" (one's country, one's people, one's religious group, and the like), whereas theory is detached. To be attached to something means to care for it, to have a concern with it, to be affected by it, or to have a stake in it. Practical matters, as distinguished from theoretical ones, "come home to the business and bosoms of men." The theoretician as such is no more interested in his own case or in the case of his own group than in any other. He is impartial and neutral, not to say "cold and languid." "Speculators ought to be neutral. A minister cannot be so." Acting man is necessarily and legitimately partial to what is his own; it is his duty to take sides. Burke does not mean that the theoretician must not pass "value judgments" but that, as theoretician, he is a partisan of excellence regardless of when and where it is found; he unqualifiedly prefers the good to what is his own. Acting man, however, is primarily concerned with what is his own, with what is nearest and dearest to him, however deficient in excellence it may be. The horizon of practice is necessarily narrower than that of theory. By opening up a larger vista, by thus revealing the limitations of any practical pursuit, theory is liable to endanger full devotion to practice.<sup>89</sup>

Practice lacks the freedom of theory also because it cannot wait: "we must submit . . . affairs to time." Practical thought is thought with a view to some deadline. It is concerned with the most imminent rather than with the most eligible. It lacks the ease and the leisure of theory. It does not permit man "to evade an opinion" or to suspend his judgment. Therefore, it must rest satisfied with a lower degree of clarity or certainty than theoretical thought. Every theoretical "decision" is reversible; actions are irreversible. Theory can and must ever again begin from the beginning. The very question of the best social order means that one "moots cases . . . on the supposed

89. *Ibid.*, I, 185-86, 324, 501; II, 29, 120, 280-81, 548; III, 379-80; VI, 226; VIII, 458.



ruin of the constitution," i.e., that one does something which in practical thought would bespeak "a bad habit." In contradistinction to theory, practice is limited by past decisions and, therefore, by what is established. In human affairs, possession passes for a title, whereas there is no presumption in favor of the accepted view in theoretical matters.<sup>90</sup>

Speculation, being essentially "private," is concerned with the truth without any regard to public opinion. But "national measures" or "political problems do not primarily concern truth or falsehood. They relate to good or evil." They relate to peace and "mutual convenience," and their satisfactory handling requires "unsuspecting confidence," consent, agreement, and compromise. Political action requires "a judicious management of the temper of the people." Even in giving "a direction . . . to the general sense of the community," it must "follow . . . the public inclination." Regardless of what one might have to think of "the abstract value of the voice of the people, . . . opinion, the great support of the State, [depends] entirely upon that voice." Hence it may easily happen that what is metaphysically true is politically false. "Established opinions," "allowed opinions which contribute so much to the public tranquillity," must not be shaken, although they are not "infallible." Prejudices must be "appeased." Political life requires that fundamental principles proper, which, as such, transcend the established constitution, be kept in a state of dormancy. Temporary solutions of continuity must be "kept from the eye," or a "politic, well-wrought veil" must be thrown over them. "There is a sacred veil to be drawn over the beginnings of all governments." Whereas speculation is "innovating," whereas the "waters" of science "must be troubled, before they can exert their virtues," practice must keep as closely as possible to precedent, example, and tradition: "old custom . . . is the great support of all the govern-

90. *Ibid.*, I, 87, 193, 323, 336, 405; II, 26, 427-28, 548, 552; VI, 19; VII, 127.

ments in the world." Society rests, indeed, on consent. Yet the consent cannot be achieved by reasoning alone, and in particular not by the mere calculation of the advantages of living together—a calculation which may be completed in a brief span of time—but solely by habits and prejudices which grow up only in long periods. Whereas theory rejects error, prejudice, or superstition, the statesman puts these to use.<sup>91</sup>

The intrusion of theory into politics is liable to have an unsettling and inflaming effect. No actual social order is perfect. "Speculative inquiries" necessarily bring to light the imperfect character of the established order. If these inquiries are introduced into political discussion, which, of necessity, lacks "the coolness of philosophic inquiry," they are liable "to raise discontent in the people" in regard to the established order, discontent which may make rational reform impossible. The most legitimate theoretical problems become, in the political arena, "vexatious questions" and cause "a spirit of litigation" and "fanaticism." Considerations transcending "the arguments of states and kingdoms" must be left "to the schools; for there only they may be discussed with safety."<sup>92</sup>

As may be inferred from the preceding paragraphs, Burke is not content with defending practical wisdom against the encroachments of theoretical science. He parts company with the Aristotelian tradition by disparaging theory and especially metaphysics. He uses "metaphysics" and "metaphysician" frequently in a derogatory sense. There is a connection between this usage and the fact that he regards Aristotle's natural philosophy as "unworthy of him," whereas he considers Epicurean physics to be "the most approaching to rational."<sup>93</sup>

91. *Ibid.*, I, 87, 190, 257, 280, 307, 352, 375, 431, 432, 471, 473, 483, 489, 492, 502; II, 27-29, 33-34, 44, 292, 293, 306, 335, 336, 349, 429-30, 439; III, 39-40, 81, 109, 110; V, 230; VI, 98, 243, 306-7; VII, 44-48, 59, 60, 190; VIII, 274; *Letters*, pp. 299-300.

92. *Works*, I, 259-60, 270-71, 432; II, 28-29, 331; III, 12, 16, 25, 39, 81, 98-99, 104, 106; VI, 132.

93. *Ibid.*, VI, 250-51.



There is a connection between his strictures on metaphysics and the skeptical tendencies of his contemporaries Hume and Rousseau. At least so much must be said that Burke's distinction between theory and practice is radically different from Aristotle's, since it is not based on a clear conviction of the ultimate superiority of theory or of the theoretical life.

For the support of this contention, we do not have to rely entirely on a general impression derived from Burke's usage and the bent of his thought. He wrote one theoretical work: *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. In that work he speaks in a nonpolemical tone about the limitations of theoretic science: "When we go but one step beyond the immediate sensible qualities of things, we go out of our depth. All we do after is but a faint struggle, that shows we are in an element which does not belong to us." Our knowledge of bodily and mental phenomena is limited to the manner of their operation, to their How; it can never reach their Why. The very title of the inquiry reveals the ancestry of Burke's sole theoretic effort; it is reminiscent of Locke and of Burke's acquaintance, Hume. Of Locke, Burke says that "the authority of this great man is doubtless as great as that of any man can be." The most important thesis of the *Sublime and Beautiful* is in perfect agreement with British sensualism and in explicit opposition to the classics; Burke denies that there is a connection between beauty, on the one hand, and perfection, proportion, virtue, convenience, order, fitness, and any other such "creatures of the understanding," on the other. That is to say, he refuses to understand visible or sensible beauty in the light of intellectual beauty.<sup>94</sup>

The emancipation of sensible beauty from its traditionally assumed directedness toward intellectual beauty foreshadows or accompanies a certain emancipation of sentiment and instinct from reason, or a certain depreciation of reason. It is this

94. *Ibid.*, I, 114 ff., 122, 129, 131, 143-44, 155; II, 441; VI, 98.

novel attitude toward reason which accounts for the nonclassical overtones in Burke's remarks on the difference between theory and practice. Burke's opposition to modern "rationalism" shifts almost insensibly into an opposition to "rationalism" as such.<sup>95</sup> What he says about the deficiencies of reason is indeed partly traditional. On some occasions he does not go beyond depreciating the judgment of the individual in favor of "the judgment of the human race," the wisdom of "the species" or "the ancient, permanent sense of mankind," i.e., the *consensus gentium*. On other occasions he does not go beyond depreciating the experience which the individual can acquire in favor of the much more extensive and varied experience of "a long succession of generations" or of "the collected reason of ages."<sup>96</sup> The novel element in Burke's critique of reason reveals itself least ambiguously in its most important practical consequence: he rejects the view that constitutions can be "made" in favor of the view that they must "grow"; he therefore rejects in particular the view that the best social order can be or ought to be the work of an individual, of a wise "legislator" or founder.<sup>97</sup>

To see this more clearly, it is necessary to contrast Burke's view of the British constitution, which he regarded, to say the

95. In the *Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke says that "our gardens, if nothing else, declare we begin to feel that mathematical ideas are not the true measures of beauty," and that this wrong view "arose from the Platonic theory of fitness and aptitude" (*Works*, I, 122). In the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, he compares the French revolutionists to the French "ornamental gardeners" (*Works*, II, 413). Cf. *ibid.*, II, 306, 308; I, 280.

96. *Works*, II, 359, 364, 367, 435, 440; VI, 146-47.

97. Friedrich von Gentz, the German translator of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, says: "Konstitutionen können schlechterdings nicht gemacht werden, sie müssen sich, wie Natur-Werke, durch allmähliche Entwicklung von selbst bilden. . . . Diese Wahrheit ist die kostbarste, vielleicht die einzige wirklich neue (denn höchstens geahnt, aber nicht vollständig erkannt wurde sie zuvor), um welche die französische Revolution die höhere Staatswissenschaft bereichert hat" (*Staatsschriften und Briefe* [Munich, 1921], I, 344) (the italics are not in the original).