Booknotes

A few years ago a posthumous collection of essays by F. R. Leavis appeared with the title *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher*. The idea seemed to be that because in his approach to literature Leavis rejected theory and the deduction of conclusions from principles, there was something un- or anti-philosophical about him. If so, Edmund Burke is also an anti-philosopher.

It would, though, be a shame if it was thought that, as a result, Burke's works are unworthy of philosophical attention, particularly these days when what is called particularism is an emerging trend in ethics and politics. Jim McCue's *Edmund Burke and Our Present Discontents* (Claridge Press, 1997), nicely coinciding with the bi-centenary of Burke's death, might be a good place to start a philosophical exhumation of Burke's political thought.

Not everyone will agree with McCue's judgements related to our present discontents or even with his extrapolation to them of Burkean themes. Nonetheless, there is plenty of philosophical meat in what he draws out of Burke. How, for example, is it possible for Burke consistently to oppose the French Revolution, while having argued strongly in favour of the American Revolution (and incidentally against Warren Hastings' adventures in India)? Was Burke not just an opportunist, a career Whig who jumped ship at an opportune moment, and thereby securing for himself a posthumous reputation as a seminal Tory thinker? McCue convincingly shows that on the key issue of sovereignty, Burke's apparent shifting of position conceals a deeper consistency. Burke's underlying insight is that in matters of sovereignty the consent of the governed is far more important than democracy in any formal sense or, indeed, any abstract notion of authority, such as the divine right of kings. In working out this thought in an actual case far more weight would be accorded local facts, manners and attitudes than abstract principle. The danger with constitutional arrangements based on abstractions, however good they sound to philosophical analysis, is that by wiping away the very traditions and balances which have in practice restrained rulers and executives they will be 'powerful to usurp, impotent to restore'.

Against their professed aims top-down constitutions are likely to be 'strong only to destroy the rights of men', by, for example, handing power over to an elected but unrepresentative assembly or, even worse, to an unelected and unrepresentative bureaucracy. Burke would clearly have hated the European Commission. He would have defended the hereditary principle in the House of Lords (because of what it does, not because of any abstract justification). What, though, would he have said of Scottish devolution, if, as we have to believe, the Scots just do not want to be treated as a branch of a London-based executive? Is there any analogy here with the 'habits of soreness, jealousy and distrust' Burke discerned in the American colonists subjected to a Parliamentary tax they found both burdensome and unjustified?

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Burke defended the British constitution by saying that 'all your sophisters cannot produce anything better adapted to preserve a rational and manly freedom than the course we have pursued, who have chosen our nature rather than our speculation, our breasts rather than our inventions, for the great conservatories and magazines of our rights and privileges'. But he also wrote that 'the bulk of mankind are not excessively curious concerning any theories whilst they are really happy', adding that 'one sure symptom of an ill-conducted state is the propensity of the people to resort to them.' After 200 years this still sounds a sharp warning to rulers and political élites. It is no advocacy of a mindless conservatism, nor is it a repudiation of any political philosophy whatever. Rather it is an invitation to a more reflective, more subtle and more empirical style than that normally favoured by philosophers, even by those who are officially committed to the recognition of perspectives other than those afforded by their theoretical stances.

Burke was no egalitarian. Nor is John Kekes. If Burke's ringing and mellifluous style and his leisurely, unstructured approach to his material make it all too easy to dismiss his philosophy as rhetoric, this would not be true of Kekes' *Against Liberalism* (Cornell University Press, 1997). In it Kekes develops a number of theories with which Burke would agree. He argues that the liberal emphasis on individual autonomy, plurality of choice and equality are liable to produce a situation in which many people will in practice have bad lives. Their lives are likely to be much more dominated by selfishness, cruelty, and greed than they might be in a society not taking liberal values as basic. Programmes of equality just cannot cope with the fact of scarcity of resources, or with the difficulty that they militate against the hard working and the deserving; this is not only bad in itself, it offends any robust sense of justice. Above all, liberalism fails to take seriously the prevalence of evil.

According to Kekes there is no evidence whatever that if people were more autonomous and the basic liberal values were realised in their society, people's natural goodness would prevail. In fact what evidence there is goes in exactly the opposite direction. Left to their own devices people are as likely to be vicious as much as virtuous. Should we then not regard prosperity, order, civility, peace, a healthy environment, security, happiness and law-abidingness as just as important as the liberal values of autonomy, rights and equality which the liberal will elevate above these other values? Kekes says that in a sequel he will develop a version of pluralistic conservatism, designed to avoid the pitfalls of liberalism while preserving what is good in it. *Against Liberalism* shows, if nothing else, that there is philosophical mileage in the themes and perceptions and in the political realism we have come to associate with Burke.

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