Reflections on the Revolution in France

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDMUND BURKE

Edmund Burke was born to a Catholic mother and a Protestant father. He studied in both Catholic and Protestant institutions in Ireland, then studied law in London. He initially had literary ambitions, serving as editor of the literary review *Annual Register* from 1758 to about 1765, but thereafter began taking positions in government service. The most consequential of these was his role as secretary to Whig leader Lord Rockingham, beginning in 1765, the same year when Burke himself was elected to the House of Commons. He remained in the House until retirement in 1794. Burke wrote polemical materials and speeches for the Rockingham Whigs, often criticizing policies in the American colonies and in British India. He also supported the lifting of restrictions on Catholics in Ireland. However, he has always been most remembered for his anti-revolutionary writings, including *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1795-7). Burke's other writings include *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Many in England who supported the French Revolution argued that it was in the spirit of England's own Glorious Revolution of 1688, in which James II and VII was deposed and replaced by William and Mary. One of Burke's main rhetorical aims in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is to demonstrate that the two Revolutions were completely different in circumstances and tenor. The French Revolution was a pivotal event for modern history, spanning the decade from 1789-1799. In short, the French Revolution overthrew the monarchy and established a republic in its place, leading to years of violent turmoil and many thousands of executions of those regarded as counterrevolutionary. Initially prompted by economic crisis, the Revolution focused on abolishing the feudal system and the privileges of the aristocracy, championing Enlightenment-inspired reason, equality, and secularism instead. At the time Burke wrote, the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793, one of the most significant events of the Revolution, had not yet taken place, and France was still technically a constitutional monarchy. *Reflections* was prompted when a French acquaintance, Charles-Jean Francois Depont, wrote to Burke in November 1789, seeking his opinion of recent events. On the same day, a radical dissenter, Richard Price, gave a speech to London's Revolutionary Society, urging his audience to build on the principles of the previous century's Glorious Revolution. In the coming months, *Reflections* emerged as a response to both Depont's letter and Price's published speech. *Reflections* was regarded as the primary critique of the Revolution in its day.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

John Locke's *Second Treatise* (1690), written soon after the Glorious Revolution, more systematically defends the idea of the social contract which Burke takes up in *Reflections*. Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791) was written in response to Burke, defending the idea of popular political revolution when people's rights are violated. Around the same time that Burke wrote his political treatises, Mary Wollstonecraft, who was actually living in Paris at the time, published *A Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*. Later, her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) directly critiqued Burke's support for aristocracy and championed republicanism.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Reflections on the revolution in France, and on the proceedings in certain societies in London relative to that event. In a letter intended to have been sent to a gentleman in Paris.
- **When Written:** 1790
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** November 1, 1790
- **Literary Period:** Enlightenment
- **Genre:** Political Pamphlet
- **Point of View:** First Person; Second Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Pamphlet War. Because Burke supported the American Revolution, many readers were surprised by his support for the French aristocracy in *Reflections*. Between 1790 and 1795, *Reflections* sparked numerous political pamphlets in response, including works by pro-republican radicals like Thomas Paine, William Godwin, and Mary Wollstonecraft. However, following France's Reign of Terror, British and American enthusiasm for the French Revolution tapered off.

Ironic Inspiration. Charles-Jean Francois Depont, the young Frenchman whose inquiries inspired Burke's *Reflections*, became a radical left-wing Jacobin. He later published a reply to Burke, stating that "if your opinions had then been known to me, far from engaging you to disclose them, I should have intreated you to withhold them from the public."

PLOT SUMMARY

Edmund Burke writes to a young French correspondent, Depont, who has asked for his views of the current revolutionary events taking place in France. Burke explains that he does not approve of the French Revolution, or the Revolution Society, which is in contact with France's National Assembly and seeks to extend Revolutionary principles in England.

Burke begins by critiquing a sermon that was recently delivered by Dissenting minister and political radical Richard Price. In his sermon, Price claims that, according to the principles of the 1688 Glorious Revolution, English people have the right "to choose our own governors"; "to cashier them for misconduct"; and "to frame a government for ourselves." Burke argues that Price's interpretation of the Glorious Revolution is inaccurate, and that its subsequent Declaration of Right laid down no such rights. For example, instead of providing for the election of England's governors, it laid down a more precise line of Protestant succession, seeing this as a guarantor of English liberties. The architects of the Glorious Revolution also established frequent parliamentary meetings instead of setting a precedent for future revolutions, and they saw their efforts as an affirmation of those rights declared in the Magna Charta, not as the framing of a new government. Overall, Burke argues that the French Revolution has been a rash rebellion against a lawful monarch, a rupture from France's ancestral heritage.

While not denying the existence of "the rights of man," Burke argues that these provide an inadequate basis for government. Government, rather, is "a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human" needs; it relies on a "deep knowledge of human nature" and on practical actions, not abstract theories. Preoccupation with abstract "rights" can lead people to overlook human nature and justify the "grand spectacle" of revolution.

Burke dramatically retells the story of the invasion of Versailles on October 6, 1789, when the King and Queen were forcibly driven to Paris by their subjects. He offers a particularly sympathetic portrait of Queen Marie Antoinette and suggests that the demise of both chivalry and fealty has led to the dehumanizing events in France. The triumph of the "rights of men" obscures people's natural sense of right and wrong. He explains that in England, people cherish their "prejudices," their age-old, "untaught feelings" of right and wrong. For example, England sees religion as the basis of civil society, unlike France's growing taste for radical deism and atheism. England also looks upon the state as a consecrated safeguard of civil society and human virtue, something not to be irreverently overturned.

Burke questions whether the French Revolution was truly justified, arguing that even in early 1789, most French political figures were seeking reform, not revolution. Though the monarchy, the nobility, and the Church were marked by numerous failings, none of these warranted the "despotic democracy" that has since taken power. Burke argues that revolutionaries pervert history, such as reviving memories of centuries-old religious persecution, in order to stir up anger against present-day figures, like clergy who haven't committed any serious wrongs.

Burke undertakes a more detailed review of France's establishments. He critiques the ambitions of the new legislators in the National Assembly, who lack the prudence and judgment that are necessary for the careful, gradual work of reform. By looking carefully at what the National Assembly has done—its legislative efforts, the executive power, the judicature, the army, and the finance system—he demonstrates that the Assembly is inadequate to carry out the rigorous duties it has assumed. For example, its redrawing of the map of France into "squares" for representation has actually reinforced inequalities, not eliminated them. Its overreliance on the confiscation of Church lands will likely prove ruinous to France's already struggling economy. And the army's internal discipline is disastrously weakened, destroying its ability to command respect and maintain order.

Burke concludes by commending the British example to France. He reasserts that changes should be only be made for the sake of preserving existing liberties and with respect for one's ancestors—in other words, people should strive for reform, not revolution. While he does not expect to change Depont's mind, he urges him to consider his beliefs, based on long years of observation and public service, since the French commonwealth may someday have need of them.

CHARACTERS

Edmund Burke – Edmund Burke (1729–1797) is the author of *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, addressed to Charles-Jean Francois Depont but largely in response to radical Dissenter Richard Price's speech "Discourse on the Love of Our Country." Burke was an Irish-born statesman who served in the British House of Commons and wrote speeches and pamphlets for the Whig party. He is best known for his opposition to the French Revolution. As many people in England supported the French Revolution, seeing it as another iteration of their own Glorious Revolution of 1688, Burke is careful to highlight in *Reflections* how dramatically different both revolutions are. Throughout *Reflections*, Burke also highlights his support for reform over revolution—fixing problems and strengthening age-old institutions but not completely demolishing them and starting from scratch.

Charles-Jean Francois Depont – Depont was the son of a French family who stayed with the Burkes. Burke describes him

as "a very young gentleman at Paris, who did him the honour of desiring his opinion" on the events taking place in France. By the time *Reflections* was published, Depont had become a radical Jacobin and later expressed regret at having solicited Burke's unfavorable opinions of the French Revolution.

Richard Price – Richard Price was a Dissenting minister and political radical, a member of London's Revolution Society whose sermon, "Discourse on the Love of Our Country," Burke dissects and critiques in the first part of *Reflections*. Price advocated for the English people's right to choose and remove their rulers and to choose their own form of government, encouraging his audience to build on the spirit of the previous century's Glorious Revolution.

King Louis XVI of France – Louis XVI (1754–1793) reigned as king of France from 1774–1792. He was the husband of Queen Marie Antoinette of France. He was the last king of France before the monarchy was abolished in the French Revolution; he was executed by guillotine in 1793. Burke describes him as a mild king, undeserving of his fate at revolutionary hands.

Queen Marie Antoinette of France – Marie Antoinette (1755–1793) was queen of France from 1774–1792. She was the wife of King Louis XVI of France. She was the last queen of France before the monarchy was abolished in the French Revolution; like her husband, Marie Antionette was executed by guillotine in 1793. Burke vividly describes the queen's capture following the March on Versailles in a famous passage in *Reflections*.

TERMS

French Revolution – The French Revolution was a pivotal event for modern history, spanning the decade from 1789–1799. The French Revolution overthrew the monarchy and established a republic in its place, leading to years of violent turmoil and many thousands of executions of those regarded as counter-revolutionary. Initially prompted by economic crisis, the Revolution focused on abolishing the feudal system and the privileges of the aristocracy, championing Enlightenment-inspired reason, equality, and secularism instead. At the time **Burke** wrote his critical *Reflections*, the execution of **Louis XVI** in January, 1793, one of the most significant events of the Revolution, had not yet taken place, and France was still technically a constitutional monarchy.

Glorious Revolution – The Glorious Revolution, or Revolution of 1688, took place in November, 1688, when James II and VII was deposed as king of England and replaced by James's daughter, Mary, and his nephew and Mary's husband, the Dutch William III. The Revolution was virtually bloodless. James was regarded as autocratic, especially for actions such as the suspension of Parliament. One of the Revolution's outcomes was to assert the primacy of Parliament over the Crown, as laid down in the 1689 Bill of Rights (a restatement in statute form of the Declaration of Right, which was initially presented to William and Mary).

National Assembly – The National Assembly was the new legislative body formed during the French Revolution, tasked with creating a new constitution for France. **Burke** extensively critiques the composition and actions of the Assembly in *Reflections*.

The Revolution Society – The Revolution Society was initially formed in commemoration of the Glorious Revolution, but in **Burke**'s day, its London chapter had begun to espouse radical revolutionary principles, such as the people's right to elect their sovereign. At the Revolution Society's 1789 dinner, **Richard Price** delivered his "Discourse on the Love of Our Country," one of the events that sparked *Reflections*.

The Declaration of Right – The Declaration of Right was initially presented to William of Orange and his wife, Mary (James II's daughter), in 1689 following the Glorious Revolution. In it, Parliament declared that James II had abdicated, and that William and Mary, as the new sovereigns, were bound to uphold particular "rights and liberties" for English citizens. It also provided specifically for a future Protestant succession to the throne.

Magna Charta – The Magna Charta, or Magna Carta, was the "Great Charter" which King John and his barons agreed to in 1215. It guaranteed certain rights to English freemen and became a foundational part of the English constitution.

Prejudice – "Prejudice," as **Burke** uses the term, is a kind of preconceived opinion, not considered to be an unjust bias—for example, affection for one's country and its customs. Burke contrasts prejudice with "naked reason" in *Reflections*, arguing that prejudice provides a sounder basis for reform than rationalist revolution.

THEMES

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THE USE AND ABUSE OF HISTORY

In his 1790 treatise *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, English statesman Edmund Burke writes to a young French aristocrat, "The very idea of the fabrication of a new government is enough to fill [the English] with disgust and horror. We wished at the period of the [1688] Revolution, and do now wish, to derive all we possess as an inheritance from our forefathers." While the English people's

purported "horror" is grounded in a reverence for tradition, it also points to a tension in Burke's view that history is neither to be rejected as antiquated nor woodenly copied in the present. As he explores this tension, Burke argues that the study of history should temper a society's enthusiasm for change, but that society must also be careful in its application of insights from the past so that history doesn't simply feed existing prejudices.

According to Burke, history is the servant of the present, providing healthy perspective on a society's current situation and offering patterns for present action. Consideration of history gives a balanced view of one's place in society, guiding one's actions accordingly: "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." In other words, people who are focused on new ideas, in Burke's view, tend to be excessively preoccupied with their own contemporary context. If they are disinclined to consider their forebears, they are unlikely to give much thought to their descendants, either. Burke names the practice of inheritance of property as an example of a safeguard against such selfishness: "[T]he people of England well know, that the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation […] without at all excluding a principle of improvement."

In the past, one can find ready-made examples for better action: "If the last generations of your country appeared without much lustre in your eyes," Burke tells his French correspondent, "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." Rather than remaining stuck on recent failings, one should search further back until a suitable example is found. Taking a longer view of history is more likely to yield patterns worthy of present imitation.

Although Burke has a lofty view of history, he doesn't argue for a slavish copying of the past. In fact, history must be studied with care, lest it be used to fuel modern prejudices. A careless reading of history can actually fuel contemporary conflict: "We do not draw the moral lessons we might from history. On the contrary, without care it may be used to vitiate our minds and to destroy our happiness. It may, in the perversion […] [furnish] offensive and defensive weapons for parties in church and state, and supply the means of keeping alive, or reviving dissensions and animosities…" For example, Burke mentions a recent dramatization of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre (a massive anti-Protestant plot carried out by Roman Catholic nobles in 1572) which inspired Parisians to chase their archbishop into exile, on the grounds that one of his 16th-century predecessors was evil.

Such a thoughtless application of history occurs when people target individuals instead of specific vices—vices which cyclically recur throughout human history. According to Burke, "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 […] Otherwise you will be wise historically, a fool in practice. Seldom have two ages the same fashion in their […] modes of mischief. Wickedness is a little more inventive." Unless the student of history is discerning in the diagnosis of such "wickedness," the result will be blind prejudice—like giving a blanket condemnation of all clergy members instead of blaming the "vices" of an intolerant few.

Burke groups the French revolutionaries among those who "[attend] only to the shell and husk of history, [thinking] they are waging war with intolerance, pride, and cruelty," while actually deepening contemporary divisiveness. Because the use of history is both so imperative and so inherently risky, Burke's view of the past might best be described as a call for balance. Ignoring history leads to an inflated view of a society's importance. On the other hand, no one should be too sweeping in the conclusions they draw from their study of history, since that study, after all, is colored by one's own biases.

NATURE, TRADITION, AND WISDOM

Part of Burke's rationale for adhering to tradition is his preference for a kind of intergenerational wisdom grounded in nature. He describes the superiority of English government thus: "This policy [of an inherited crown, inherited properties and privileges, etc.] 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." Burke upholds the hereditary monarchy of England, in other words, as a system which "follow[s] nature," hence adhering to a timeless wisdom that his revolutionary contemporaries reject, to their harm. By contrasting the English system as grounded in such wisdom, or "prejudice," and the French as detached from it, Burke argues that the French Revolution is "unnatural" and thus unsustainable.

With reference to the particular example of the hereditary system, Burke argues that England's government goes with the grain of nature, while France's new system goes against it. "Our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world […] wherein […] the whole, at one time, is never old, or middle-aged, or young, but in a condition of unchangeable constancy, [it] moves on through the varied tenour of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression." In other words, because the system—the passing down of lands, titles, and the crown within a family line—follows a predictable pattern from one generation to the next, it is like a renewable resource with its various parts always at different points in a healthy cycle of growth, death, and rebirth. This

pattern for the state enables an "organic" blend of old and new, so England's government is neither obsolete nor too cutting-edge.

Burke argues that revolutionary France's rejection of the hereditary system contains the seeds of its own destruction, because it goes against nature. He claims that such ordinary citizens as hairdressers and candlemakers "ought not to suffer oppression from the state; but the state suffers oppression, if such as they [...] are permitted to rule. In this you think you are combating prejudice, but you are at war with nature." In contrast to England's orderly, self-renewing system, France's system lacks a built-in means of perpetuating itself, in Burke's view, because it isn't anchored in a stable, propertied succession that's rooted in the land itself.

Although reliance on hereditary wealth and rank can be abused, "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..." Ultimately, Burke sees more danger in the presumptions of those who ignore succession and birth than in those who uphold them, because the former are grounded in abstract "philosophy" (even if well-intentioned), rather than in the time-tested observation and experience of nature.

Burke's understanding of "prejudice" is also critical to his view of how government works best. In its late-18th century connotation, "prejudice" does not imply bigotry, but a "preconceived opinion" grounded in nature. Thus, revolutionary philosophy is divorced from nature, slighting "prejudices" that establish government in the received wisdom of tradition. Burke writes, "that in this enlightened age [...] we are generally men of untaught feelings; that instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree [...] We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages." In other words, individuals, and even entire epochs, are limited in their reasoning abilities. This is where "prejudice" supplies a needed connection to the instincts of the past—"untaught feelings" have the ability to deepen otherwise shallow rationality with tested wisdom.

Burke expands on the value of prejudice, explaining how it embeds duty within human nature: "Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, sceptical, puzzled, and unresolved. Prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit; and not a series of unconnected acts." That is, prejudice is an instinct, founded on collective wisdom, that enables people to respond to present situations with more than superficial, reactive decisions.

Burke's emphasis on prejudice, then, ties back to his concern for nature and history. The "enlightened" revolutionaries of France "have no respect for the wisdom of others [...] They conceive, very systematically, that all things which give perpetuity are mischievous, and therefore they are at inexpiable war with all establishments." In Burke's view, such revolutionaries are actually at war with nature itself, because they ignore the moderating effects of prejudice, which is grounded in "perpetuity." By contrast, England boasts a longstanding judicial system, an established church, and the notion of society as a contract not only between the living, but among generations living and dead. All these things provide a sounder precedent for governance than that provided by bare reason.

Because Burke sees "prejudice" as natural, he also sees it as being more grounded in reality than revolutionary efforts. He comments that ancient Greek and Roman political philosophers "had to do with men, and they were obliged to study human nature." Following in this tradition, English rulers are more connected to the concrete circumstances of human lives than the French revolutionaries, with their abstracted appeals to human rights. This theme also connects, therefore, to Burke's theme of the limits of rationalism in government.

REVOLUTION AND REFORM

When writing his *Reflections*, Burke was not only concerned for the future of revolutionary France, but for English factions who saw the French Revolution as a potential precedent for similar principles and actions in England. Because of this, Burke is eager to demonstrate that England's own history—like its Glorious Revolution of 1688—was not meant to establish a pattern for a series of revolutions, but was a response limited to specific circumstances at the time. In addition, he pointedly contrasts France's bloody revolution with the deliberative character of England's. In these ways, Burke argues that revolution is an anomaly, and that it is best conducted in a spirit of restraint, with an eye toward preservation, not destruction.

According to Burke, revolutionary events in 17th-century England do not establish a precedent for 18th-century revolutionary sentiments, in either England or France. Burke argues that it is inappropriate for his radical contemporaries to appeal to the Glorious Revolution, a bloodless revolution in which the crown was offered to William and Mary in light of the perceived infractions of the absolutist King James II. Likewise, the Declaration of Right (a 1689 document laying out English civil rights and rights of royal succession) is not an appropriate source for them because, unlike the actions of the French Revolution, it was a "most wise, sober, and considerate declaration, drawn up by great lawyers and great statesmen, and not by warm and inexperienced enthusiasts." In other words, though the events of 1688-1689 represented a limited

break with England's past, they were a rare occurrence for the sake of the preservation of tradition. In addition, the revolution was conducted with a temperament completely opposite to that of today's "enthusiasts."

"Instead of a right to choose our own governors," as some revolutionary agitators in England have claimed, Burke holds that the Declaration of Right "declared that the succession [...] was absolutely necessary 'for the peace, quiet, and security of the realm,'" and that the succession is critical so that "subjects may safely have recourse for their protection.'" Burke then writes that "Both these acts, in which are heard the unerring, unambiguous oracles of Revolution policy, instead of countenancing the delusive [...] predictions of a 'right to choose our governors,' prove [...] how totally adverse the wisdom of the nation was from turning a case of necessity into a rule of law." Burke explains that the Revolution of 1688 was meant to ensure a stable succession, so that the rights of the people would be secured against tyranny. His point is that, because of these broader goals, the Declaration of Right cannot rightly be claimed (as some are trying to do) as support for current revolutionary sentiments. In other words, the Revolution as a whole was a unique historical anomaly, brought about by specific, irregular circumstances, and is not a precedent for rebellious sentiments a century later. In fact, establishing a law on the basis of that event would be "against all genuine principles of jurisprudence." Burke's attitude toward revolutionary moments in England's past could be summed up as follows: "An irregular, convulsive movement may be necessary to throw off an irregular, convulsive disease. But the course of succession is the healthy habit of the British constitution." The irregularity is an unfortunate exception, not a norm.

In stark contrast to the events in England a century ago, Burke portrays the French Revolution as a bloodthirsty "spectacle," out of keeping with the steady temperament necessary for lasting reform. In one of his most famous passages, Burke portrays the Revolution as follows: "History will record, that on the morning of the 6th of October 1789, the king and queen of France [...] lay down, under the pledged security of public faith, to indulge nature in a few hours of respite [...] From this sleep the queen was first startled by [...] a band of cruel ruffians and assassins [...] from whence this persecuted woman had but just had time to fly almost naked, and through ways unknown to the murderers had escaped to seek refuge at the feet of a king and husband, not secure of his own life for a moment." This excerpt conveys the narrative, intentionally sensational in its tone, which Burke uses to convey the basis of the French Revolution. It's meant to appeal to traditional English sentiments by portraying the hapless queen of France as being cruelly persecuted, and the French public as vengeful and bloodthirsty. By implied contrast, it's also meant to bring out the supposedly deliberative, peaceful, and measured events of 1688 in England as being civilized and worthy of emulation.

Burke further argues that, though opposition to tyranny sometimes requires extreme measures, the situation in France did not rise to that level, and it was not carried out with an appropriate level of solemnity: "If it could have been made clear to me, that the king and queen of France [...] were inexorable and cruel tyrants [...] I should think their captivity just. If this be true, much more ought to have been done, but done, in my opinion, in another manner. The punishment of real tyrants is a noble and awful act of justice..." The French, in other words, have not given an adequate justification for their actions, much less for the ferocity of them.

Burke concludes by commending the English pattern of reform, once again, over the French one: "I think our happy situation owing to our constitution [...] owing in a great measure to what we have left standing in our several reviews and reformations, as well as to what we have altered..." Burke pointedly describes the upheavals of English history not as revolutionary, but more benignly as "reviews and reformations" of existing structures. As in his discussions of the role of history and the importance of maintaining the natural order, Burke is primarily concerned with upholding continuity with the past.

THEORY VS. PRACTICALITY

Early in the *Reflections*, Burke writes, "But I cannot [...] give praise or blame to any thing which relates to human actions, and human concerns [...] in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction [...] Circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind." In keeping with his emphasis on the importance of history and the natural order, Burke believes that government is particular and specific, not general and theoretical. In saying this, Burke does not suggest that the French appeal to "natural rights" is fundamentally wrong, but that such an abstract appeal is not an adequate basis for governing a country. By showing how talk of abstract "rights" is insufficiently rooted in practical solutions, Burke argues that an excessively theoretical basis for governance is ultimately self-destructive.

In Burke's view, an insistence on abstract "natural rights" is not a sustainable basis for governance. Burke quotes a law in which "parliament says to the king, 'Your subjects have inherited this freedom,' claiming their franchises, not on abstract principles as the 'rights of men,' but as the rights of Englishmen, and as a patrimony derived from their forefathers." Such a "patrimony" can be traced all the way from the Magna Charta to the more recent Declaration of Right: "We have an inheritable crown; an inheritable peerage; and an house of commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties, from a long line of ancestors." In other words, English government has traditionally been rooted in the particular history of a particular people, and their pattern of governance is derived from that

history—not from a philosophical articulation of rights, like that espoused in the French Revolution.

Emphasis on abstract theory leads to the elevation of lawmakers who are ill-equipped to deal with concrete questions of governance. Burke argues that France's new National Assembly is packed with inferior lawyers, doctors, and traders—"all of these from whom [...] little knowledge of or attention to the interests of a great state was to be expected [...] men formed to be instruments, not controls." In other words, these men were chosen in the interests of supposed equality; however, because they have no prior experience in legislation, they are really just cogs in a mechanical structure of governance that might make sense in theory, but has little grounding in the specific problems of running a complex nation.

Though Burke does not deny the existence of natural human rights, he holds that these are too abstract to form a basis for governance. "Government is not made in virtue of natural rights, which may and do exist in total independence of it; [...] Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants." He elaborates, "What is the use of discussing a man's abstract right to food or to medicine? The question is upon the method of procuring and administering them. In that deliberation I shall always advise to call in the aid of the farmer and the physician, rather than the professor of metaphysics.'' In other words, a general argument for human rights is not the work of government. Instead, government is about the practical application of such rights, something which is rarely addressed by mere theorists.

An overemphasis on theory over an application of principles tends toward a destructive approach to governance. The practicality Burke stresses earlier helps explain why historical precedents and models are necessary: "The science of government being therefore so practical in itself [...] [it is 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." Because of this, "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 [...] without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes." In Burke's view, revolution tends to be more concerned with tearing down than with building up, usually by means of blanket denunciation rather than informed, cautious societal change. Thus, most people who are abstractly focused on revolution have not given sufficient thought to the practicalities of sustainable governance.

Moreover, such a theoretical mindset is not conducive to creating a society deserving of people's affection: "Mechanic philosophy" cannot "create in us love, veneration, admiration, or attachment. But that sort of reason which banishes the affections is incapable of tilling their place. [...] To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely." In other words, abstract philosophy teaches people what to reject, but it doesn't build worthwhile alternatives in place of what's rejected. Burke suggests that people ultimately can't love ideas; they love tangible, human-scale things, and revolutionaries ignore these at their peril.

Burke expands on the above idea when he writes, "By hating vices too much, [philosophers] come to love men too little. It is therefore not wonderful, that they should be indisposed and unable to serve them." When agitating for revolution, in other words, it's natural for leaders to focus on what is broken and lacking in society. But however pressing those deficiencies might be, an excessive focus on them does not produce leaders who know how to address the daily needs of human beings. He suggests, therefore, that the French Revolution is in the process of undermining itself.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BUILDINGS

In *Reflections*, Burke sometimes uses the symbol of a building to illustrate the contrast between reform and revolution: whereas a reformer would repair an aged or damaged building without completely altering the underlying structure, a revolutionary would tear it down to its foundations and build something new from the ground up. Burke especially favors this symbol when he describes his own inclination to preserve the best of what has gone before—should he ever be in a position to enact reforms, he explains, he would follow the example of his ancestors and make "the reparation as nearly as possible in the style of the building." Burke views reform much more favorably than revolution, which he sees as ruinous, laying waste to vital institutions of society.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Revolutionary Writings* published in 2014.

Section 1 Quotes

❝ I flatter myself that I love a manly, moral, regulated liberty as well as any gentleman of that society, be he who he will [...] But I cannot stand forward, and give praise or blame to any thing which relates to human actions, and human concerns, on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction. Circumstances (which with some gentlemen pass for nothing) give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing colour, and discriminating effect. The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind. Abstractedly speaking, government, as well as liberty, is good; yet could I, in common sense, ten years ago, have felicitated France on her enjoyment of a government (for she then had a government) without enquiry what the nature of that government was, or how it was administered? [...] Is it because liberty in the abstract may be classed amongst the blessings of mankind, that I am seriously to felicitate a madman, who has escaped from the protecting restraint and wholesome darkness of his cell, on his restoration to the enjoyment of light and liberty?

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, near the beginning of Burke's *Reflections*, Burke addresses his correspondent's assumption that Burke shares the Revolution Society's enthusiasm for the ongoing French Revolution. The Society was a group founded in commemoration of England's Glorious Revolution a century earlier, which now endorsed the French Revolution as consistent with English political principles. Burke argues that he loves "liberty" as much as any member of the Revolution Society. However, he argues that an abstract "liberty" is meaningless without consideration of the particular circumstances surrounding it. Without a holistic understanding of the situation, it's impossible to judge whether a political event is good or bad. With a dig at France's currently disordered political situation, Burke explains that, for example, it would make no sense to congratulate France on merely *possessing* a government, without knowing the specifics of that government's structure and conduct. Likewise, he wouldn't congratulate a "madman" for his "liberty," when, in fact, that man's release would pose a threat to himself and society. These arguments fit with Burke's later insistence that practical application of a government's principles is crucial to its functioning—good theories alone are insufficient.

Section 2 Quotes

❝ ...[T]he political Divine proceeds dogmatically to assert, that by the principles of the Revolution the people of England have acquired three fundamental rights, all 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 people of England] 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 favour of the fictitious rights claimed by the society which abuses its name.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker), Richard Price

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Burke has been examining a sermon given by radical dissenting preacher Richard Price in commemoration of England's Glorious Revolution. In that sermon, Price asserts that, in accordance with the 1688 Revolution's principles, the English people have the right to choose their rulers, to depose those rulers if they misbehave, and to frame their own government. Burke disagrees with Price that the English possess these rights. To disprove Price's case, Burke will next attempt to demonstrate that, far from establishing these three "rights," the laws established after the Glorious Revolution actually prohibit such rights. Burke's argument that Price's alleged "rights" are not, in fact, traditionally English principles will also serve a greater rhetorical purpose: allowing Burke to sever Price's supposed link between the English and French Revolutions. This argument is part of Burke's theme, throughout the *Reflections*, that history is frequently deployed in favor of suspect arguments and must therefore be studied and used with care. He makes his view clear with his remark that the Revolution Society "abuses [the] name" of the Glorious Revolution.

Section 5 Quotes

The third head of right [...] the 'right to form a government for ourselves,' has, at least, as little countenance from any thing done at the Revolution, either in precedent or principle, as the two first of their claims. The Revolution was made to preserve our *antient* indisputable laws and liberties, and that *antient* constitution of government which is our only security for law and liberty. [...] The very idea of the fabrication of a new government is enough to fill us with disgust and horror. We wished at the period of the Revolution, and do now wish, to derive all we possess as an inheritance from our forefathers. [...] All the reformations we have hitherto made, have proceeded upon the principle of reference to antiquity; and I hope, nay I am persuaded, that all those which possibly may be made hereafter, will be carefully formed upon analogical precedent, authority, and example.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker), Richard Price

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

As Burke continues dissecting the radical sermon of Richard Price, he turns to Price's claim that the English people have the right to determine their own form of government. Having already disposed of Price's claim that the English people can elect and dispose of their rulers at will, he now uses his refutation of this third claim to make a significant rhetorical shift. Burke argues that not only did the Glorious Revolution *not* set a precedent for choosing one's own government, but that the framers of that Revolution were more interested in following historical precedents than in establishing new ones. In fact, their overriding concern was to preserve *existing* liberties and forms. Burke argues that the English of his day should share those concerns. A connection to antiquity is the basis for "reformation"—a point that helps Burke draw a distinction, consistent throughout *Reflections*, between reform (which respects history) and radical revolution (which rejects it).

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. [...] We have an inheritable crown; an inheritable peerage; and an house of commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties, from a long line of ancestors.

[...] 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.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

As Burke continues to explore the nature of English liberty, particularly how this principle is embedded in history, he names two significant documents that have preserved English rights for centuries. One of these, The Magna Charta (which means "Great Charter") was issued in 1215 by King John. Apart from clauses specific to John's reign, the Magna Charta stipulates that everyone, including the monarch, must be subject to the law—a claim that remained key to future British constitutionalism. Another, The Declaration of Right (1689) details the absolutism of the newly deposed King James II and states those rights to which all English citizens are entitled (and which England's monarchs must abide by from now on). By appealing to these two historic documents, Burke seeks to establish that England has traditionally been committed to liberty, and that revolutionary measures are not necessary in order to secure it. Burke further argues that people who fail to look to history—implicitly the French revolutionaries—have an inadequate supply of wisdom for the future. He uses the English experience as evidence both that tradition is superior to innovation, and that tradition in no way precludes healthy reform.

Section 7 Quotes

❝ It is no wonder therefore, that with these ideas of every thing in their constitution and government at home, either in church or state, as illegitimate and usurped, or, at best as a vain mockery, they look abroad with an eager and passionate enthusiasm. Whilst they are possessed by these notions, it is vain to talk to them of the practice of their ancestors, the fundamental laws of their country, the fixed form of a constitution, whose merits are confirmed by the solid test of long experience, and an increasing public strength and national prosperity. They despise experience as the wisdom of unlettered men; and as for the rest, they have wrought under-ground a mine that will blow up at one grand explosion all examples of antiquity, all precedents, charters, and acts of parliament. They have 'the rights of men.'

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Having discussed the English people's inheritance of liberty, Burke criticizes those English radicals, like Richard Price and members of the Revolution Society, who look away from their birthright and instead covet the perceived revolutionary gains of France. Burke's point is that, when people fail to appreciate their ancestral liberties, it is fruitless to try to dissuade them from pursuing novelties. One of Burke's themes in *Reflections* is that established practices, wisdom gained by experience, and the proofs of prosperity are of more value than abstract, untested theories that seek to make a clean break with what has gone before. The French Revolution's *Declaration of the Rights of Man* (1789), in contrast to England's culturally specific constitutional documents, proclaimed universal rights applying to humanity in general. Burke goes on to explain that, although he does not deny that such universal rights (such as equality, safety from oppression, and the liberty to act as one wishes without harming others) do exist, they cannot serve as the basis for governing a specific nation. Governance, in his view, is ineffectual when it is not grounded in knowledge of, and accountability to, a specific people.

❝ Government is not made in virtue of natural rights, which may and do exist in total independence of it; and exist in much greater clearness, and in a much greater degree of abstract perfection: but their abstract perfection is their practical defect. By having a right to every thing they want every thing. Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human *wants*. Men have a right that these wants should be provided for by this wisdom. [...] [Government] requires a deep knowledge of human nature and human necessities, and of the things which facilitate or obstruct the various ends which are to be pursued by the mechanism of civil institutions. [...] What is the use of discussing a man's abstract right to food or to medicine? The question is upon the method of procuring and administering them. In that deliberation I shall always advise to call in the aid of the farmer and the physician, rather than the professor of metaphysics.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote Burke expands on his understanding of government and the inadequacy of "natural rights" as a foundation for it. Again, the issue for Burke is not whether such basic human rights exist; he acknowledges that they do. However, he believes that their universality cannot easily be translated into practical governance. Governing is inherently concrete for Burke; it's a way of providing what people require in order to live. Figuring out what those needs are, and how to supply them, requires an intimate acquaintance with human beings in particular, not humanity in the abstract. This is the meaning of Burke's query about food and medicine—he believes it serves little good to theorize about people's rights to such things; government only has a meaningful role in facilitating access to them. That's why a farmer or a doctor would, in this case, be far more useful than an academic, who probably has no firsthand experience of providing for people's needs.

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. [...] 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.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Burke continues his discussion of the science of government, which, in his view, is not something that can simply be taught in a university. Since government is primarily focused on the practical, it requires lived experience. Because it's such a complex matter, government is not even the province of a single wise person. This ties into Burke's emphasis on history and tradition. If no individual can adequately handle the weight of governing, it follows that no single generation is equal to the task, either—the wisdom of "ages" must be duly considered and handled with reverence. Burke's belief in the complexity of government is also tied to his emphasis on the complexity of human nature. In fact, the two things are inseparable. This is why Burke rejects as impracticable simplistic laws with abstract justifications: they are unlikely to be able to account for the variety and particularity of human life.

Section 8 Quotes

History will record, that on the morning of the 6th of October 1789, the king and queen of France, after a day of confusion, alarm, dismay, and slaughter, lay down, under the pledged security of public faith, to indulge nature in a few hours of respite, and troubled melancholy repose. From this sleep the queen was first startled by the voice of the centinel at her door, who cried out to her, to save herself by flight - that this was the last proof of fidelity he could give — that they were upon him, and he was dead. Instantly he was cut down. A band of cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with his blood, rushed into the chamber of the queen, and pierced with an hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards the bed, from whence this persecuted woman had but just had time to fly almost naked, and through ways unknown to the murderers had escaped to seek refuge at the feet of a king and husband, not secure of his own life for a moment.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker), Queen Marie Antoinette of France, King Louis XVI of France

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

This is a famous passage in *Reflections*, and with its sense of narrative drama, it is a marked departure from the tone and style of the rest of the work. It dramatizes the March on Versailles, a pivotal moment in the French Revolution as a whole. The march began when women rioted in the marketplace over the high price of bread; spurred on by revolutionaries, they marched on the royal palace at Versailles, besieged the palace, and compelled the royal family to accompany them back to Paris the next day. "History" does not, in fact, record that events unfolded in precisely this way; Burke is clearly taking some poetic license. But Burke's point is to create sympathy for the harried figure of Queen Marie Antoinette as she is mercilessly pursued from her bedchamber—a place of domestic repose cruelly broken into by bloodthirsty radicals. For Burke, this scene of inhumanity and rupture symbolizes the injustice of the shift of power in the Revolution's favor. It is meant to shock and to instill doubt as to the morality of revolutionary sentiments.

All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.

On this scheme of things, a king is but a man; a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order. All homage paid to the sex in general as such, and without distinct views, is to be regarded as romance and folly. Regicide, and parricide, and sacrilege, are but fictions of superstition, corrupting jurisprudence by destroying its simplicity. The murder of a king, or a queen, or a bishop, or a father, are only common homicide; and if the people are by any chance, or in any way gainers by it, a sort of homicide much the most pardonable, and into which we ought not to make too severe a scrutiny.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Burke argues that chivalry is disappearing from Europe and especially from France. He views chivalry as a healthy phenomenon for society, one which preserves the natural distinctions between classes and promotes harmonious relationships among them. But now, revolutionary fervor undermines chivalry and threatens the bonds of civil society. Here Burke illustrates how traditional views are successively undone: When there is no distinction between royalty and the common people, soon the queen is not just viewed as a mere woman, but as less than human as well. When the king is no longer viewed as a class apart, atrocities like regicide become thinkable; people are persuaded that such acts even promote the public good. While these demotions sound extreme, Burke's larger argument is that the "moral imagination" is a vital component of society, and when people become convinced that elements of their traditional worldview—like chivalry—are outmoded, it is difficult to predict what the downstream societal effects might be.

Section 9 Quotes

When I assert anything else, as concerning the people of England, I speak from observation, not from authority; but I speak from the experience I have had in a pretty extensive and mixed communication with the inhabitants of this kingdom [...] The vanity, restlessness, petulance, and spirit of intrigue of several petty cabals, who attempt to hide their total want of consequence in bustle and noise, and puffing, and mutual quotation of each other, makes you imagine that our contemptuous neglect of their abilities is a mark of general acquiescence in their opinions. No such thing, I assure you. Because half a dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their importunate chink, whilst thousands of great cattle, reposed beneath the shadow of the British oak, chew the cud and are silent, pray do not imagine, that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field; that, of course, they are many in number; or that, after all, they are other than the little shrivelled, meagre, hopping, though loud and troublesome insects of the hour.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

Here Burke argues that, whatever impression his correspondent Depont has received, the larger part of the English public does not support revolutionary sentiments. Those that do, like the Revolution Society, are insignificant. He claims that such groups create an exaggerated impression of their size and influence by publishing dramatic statements of their ideals (like Price's sermon, which Burke has just finished critiquing) and thus amplifying one another's views. However, Burke urges Depont not to suppose that the broader public's apparent silence means that they assent to radical views. They are like the implacable cattle, who calmly go about their age-old business, while the grasshoppers make a harmless nuisance of themselves. Burke makes the point that there isn't a notable revolutionary momentum in England, even if the Revolution Society's contacts in Paris have given Depont that impression. However, at the same time, Burke really is concerned about the inroads of French revolutionary thought in England, or he would not be going to such lengths to publicly refute such views.

> You see, Sir, that in this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess, that we are generally men of untaught feelings; that instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree, and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted, and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them. We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Burke introduces his understanding of "prejudice" and its significance in his view of politics. Prejudice, at this time, didn't have an automatic connotation of bigotry. Rather, Burke uses this term to mean the preconceptions that come before any kind of reason-based appraisal ("untaught feelings"). He sets up prejudice against the kind of rationalism that infused revolutionary thought, wanting to show how these different forms of belief have different practical implications. For Burke, long-held prejudices are justifiable because of their antiquity. They provide a stable basis for the continuation of civil society, as well as for reformation where needed. For the revolutionary, on the other hand, prejudices deserve to be overthrown *because* they are old and outdated. Society should be restructured without the fetters of prejudice, appealing to unbiased reason instead. Thus, prejudice provides a helpful window into the differences between Burke's political outlook and the revolutionary outlook, as he portrays it.

> If unfortunately by their intrigues, their sermons, their publications, and by a confidence derived from an expected union with the counsels and forces of the French nation, they should draw considerable numbers into their faction, and in consequence should seriously attempt any thing here in imitation of what has been done with you, the event, I dare venture to prophesy, will be, that, with some trouble to their country, they will soon accomplish their own destruction. This people refused to change their law in remote ages from respect to the infallibility of popes; and they will not now alter it from a pious implicit faith in the dogmatism of philosophers; though the former was armed with the anathema and crusade, and though the latter should act with the libel and the lamp-iron.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Burke is arguing that it is unlikely that French revolutionary sentiments will make significant inroads into English society. Even if groups like the Revolution Society manage to stir up interest in French events, attempts to foment similar revolution are unlikely to generate momentum in England. Significantly, Burke makes this point, in part, by recalling events from English history—the comment on infallibility of popes likely refers to repeated papal attempts to impose Rome's appointees to English bishoprics. He also makes a comparison that recurs elsewhere in *Reflections*, likening the views of France's political "philosophers" to a dogmatic religious faith—here, a faith that makes the same demands on people's consciences as the medieval Catholic Church (the "lamp-iron" might refer to public hangings in revolutionary Paris). His overall argument is that England does not take kindly to the incursions of foreign ideas into its way of life, because it is so firmly founded on its own history and traditions. He also reinforces his portrayal of the Revolution as a kind of blind dogmatism that tries to enforce its ideas by violence, in contrast to the English way that is confident in its roots and cannot be forced, nor does it seek to force others.

Section 10 Quotes

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, callico 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.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

In this part of *Reflections*, Burke is discussing the complexity of government, and, in light of that complexity, the gravity with which anyone should approach an alteration of existing structures. However, the complexity is not just a matter of technical intricacy, but of accountability to others. Before Edmund Burke, other Enlightenment-era political theorists had worked with the concept of the social contract: a way of talking about the relationship between the state and the individual. The most notable of these was John Locke, whose *Second Treatise of Government* (1689) had envisioned the state as a contract between citizens who give up certain freedoms to the state (such as violence) in exchange for other freedoms. Here, however, Burke is not just interested in contracts as agreements regarding temporal goods, or even regarding the ordering of everyday society. He envisions society as a contract regarding more than "temporary and perishable" matters—rather, as a contract among all generations, past and future. This idea allows Burke to connect matters of practical governance to his cherished emphasis on the importance of history, nature, and tradition, as well as to caution his audience regarding the propriety of revolutions, which inevitably disrupt this ongoing spiritual "contract."

Section 11 Quotes

The literary cabal had some years ago formed something like a regular plan for the destruction of the Christian religion. This object they pursued with a degree of zeal which hitherto had been discovered only in the propagators of some system of piety. They were possessed with a spirit of proselytism in the most fanatical degree; and from thence by an easy progress, with the spirit of persecution according to their means. What was not to be done towards their great end by any direct or immediate act, might be wrought by a longer process through the medium of opinion. To command that opinion, the first step is to establish a dominion over those who direct it. They contrived to possess themselves, with great method and perseverance, of all the avenues to literary fame.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

As Burke examines how the French Revolution was brought about, he considers how the traditional structures of the Christian faith were systematically driven out of French society. At the time Burke wrote *Reflections*, the Declaration of the Rights of Man had recently proclaimed freedom of religious beliefs, as long as "their manifestation does not trouble the public order." The National Assembly had also begun seizing church properties in order to deal with the country's massive debt. However, Burke is most concerned here about the swaying of public opinion through an alliance between the monied class and certain "men of letters," who have been fomenting distrust and even bigotry against the church by gaining control of "mediums of opinion." One example of how this process had gotten underway earlier in the Enlightenment is d'Alembert's and Diderot's 35-volume *Encyclopedia*, which subordinated theology to philosophy. Burke fears that this cultural shift is becoming more fanatical, threatening the place that religion has traditionally occupied in binding society together. His concerns were not entirely misplaced, as later in the 1790s, the Christian calendar was replaced with a post-Revolutionary one, traditional festivals were replaced with Festivals of Liberty, Reason and the Supreme Being, and the French government briefly mandated the deistic Cult of the Supreme Being.

> When all the frauds, impostures, violences, rapines, burnings, murders, confiscations, compulsory paper currencies, and every description of tyranny and cruelty employed to bring about and to uphold this revolution, have their natural effect, that is, to shock the moral sentiments of all virtuous and sober minds, the abettors of this philosophic system immediately strain their throats in a declamation against the old monarchical government of France. When they have rendered that deposed power sufficiently black, they then proceed in argument, as if all those who disapprove of their new abuses, must of course be partizans of the old; that those who reprobate their crude and violent schemes of liberty ought to be treated as advocates for servitude. I admit that their necessities do compel them to this base and contemptible fraud. Nothing can reconcile men to their proceedings and projects but the supposition that there is no third option between them, and some tyranny as odious as can be furnished by the records of history, or by the invention of poets.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

Burke continues his discussion of the way that radicals have attempted to win France over to a revolutionary mindset. First, the people have been worn down by the shocking nature of revolutionary activity—everything from the march on the palace of Versailles (which Burke himself had so dramatically portrayed earlier) to the confiscation of church lands has rattled people's expectations about their government and their way of life. Once people's "moral sentiments" were suitably shocked, the revolutionaries took advantage of this by tearing down the old monarchical government, hoping that people would now be more disposed to agree. Finally, they stoke deeper divisions within society by acting as if any objection to their more extreme measures puts someone on the side of the king, who has already been rejected as tyrannical. Burke calls this cynical process a "contemptible fraud," as it is meant to serve those who are already in power, making people who might be inclined to protest feel bound to support them.

> I am no stranger to the faults and defects of the subverted government of France; and I think I am not inclined by nature or policy to make a panegyric upon any thing which is a just and natural object of censure. But the question is not now of the vices of that monarchy, but of its existence. Is it then true, that the French government was such as to be incapable or undeserving of reform; so that it was of absolute necessity the whole fabric should be at once pulled down, and the area cleared for the erection of a theoretic experimental edifice in its place? All France was of a different opinion in the beginning of the year 1789. [...] Men have been sometimes led by degrees, sometimes hurried into things, [...] they never would have permitted the most remote approach.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

Burke reflects on the progress of the French Revolution, first by granting that there certainly were censurable "vices" that the French rightly sought to address. While Burke doesn't quarrel with the necessity of reform, he tries to show that there is a big difference between addressing problems and tearing down existing structures and starting fresh. Was the existing monarchy so irredeemable, he asks, that it needed to be eliminated in favor of something that had never been tried before? He further argues that nobody in France was thinking this way at the beginning of 1789, and he suggests that as recently as a year before, most people in government were inclined to undertake reforms, not seek revolution. He portrays the revolution as a train of events that quickly got out of control, sweeping people along who might otherwise have been content to take a more incremental approach to fixing the government's ills. In this way, Burke is able to portray his stance as a moderate position between outdated monarchy and radical revolution. This is in keeping with his inclination to favor reform as both open to change but also consistent with past tradition.

A brave people will certainly prefer liberty, accompanied with a virtuous poverty, to a depraved and wealthy servitude. But before the price of comfort and opulence is paid, one ought to be pretty sure it is real liberty which is purchased, and that she is to be purchased at no other price. I shall always, however, consider that liberty as very equivocal in her appearance, which has not wisdom and justice for her companions; and does not lead prosperity and plenty in her train.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Burke has just finished discussing statistics in revolutionary Paris, such as high rates of unemployment and mendicancy (begging). He argues that the revolution has harmed France's economy and standard of living rather than relieving the country's financial woes. He uses these points to bolster his anti-revolutionary stance. After all, he argues, there is nothing inherently wrong with poverty, as long as it is joined to genuine liberty. But he implies that the supposed "liberty" secured by the Revolution is a counterfeit one. Its fruits of increased poverty and makeshift societal changes suggest that it was undertaken hastily and without measured consideration. The present conditions in France, in short, were a high price to pay for something that might turn out to hurt the people more. Burke shows his characteristic caution regarding the propriety of revolutions—in his view, they tend to damage too much that has been handed down for generations and might yet be worth preserving.

Section 12 Quotes

We do not draw the moral lessons we might from history. On the contrary, without care it may be used to vitiate our minds and to destroy our happiness. In history a great volume is unrolled for our instruction, drawing the materials of future wisdom from the past errors and infirmities of mankind. It may, in the perversion, serve for a magazine, furnishing offensive and defensive weapons for parties in church and state, and supply the means of keeping alive, or reviving dissensions and animosities, and adding fuel to civil fury.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Burke shows his understanding of the use and misuse of history. He doesn't argue for a straightforward, wooden application of the lessons of the past. Rather, he argues that it must be studied and applied with great care. Misapplying history can backfire in the present, making present conditions worse than they were before. If it's uncritically applied, history can become a "magazine"—a place for storing ammunition—to stoke present-day division, prejudice, and even violence. People can easily look into history and associate themselves, or their enemies, with figures and events that help strengthen their own self-conception, deepening polarization. So, Burke's valorization of history is not an argument for a simple, moralistic reading of the past, or one that discourages change altogether. Instead, he recognizes that the complexities of both past and present must be accounted for and not carelessly mixed to serve rhetorical purposes.

Your citizens of Paris formerly had lent themselves as the ready instruments to slaughter the followers of Calvin, at the infamous massacre of St. Bartholomew. What should we say to those who could think of retaliating on the Parisians of this day the abominations and horrors of that time? They are indeed brought to abhor that massacre. Ferocious as they are, it is not difficult to make them dislike it; because the politicians and fashionable teachers have no interest in giving their passions exactly the same direction. Still however they find it their interest to keep the same savage dispositions alive. It was but the other day that they caused this very massacre to be acted on the stage for the diversion of the descendants of those who committed it. In this tragic farce they produced the Cardinal of Lorraine in his robes of function, ordering general slaughter. Was this spectacle intended to make the Parisians abhor persecution, and loath the effusion of blood? No, it was to teach them to persecute their own pastors…

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

Here, Burke builds on his argument regarding the use of history, providing a clear example. The St. Bartholomew's

Day Massacre was an outbreak of mob violence by Catholics against Huguenots (French Protestants) in 1572. Burke argues that nobody in present-day Paris sides with the persecutors in that terrible event, and that the descendants of the perpetrators shouldn't be punished for it, either. However, the event was recently reenacted in a stage play, with a very specific contemporary application in mind. Burke says that the portrayal of the Cardinal of Lorraine—an infamously scheming churchman suspected of complicity in the Massacre—was intended to serve the anti-clerical sentiments of modern Paris. The sight of the hated Cardinal would provoke people to turn against the present Archbishop of Paris, whose reputation, Burke says, is far less objectionable. This illustration shows how history can be used not to teach a general principle—that persecution and religiously-motivated violence are immoral, for example—but instead to manipulate people toward specific factional ends.

Section 13 Quotes

❝ It is this inability to wrestle with difficulty which has obliged the arbitrary assembly of France to commence their schemes of reform with abolition and total destruction. But is it in destroying and pulling down that skill is displayed? Your mob can do this as well at least as your assemblies. The shallowest understanding, the rudest hand, is more than equal to that task. Rage and phrenzy will pull down more in half an hour, than prudence, deliberation, and foresight can build up in an hundred years. The errors and defects of old establishments are visible and palpable. It calls for little ability to point them out; and where absolute power is given, it requires but a word wholly to abolish the vice and the establishment together. […] At once to preserve and to reform is quite another thing.

Related Characters: Edmund Burke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Burke returns to his theme that government is a complex matter. He argues that the current revolutionary government of France is especially ill-suited to the task, because they lack the patience necessary to undertake sound, long-lasting reforms. He associates revolution primarily with the task of pulling things down and destroying existing structures—something, he argues, that a mere mob could do, since it doesn't require any particular skill. From this perspective, easy to identify problems and violently rise up against them. It's another skill altogether to figure out how to address weaknesses and failings in a non-destructive manner. Here Burke draws a sharp distinction between reform and revolution. The latter, in his view, can hardly be called real governance, and it requires little more than anger and motivation. Reform requires discernment, a respect for the past, and foresight as well. Thus, this quote sums up significant central themes in Burke's thought. In his view, workable change requires genuine knowledge of the past, and revolutionary sentiments fail in this respect because they are grounded more on untested theory than on time-tested observations.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SECTION 1

Burke addresses himself to a "dear Sir" who has been pressing him for his views on recent upheavals in France. He explains that, although he wishes that France "may be animated by a spirit of rational liberty," he is doubtful that this will be the case. His correspondent had thought that Burke was sympathetic to the French Revolution, because certain London clubs—the Constitutional Society and the Revolution Society—have publicly approved it.

Burke's correspondent is young French aristocrat Charles-Jean Francois Depont, who solicited Burke's opinion in two separate letters. (It's important to note, though, that while Burke addresses Depont directly, he's also using the letter as a rhetorical device for addressing a broader English and European audience.) The Constitutional Society was a group of Whigs and dissenters, and the Revolutionary Society was a group that met in commemoration of the 1688 Glorious Revolution.

Burke says that those who uphold England's constitution and celebrate its revolution should be cautious in their affiliation with anyone who, "under the pretext of zeal towards the Revolution and Constitution, too frequently wander from their true principles," and he assures Depont that he is not a member of either the Constitutional or the Revolution Society.

Burke establishes one of his primary arguments, which is that the English constitution and the Glorious Revolution cannot legitimately be adopted as precedents for the revolutionary events currently taking place in France.

The Constitutional Society, Burke explains, is a kind of circulating library for political materials, though he suggests that he hasn't heard of anyone deriving much benefit from their holdings. The Revolution Society, by contrast, has attracted more notice in France. In fact, France's National Assembly has established contact with the Revolution Society, and the Society seeks to extend Revolutionary principles in England. Burke disapproves of such unauthorized, formal correspondence between a society and a foreign government, especially because of the absence of signatures.

The Revolution Society will be of special concern to Burke, because its London members correspond with French leaders and openly extol the French Revolution in England. Because of what he sees as misplaced enthusiasm on the part of its members, he will go to great lengths to refute their radical political claims.

Burke supposes that he loves "liberty" as much as anyone in the Revolution Society. However, he cannot "give praise or blame to any thing which relates to human actions, [...] in all the nakedness [...] of metaphysical abstraction." "Circumstances" are what give reality to principles and schemes. It makes no sense, for example, to praise a government in the abstract, without knowing what type of government it is, or to congratulate a "madman" on his "liberty" from his restraints.

Burke begins to build his argument that particular circumstances are the concern of government rather than abstract theories. He uses the examples of government and liberty to illustrate that it doesn't make sense to judge a disconnected concept; one must know something of the specifics in order to form a meaningful judgment.

Burke goes on to say that he must suspend his judgment regarding France's newfound liberty until he sees how it has been "combined with government [...] with the solidity of property; with peace and order," and other elements of civic life. Without these things, liberty won't last. In particular, liberty among bodies of people "is power," and until it's evident how that power is being used, Burke thinks a judgment would be premature.

Burke anticipates some of the aspects of a nation's life which he will explore later in the work—things like government, force, armies, morality, and other specific means by which a people's liberty is secured and expressed. Because liberty, in the current discussion, is not just a matter of individual freedom, but of social action, France's present situation calls for special scrutiny.

Burke describes his "uneasiness" upon studying the published proceedings of the Revolution Club, including a sermon given by Dr. Price; all of these were designed not only to connect the affairs of France and England, but to draw England "into an imitation of the conduct of the National Assembly." As time goes on, the true nature of the Assembly becomes more evident, giving good reason for concern. Because of this concern, Burke will not only address Depont's concerns, but his own, "with very little attention to formal method."

Revolution Club member Dr. Richard Price was a dissenting (non-Anglican Protestant) preacher and philosopher. Burke will dissect his sermon "A Discourse on the Love of our Country" in what follows. The National Assembly is the legislative body that was drawing up a new constitution for France at the time. Burke's remarks to Depont indicate the scope he has been intending all along, and although Reflections *is not a traditionally structured treatise, his warning about the lack of "formal method" is likely a knowing exaggeration.*

SECTION 2

Burke describes the French Revolution as "the most astonishing thing that has hitherto happened in the world," a "strange chaos of levity and ferocity," a "tragi-comic scene." However, not everyone feels this way: some see it as "a firm and temperate exertion of freedom," deserving of "all the devout effusions of sacred eloquence."

Burke's emphasis on unlikely mixtures—levity and ferocity, tragedy and comedy—might point to his later remarks on the unprecedented (and, in his view, incongruous) mixing of classes in emerging French politics. With "sacred eloquence," Burke sets up his critique of Price's sermon.

Last November 4th, Richard Price preached at the Old Jewry (district in London that includes a Dissenting meeting house), a sermon which Burke calls "a sort of porridge of various political opinions," with the French Revolution being "the grand ingredient in the cauldron." He adds that such "meddling" sermons contain more passion than genuine understanding of political realities.

Burke continues with the imagery of questionable mixtures in the way he describes Price's sermon; perhaps he even hints that the sermon is a kind of harmful witch's brew, the opposite of a sacred discourse. His language suggests that the mixing of religion and immoderate political speech is unseemly.

In his sermon, Price tells the Revolution Society that a king is only a lawful king if he "[owes] his crown to the choice of his people." Burke points out that, if this is the case, then the king of Great Britain is no better than a "usurper." Burke suggests that preachers like Price are trying to "habituate" their audiences to this theory during relatively peaceful times, so that, "picked in the preserving juices of pulpit eloquence," it can be saved for future use.

Burke suggests that radical preachers like Price use their platforms to accustom their audiences to ideas—like the people having a say in the occupant of the throne—that seem too remote to be threatening during times of peace, but that might prove useful when the political climate shifts. By that time, people will have been exposed to such ideas so often that they'll seem plausible.

Political preachers like Price carry on in this way, attracting little notice, but when they are pressed regarding their views, then "equivocations and slippery constructions" abound. Burke points out that, if one looks far enough into the history of most European dynasties, the heads of those dynasties were, in some sense, "chosen." But according to the rules of modern Great Britain, the King is king according to a law of succession. Both he and his successors will take the throne according to that same law, without regard for the opinions of the Revolution Society.

Burke argues that the views put forth by political radicals like Price don't hold up to historical scrutiny. Furthermore, they don't accord with present realities of government. This hints at the argument Burke will soon develop—that history is often abused for the sake of revolutionary aims. It also hints at his view that appealing theories often don't stand up to reality.

Burke says that in Price's *Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, Price asserts three "fundamental rights," according with the principles of the Glorious Revolution, which belong to the English: the right "to choose our own governors"; "to cashier them for misconduct"; and "to frame a government for ourselves." Burke argues that this "unheard-of bill of rights" belongs to the Revolution Club alone, not to the English people, who are bound by the laws set down at the time of the Glorious Revolution—that very Revolution whose name the Society "abuses."

The so-called Glorious Revolution, which was virtually bloodless, took place in November, 1688, when James II and VII was deposed as king of England and replaced by James's daughter, Mary, and his nephew and Mary's husband, the Dutch William III. Though the Revolution Society was formed to commemorate that event, Burke makes a rhetorical blow by arguing that, despite their appropriation of the name, Price and his associates are out of step with the laws established in England after the Glorious Revolution.

Burke argues that the gentlemen of the Revolution Club are so preoccupied with the Glorious Revolution, the Great Rebellion and Commonwealth of 40 years before that, and the current French Revolution that they are "constantly confounding" these three events. Therefore it's necessary to separate these events, starting by clarifying the acts and principles of the Revolution of 1688.

Burke's argument will rest on the frequent misuse of history by those who appeal to it. The "Great Rebellion" refers to the English Civil War, which was really a series of civil wars fought in the 1640s over the way that England should be governed. The Civil War (and King Charles I's resulting execution) was followed by a period of republican government (the Commonwealth). During this time, it was established that English monarchs govern with the consent of Parliament, although that wasn't codified legally until after the Glorious Revolution.

SECTION 3

Burke says that the principles of the Glorious Revolution must be sought in the Declaration of Right—a "most wise, sober, and considerate declaration, drawn up by great lawyers and great statesmen, and not by warm and inexperienced enthusiasts." This document, he says, makes no suggestion regarding those "rights" Price has claimed were established by the Revolution.

The Declaration of Right was a document presented to William and Mary, inviting them to become the sovereigns of England following the deposition of James II. Burke pointedly contrasts the creators of this document with "enthusiasts" like Price, arguing that the Declaration does not provide support for those principles Price wishes to derive from the Revolution.

The Declaration of Right "is the corner-stone of our constitution," and "its fundamental principles [are] for ever settled." The purpose of the document was to "[declare] the rights and liberties of the subject, and [to settle] the succession of the crown." The rights and succession are purposefully declared side by side.

Burke provides historical background on the Declaration of Right and shows how he believes it supports his argument. He underlines how the Declaration placed the concerns of the subject side by side with the matter of the crown's succession, suggesting that these issues are inextricably connected. Further, the Declaration is intended to apply in perpetuity.

A few years after the Declaration of Right, when neither King William nor the Princess, later Queen Anne, had produced any heirs, there was another opportunity to consider the matter of "election" to the crown. However, the legislature did not call for election; rather, they more precisely declined the lines of succession. They also incorporated "our liberties, and an hereditary succession" within the same act of Parliament.

Burke refers to the 1701 Act of Settlement. He does this to point out that past legislators had plenty of opportunity to consider the type of election Price favors. However, they did not do so; instead, they took care to ensure that the hereditary succession would continue, seeing this concern as directly guaranteeing the rights of the people, not as a denial of them.

The Act of Settlement saw the "certainty in the succession" of the crown as an aspect of ensuring that subjects "safely have recourse for their protection." Both the Act of Settlement and the Declaration of Right contain "the unerring, unambiguous oracles" of the Glorious Revolution. By contrast, today's so-called revolutionaries, like Price, advance "delusive [...] predictions." The legislators who drew up the two earlier documents understood that it's unwise to turn "a case of necessity into a rule of law."

Burke continues to build his case that the previous century's concern for succession was seen as inseparable from the rights of the people. His sharply contrasting rhetoric—comparing infallible oracles with mere fortune-telling—is meant to give weight to the wisdom of the past against the uninformed passions of the present. Further, he anticipates his coming discussion of the French Revolution by arguing that one "necessary" revolution should not be treated as a precedent.

Burke again asserts that King William's ascending the throne was "a temporary deviation" from strict succession, but that the principles of jurisprudence forbid establishing a principle from a special case. If "popular choice" was to become the principle for English monarchs, then surely this would have been the time to establish that principle. In fact, anyone who is familiar with history, argues Burke, knows that many in Parliament were reluctant to crown William, since Mary was the lineal descendant of the deposed James, but they acted from necessity, not from choice.

Burke drives home his point that William's ascent to the throne was a historical anomaly, something which William's contemporaries did not see as a basis for future revolt. And if they had intended to open the succession to popular elections, they would have made this clear at the time. His reasoning is intended to undermine Price's reasoning one logical step at a time.

Finally, Burke points out the pledge which Parliament attached to their recognition of the new monarchs, submitting "themselves, their heirs and posterities forever" to William and Mary. Burke says that he does not desire to "understand the principles of the Revolution better than those by whom it was brought about" or to read "mysteries" into a clear document.

Burke's critique of Price indirectly accuses him and his revolutionary brethren of willfully misreading the documents of the Glorious Revolution, wanting them to yield arcane meanings that a straightforward reading of the text plainly denies—that is, misusing history for their own ends.

Burke goes on that it's entirely possible to reconcile "fixed rule" with "deviation," and succession with the possibility of change in an emergency. After all, "a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation." The principles of "conservation and correction" have operated together throughout English history. For example, following the English Civil War and the Revolution, the nation had lost its traditional "bond of union," yet this did not "dissolve the whole fabric." Rather, it was possible to "[regenerate] the deficient part" of the government using those parts that remained whole—as when the law of succession was altered to make it clear that only Protestants could inherit the throne.

Burke explains how stability and change are not mutually exclusive. Such reconciliation, in fact, is key to his view of governance. A state must retain some flexibility—some mechanism for reform—in order to remain healthy and whole. Burke uses one of the very same examples Price appeals to in order to further establish this point—the Revolution was not a rupture, but a means of preserving continuity.

Burke sums up this part of his argument by saying that the radicals of the Revolution Society "see nothing [in the Glorious Revolution] but the deviation from the constitution; and they take the deviation from the principle for the principle." They fail to consider the implications of saying that only an elected sovereign is valid; if that were true, then the acts of previous, un-elected sovereigns aren't valid, either. Therefore, insisting on election rather than succession "[stains] the throne of England with the blot of a continual usurpation," and much of the heritage of English law and liberty would be called into question.

Burke portrays the Revolution Society as being too narrow in its interpretation of history and thus too short-sighted regarding the future. The "rights" they champion, if carried to their logical conclusions, would actually serve to undermine the very basis of English liberty and undo much that the radicals presumably wish to maintain. By implication, then, the radicals fail to adequately account for preservation in their view of history, as Burke does.

Burke explains that England's past experience has shown her no other method for the preservation of liberty than the hereditary crown. While "an irregular, convulsive movement may be necessary to throw off an irregular, convulsive disease," succession is "the healthy habit of the British constitution." The fact that they knowingly chose a foreign line (the Hanoverian descendants of James I), with all the risk and inconvenience this step entailed, shows that the legislature acted with full conviction.

Burke continues to argue that the continuance of the hereditary succession is for the benefit of the English people. He describes revolution as a kind of emergency treatment in the event of disease and succession as the normal, healthy equilibrium which England must strive to maintain. England went to great lengths to maintain it following the Revolution, Burke says—making the day's radicals look presumptuous and unserious by comparison.

Burke explains that it's necessary to belabor this point because of the increase in public revolutionary teaching of late, in settings such as Price's pulpit, and in the widespread contempt for "all ancient institutions," and the preference for "present [...] convenience." He tells Depont that he mustn't be taken in by "counterfeit wares" smuggled across the English channel as "raw commodities of British growth though wholly alien," then smuggled back to England in French guise.

Burke describes the taste for revolutionary sentiment in terms of a general distaste for the old in favor of the new, in keeping with his stress on the value of history and nature throughout. He uses the analogy of smuggling counterfeit goods as a metaphor for the dissemination of ideas of questionable origin; that is, ideas are often attributed to attractive sources in order to make them more palatable.

SECTION 4

The Revolution Society's second claim is that people have "a right of cashiering their governors for misconduct." Burke points out that those who influenced the abdication of King James desired that Glorious Revolution to be "a parent of settlement, and not a nursery of future revolutions."

From refuting the first argument that the people have the right to choose their own governors, Burke now moves on to refuting the claim that the people can depose their governors. Burke continues to stress his own claim that present-day revolutionaries misunderstand and misuse the aims of their historical forebears; the Glorious Revolution was meant to settle things, not stir them up.

"Misconduct" is such a loose term that any government could be undone by it. The leaders of the Glorious Revolution relied on no such term; they charged James with the subversion of the Protestant Church and state and with breaking the contract between king and people—much more than mere "misconduct." Their aim was not to rely on more revolutions in the future, but to "render it almost impracticable" for any future sovereign to do as James did. That's also why they took such care to secure frequent parliamentary meetings—they thought this a much better security for the future than something "so mischievous in the consequences, as that of 'cashiering their governors.'"

Burke continues to argue that the Revolutionary Society misunderstands history, and that the facts of history won't support their aims. For example, the revolutionaries of 1688 saw James's Catholicism as a threat to the state, as well as his absolutist attempts to impose his measures. These were more specific complaints than the catchall "misconduct." They also sought to guard against *future revolutions, not to set a precedent for them, Burke argues.*

Burke next takes up the idea that kings are "the servants of the people." In one sense, he says, this is undoubtedly true, since their goal is the general welfare of the people; however, kings are not servants in the sense that they are required to obey someone else; rather, all British subjects owe him obedience by law. Burke says that his ancestors had a "better remedy against arbitrary power than civil confusion," like that produced by subjecting the king to his public's authority.

Burke demonstrates how, in his view, the Revolution Society's claims are far more radical than their language makes it appear on the surface. Their use of the term "servants," for example, has a commonly acceptable meaning, but the meaning intended by the Revolution Society actually runs directly counter British law and the intentions of their forebears.

Burke points out that "cashiering kings" is something that can seldom be done without force—making it "a case of war, and not of constitution." The Glorious Revolution of 1688 was a just war, dealing with out-of-the-ordinary abuses. Such an event should be "the very last resource of the thinking and the good."

Burke argues that the revolutionaries' arguments actually have more radical implications than they might seem—deposing a king is something that likely cannot be achieved without violence.

SECTION 5

The third "right" Price asserted was "the right to form a government for ourselves." Burke asserts that the radicals can draw no more precedent for this "right" from the Glorious Revolution than they could for the previous ones. He explains that "the Revolution was made to preserve our antient indisputable laws and liberties, and our [...] constitution." The idea of forming a new government "is enough to fill us with disgust and horror," because the desire at the time of the Revolution, as now, was "to derive all we possess as an inheritance from our forefathers."

Burke's analysis of Price's sermon moves to the third "right," that of self-government. Again, this one cannot be derived from history, Burke argues. That's because the Glorious Revolution was fundamentally backward-looking. With this argument, Burke deepens the theme of the use of history and also turns to the theme of the importance of tradition, in order to portray the revolutionaries—both English and French—as objectionably future-oriented.

Burke claims that England's "oldest reformation is that of Magna Charta." Even this document was "a re-affirmance of the still more antient standing law of the kingdom."

The Magna Charta, or Magna Carta, was written in 1215 and agreed to by King John. It primarily concerned the relationship between the monarch and barons, but it was long viewed as an iconic symbol of liberty in English history.

Likewise in the Petition of Right, a law made under Charles I, the parliament asserts the freedom of English subjects not on the basis of "abstract […] 'rights of men,'" but on the basis of their inheritance "as Englishmen, and as a patrimony derived from their forefathers." Burke explains that this reliance on "positive, recorded, hereditary title" is superior to the "vague, speculative right" which is vulnerable to "every wild litigious spirit."

The Petition of Right was a 1628 statement of English civil liberties, particularly those rights that the king of England may not infringe. Burke's point here is that, in its history, England's understanding of its rights has been based on specific rights passed down through the centuries, not indefinite, abstract "rights" like those championed by the revolutionaries.

Burke goes on to argue that the Declaration of Right, too, says nothing of a so-called right for the people "to frame a government for themselves." It, too, was primarily concerned to secure long-held liberties that had recently been threatened. From the Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right, then, "it has been the uniform policy of our constitution" to claim liberties as an "inheritance derived to us from our forefathers." Because of that emphasis on inheritance, England has an inherited crown, peerage, and house of commons, as well as the people inheriting various privileges and liberties "from a long line of ancestors."

Burke seeks to draw a continuous historical line from the medieval period through more recent history to the present, in order to show that England has always founded its understanding of its rights on its inheritance. This is why specific aspects of English governance are inherited, like the crown and houses of parliament. Burke makes this argument to demonstrate that the English people receive their government; they don't seek to form a new one.

Burke holds that this policy of inheritance is "the result of profound reflection; or rather the happy effect of following nature, which is wisdom without reflection." He argues that "a spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views"—that people who do not look back to their ancestors will not be inclined to think about their posterity. By experience, the English people know that this idea of inheritance has preserved an idea of conservation while maintaining a possibility of improvement.

Burke argues that there is a kind of wisdom embedded in nature with which practices like inheritance are aligned. He further suggests that those who disregard such wisdom are selfish, with insufficient respect for either the past of the future. Those who heed it, by contrast, respect their ancestors while also remaining open to change. Thus Burke portrays a conservatism that isn't stagnant, but is flexible and responsive to the needs of the present.

Burke goes on to explain that the English political system, in his view, maintains "a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world." This system is at once "never old, or middle-aged, or young," but constantly moving through a cycle of "perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression." By patterning government upon nature, "we are never wholly new; [yet] in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete."

Burke portrays this flexible conservatism as going with the grain of nature. Like the changing of the seasons, it is perpetually open to change and progress, but firmly rooted in its past. By grounding governance in nature in this way, Burke is able to portray his view as reform-minded as opposed to revolutionary.

One of the advantages of this emphasis on inheritance is that "the spirit of freedom, leading in itself to misrule and excess, is tempered with [...] gravity." A "rational" freedom is best preserved by favoring "our nature rather than our speculations, our breasts rather than our inventions, for the great conservatories [...] of our rights and privileges."

Burke doesn't say that freedom is a bad instinct in itself. Rather, it's not enough by itself to produce healthy changes. It needs to be grounded in nature and a sound understanding of the past, rather than newfound inventions disconnected from collected wisdom.

SECTION 6

Burke points out to Depont that the French might have benefited from the English example. After all, they still possessed the foundations of their old constitution, even after it was suspended; they still possessed those harmonious elements in their old state which would provide a basis for the new. These rudiments might have served to promote compromise and moderation instead of "harsh, crude, unqualified reformations."

In Burke's view, the existing good in the French government was more than sufficient to undertake reforms. By remaining tethered to the past, the revolutionaries would have stood a better chance of building something that would last. Instead, the results of the Revolution are literally too "radical"—tearing things up by the roots.

The fault of the French Revolution, Burke explains, is that France had many existing advantages, but "chose to act as if you had never been moulded into civil society, and had everything to begin anew." If the French were discouraged by recent generations, then they might have looked further back in their history, finding in their ancestors "a standard of virtue and wisdom, beyond the vulgar practice of the hour," and providing a needed example for the present: "Respecting your forefathers, you would have been taught to respect yourselves." Failing in this, France instead has unleashed "an irreparable calamity to you and to mankind," by "[rebelling] against a mild and lawful monarch" more violently than any other people has risen against an actual tyrant. What we see in France, Burke asserts, are "monuments of rash and ignorant counsel in time of profound peace."

Burke identifies two main problems at the heart of the French Revolution. As he's already stated, the revolutionaries were too eager to attack existing structures and would have been better served—and more faithful to their own heritage—by looking back at earlier examples to find examples for the future. And secondly, Burke finds the revolutionaries' motives suspect in that King Louis XVI was not even tyrannical enough to warrant such an upheaval to begin with.

Burke argues that another problem is the composition of France's newfound National Assembly, which he sees as composed of men unsuited to this new dignity—lacking the natural abilities for their position. The Third Estate is made up of 600 people, a majority of them lawyers, and "inferior, unlearned" lawyers at that—"country attorneys [...] conductors of the petty war of village vexation." These men, "not taught habitually to respect themselves," can hardly be expected to handle their new position well, as they are "intoxicated with their unprepared greatness." The situation is little improved by the presence of semi-literate "country clowns," traders, physicians, and village clergy—very little of "the natural landed interest" of France.

Not only was the Revolution uncalled for, but Burke sees the new government figures as unpromising. It's not simply the fact that most of these come from the working classes (the "Third Estate" refers to commoners), but that these people, unaccustomed to a political role, are not ready for the weighty task that's been thrust upon them. It's also Burke's view that the "landed interest"—like those in England whose inheritance ties them to tradition and the needs of the country—are more reliably invested in the needs of government and thus better suited to such responsibilities.

In other words, Burke goes on, "excellence in [...] peculiar functions may be far from a qualification for others." People who spend their lives within narrow circles are probably not suited to roles that depend on a broad knowledge of humanity in general, especially knowledge of those interests "which go to the formation of that multifarious thing called a state." The problem with the makeup of the National Assembly is that it has "no fundamental law, no strict convention" to restrain its actions. They can design a constitution from scratch, and they have "unbounded power."

Burke doesn't deny that the new members of the Third Estate might have many excellent distinctions, but that those distinctions don't suit them for the new functions required of them—a complex one requiring broad, experiential knowledge. Worse yet, these members are being thrust into a situation where they have immense power and no built-in structures to guide and restrain their work.

Burke argues that the majority of the Assembly, in its efforts to destroy the French nobility, will be led by the worst qualities of the nobility, as "turbulent, discontented men of quality" tend to despise their rivals. Burke argues that loving "the little platoon" each of us belongs to in society is the building-block of affection for our country, and for humanity. This suggests to us that only traitorous men "would barter away" their interests in their own place in society.

Burke questions the motivations of those who are newly rising up in government. He suggests that the Revolution incentivizes ambition and rivalry instead of deliberation and compromise. This is because people develop affection for their country close to home, among those who are similar to them—so those who are destructive probably possess questionable character.

Burke continues by arguing that "When men of rank [...] work with low instruments and for low ends, the whole composition becomes low and base." This is what is now seen in France. Other revolutions had "long views," with an eye toward the dignity of the people; they sought to "beautify the world," "outshining" their competitors. By contrast, however, France's "present confusion [...] has attacked the fountain of life itself." Burke cautions Depont that "those who attempt to level, never equalize;" those who attempt to level "pervert the natural order of things." Such an "usurpation on the prerogatives of nature" can never last.

Burke returns to his emphasis on the importance of nature as a foundation and guide for action. France's attempts to suddenly and radically equalize society go against the grain of nature and thus, in his view, are doomed to failure. Burke's philosophical interest in aesthetics is also apparent in his remark about beauty—something he believes should characterize change.

Burke notes the French chancellor's remarks that "all occupations [are] honourable." Burke agrees that the job of, say, a hair-dresser or a chandler should not be oppressed by the state; but "the state suffers oppression" if such are allowed to become rulers. While the French think they are combating "prejudice," they are in fact "at war with nature."

Burke continues his argument that a flattening equality is unnatural. It's not that more common occupations are devoid of dignity, but that, in his view, such people are not equipped for the lofty role of governing.

Burke clarifies that there are no qualifications for government besides "virtue and wisdom," no matter where these are found. A state ought to be represented by ability, not just property. Nevertheless, property inheritance is important, because it's linked to society's perpetuation of itself. While it is possible to "idolize" hereditary wealth, it's also possible for the "short-sighted coxcombs of philosophy" to "slight" the role that wealth plays. A certain preeminence granted to status, then, "is neither unnatural, nor unjust." France, however, has "stayed out of the high road of nature."

Burke agrees with those who celebrate virtue and wisdom as the most important characteristics for rule. However, Burke also argues that the role of property is not just superficial classism. It is natural, because the passing down of property guarantees that people will take a personal interest in the particular needs of their land and the people at large. To him, no "philosophy" can override this self-evident truth.

SECTION 7

Burke turns to Price's comments regarding "the favorableness of the present times to […] exertions in the cause of liberty." Burke argues that liberty is rather "a possession to be secured than […] a prize to be contended for." He wonders, "What is that cause of liberty, and what are those exertions in its favor, to which the example of France is so singularly auspicious?" The members of the Revolution Society seem to look with contempt on those aspects of English governance which Burke has supposed to be England's "glory." They disdain the supposed "inequality in our representation," hoping for the provocation of "some great calamity" which will encourage England to throw off this yoke.

Here, Burke questions Price's claim that "exertions" on behalf of liberty are appropriate, because such implies that liberty must be fought for. He rather holds that England is a better repository of liberty than France is, because it has carefully guarded liberty for generations, and no exertions are necessary. But Price and other radical Englishmen overlook this, favoring the model of France.

Given the Revolution Society's contempt for Britain's own constitution and government, it's not surprising that they now look to France for another model. They are so obsessed that it's fruitless to talk to them about their ancestors' practices or their country's long-tested constitution: "They despise experience as the wisdom of unlettered men […] they have 'the rights of men.'"

The "rights of men" refers to the 1789 revolutionary Declaration of the Rights of Man, *which Burke disdains as disconnected from history and concrete reality. Those who favor these abstract "rights" overlook the wisdom embedded in lived experience.*

Burke explains that he does not deny "the real rights of men." People have a right to justice, to the fruits of their labor, and whatever they desire to do without trespassing on the rights of others. Burke denies, however, that each has a right to "the share of power, authority, and direction" in the management of the state. He argues that one of the conventions of civil society is that "no man should be judge in his own cause." That is, he gives up some of his liberty in order to secure some of it.

Burke affirms that basic human rights do exist. However, the possession of such rights does not grant someone a place in the government of society. He refers to the traditional view that people should not determine the outcome of their own case—writ large, this suggests that people in general should not be involved in their own government.

Burke uses the above as an example of the point that government doesn't rest on clear, abstract "natural rights," because the "perfection" of such rights "is their practical defect." Government is, rather, "a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human *wants*."

Burke argues that government is inherently practical. It's a means of ensuring that people get what they lack. It cannot rest on abstractions, contrary to the revolutionary view.

For example, one such "want" is "a sufficient restraint upon […] passions." Both individual and collective passions must necessarily be thwarted sometimes, for the good of both individuals and the whole; only someone besides themselves has the power to do this. But the circumstances of this vary greatly, so it doesn't make sense to create an "abstract rule" about them. This is part of why governance is so difficult—it "requires a deep knowledge of human nature."

Burke argues that government requires a knowledge of particular circumstances, as well as the recurrent truths about human behavior; these are not things to which an abstract rule can be applied without allowance for interpretation.

Burke goes on, asking, "What is the use of discussing a man's abstract right to food or to medicine? The question is upon the method of procuring and administering them," which is better answered by a farmer or physician, "rather than the professor of metaphysics." A "plausible scheme" may turn out to have "lamentable conclusions"; likewise, "obscure" causes might end up being critical to a nation's prosperity.

Burke famously makes the point that there is no use talking about abstract rights to concrete things; government should be in the business of providing such things, not theorizing about them. And an airtight academic scheme might not be the best means of provision.

Because, then, "the science of government" is so inherently practical, it requires experience—far more than the experience of even a single wise person. Even such a wise person ought to show "infinite caution" in "pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society," or trying to rebuild without the aid of time-tested models.

Government, then, is not a matter of simply placing the smartest people into the right positions. Rather, it balances on collective wisdom, and adapting that long-tested wisdom to present situations. It requires careful deliberation, not hasty changes.

Burke goes on to suggest that "the pretended rights of these theorists are all extremes"; even when theoretically correct, they often prove "morally and politically false. "The rights of men defy precise definitions, and government can only put them into practice through compromise, never with exactness.

Burke further explains that a theory can be true, but difficult or impossible to put into practice, and thus not serviceable for society. Broad definitions often fail to account for the needs of particular people.

Burke wonders if people, in their revolutionary fervor, have become so taken up with the "rights of man" that they've forgotten human nature. Such an obsession, cautions Burke, is dangerous. To such people, "plots, massacres, assassinations, seem [...] a trivial price for obtaining a revolution." They seem to be satisfied with nothing less than a "grand spectacle," lulled by the privileges of security and prosperity. Burke argues that the present condition of France's government is a "burlesque" and "perversion," of which its own participants must have felt ashamed.

Burke portrays the French Revolution as a spectacle in which people have been thoughtlessly swept away. It's disconnected from the real needs and nature of people and therefore more likely to satisfy their appetites in the short run while harming their long-term security.

SECTION 8

Burke moves into a narrative of the events of October 6, 1789. History, he says, will record that on that morning, France's king and queen, "after a day of confusion, alarm, dismay, and slaughter," lay down to a troubled sleep. The queen was startled from sleep by the cry of her sentinel, who was quickly killed. A band of "cruel ruffians and assassins" then broke into the queen's chamber and slashed her bed with their bayonets—the queen had fled "almost naked" in search of her husband at the last moment.

Here Burke turns abruptly from more abstract discussion to a colorful narrative of the events of the March on Versailles, a significant turning point in the masses' favor. His use of dramatic, even sordid, detail is meant to gain sympathy for the plight of the queen as a human being. This goes along with the points he's just been making about abstraction versus human nature.

The king, queen, and their children were then forced to flee their palace, which was "swimming in blood," and brought into Paris. Two randomly selected members of the king's bodyguard were publicly executed and their heads stuck on spears while the royal family was paraded through the city among "infamous contumelies." After a 12-mile journey, they were lodged in the Bastille.

The events of October 6, 1789, while a dramatic moment in the Revolution, were probably not as blood-soaked as Burke portrays them here. Interestingly, Burke employs history to try to evoke a particular emotional response from his audience—a tactic he cautions against elsewhere.

Burke asks, "Is this a triumph to be consecrated at altars?" He assures Depont that, while the Revolution Society might applaud these events, most people in England do not. Burke says that although "this great history-piece of the massacre of innocents" remains unfinished, some "hardy pencil of a great master, from the school of the rights of men," will finish it hereafter. He tells Depont that he is "influenced by the inborn feelings of my nature," "not [...] illuminated by a single ray of this new-sprung modern light," and so has no taste for the "exultation" this occasion called forth among revolutionaries.

Burke tries to get Depont, and his audience in general, to consider the events of the rRvolution in a more human light, assuming that this will prompt people to reconsider its excesses. He also predicts that worse violence will yet befall France—a prophecy proven true by the later execution of the king and queen and the Reign of Terror, in which many perceived to be anti-revolutionary were publicly executed. Burke argues that inborn human nature, not theories, should enable a person to see what's wrong with the Revolution.

Burke offers an encomia on the queen of France. He saw her 16 or 17 years ago, when she was the dauphiness at Versailles. "Surely never lighted on this orb," says Burke, "a more delightful vision." He never imagined that she should someday "carry the sharp antidote against disgrace concealed in that bosom," while living in "a nation of men and honor and of cavaliers." However, "the age of chivalry is gone"; in its place has come "that of sophisters, economists, and calculators."

Burke continues with his technique of humanizing the queen, even flattering her in romantic terms, to undermine the revolution's excesses. Notably, he implies that the queen carried a knife so that she could commit suicide rather than be assaulted or otherwise disgraced—something that would be unthinkable in a chivalrous age, but which inhumane revolution has rendered necessary.

Burke argues that chivalry, "this mixed system of opinion and sentiment," is what has given modern Europe its distinctive character. It is important because, "without confounding ranks," it "produced a noble equality," subduing pride, "[obliging] sovereigns to submit to [...] social esteem," and elevating manners.

Burke argues that chivalry is a kind of natural sensibility that recognizes different ranks in society and allows those ranks to respect one another and interact harmoniously. Such a "natural" state of things has been upended by the Revolution.

Now, all this has changed, says Burke. "All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle, and [...] harmonized the different shades of life [...] are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason," a development Burke likens to "the decent drapery of life [being] rudely torn off." As an example of this new outlook, "a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal"; "regicide [...] and sacrilege, are but fictions of superstition," and even regicide is excusable if it benefits the people in some way.

Burke argues that when bald theories replace traditional sensibilities, the foundations of society are threatened. This is precisely what has led to the queen's tenuous position, and the people's willingness to tolerate something as extreme as the possibility of regicide, the killing of a king.

Burke critiques this new sensibility by calling it a "mechanic philosophy" which fails to cultivate any affection for one's country. Institutions, for example, can no longer be "embodied [...] in persons," inspiring love and loyalty. This "reason which banishes the affections is incapable of filling their place." "To make us love our country," argues Burke, "our country ought to be lovely," but the new outlook allows for nothing to make it so.

Burke argues that philosophy doesn't inspire love. For example, his narrative of Queen Marie Antoinette was meant to inspire affection in a specific person. Bare "reason" offers nothing specific toward which to direct one's affections. Burke's comments on loveliness are also a play on the title of Price's sermon, "A Discourse on the Love of Our Country."

Burke argues that when the spirit of "fealty" is dead, "preventive murder" will reign in its place: "Kings will be tyrants from policy when subjects are rebels from principle."

Traditionally, fealty preserved mutual loyalty and protection between subjects and monarchs. But when this system is destroyed, the void will be filled by something more destructive.

Two principles—"the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion"—have sustained European civilization up to this time. They preserved learning. Now that the nobility and clergy are scorned in France, "learning will be cast into the mire." Burke fears that, like education, things like commerce and trade might also falter in the absence of "their natural protecting principles." France will be left with "stupid, ferocious [...] barbarians, destitute of religion, honor, or manly pride."

Burke argues that, as the building blocks of traditional society are toppled, many unintended consequences will follow, to the detriment of society and culture as a whole. Things like nobility and religion are not arbitrary, but "natural" structures that allow for the flourishing of society.

Burke says that England has always gotten its manners from France, and that when France's "fountain is choked up and polluted, the stream will not run long [...] with us." This is one reason why all of Europe must be concerned about what's happening in France, and why Burke has dwelt so long on "a revolution in sentiments, manners, and moral opinions" which, in his opinion, dates from October 6, 1789.

Though Burke has been adamant that most people in England are not susceptible to revolutionary sentiments, he also recognizes France's longstanding cultural influence and therefore holds that what happens to France should be of concern to all.

SECTION 9

Burke says it is only natural that his feelings are so different from those of Dr. Price. Humans are made "to be affected at such spectacles [...] in events like these our passions instruct our reason." Burke says that poets, who have "not yet graduated in the school of the rights of men," would not dare to write of a spectacle like the Revolution as other than a tragedy; a stage actor would reject such, also. If such a thing were performed onstage, any theater-goer would intuitively see that the Revolution "would justify every [...] crime," and that "criminal means once tolerated are soon preferred." When "the rights of men" triumph, it's not long before people lose the ability to discern right from wrong.

Burke argues that human passions provide a kind of gateway to reason. That's why cultural institutions like poetry, theater, and art are indicators of broader sentiments; they are more connected to tradition and to human nature. Seeing revolutionary events onstage or imprint would be nonsensical in this light, because they violate natural sensibilities.

Burke says that, if it could have been demonstrated to him that the king and queen of France were indeed "cruel tyrants," he would think their present captivity fair, since "the punishment of real tyrants is a noble [...] act" to be gravely carried out. But to "degrade and insult a man as the worst of criminals," and then make a pretense of retaining him as king, is inconsistent and foolish.

Burke doesn't deny altogether that it is sometimes necessary to punish tyrants. However, he questions whether there was adequate justification for such measures in France. He also suggests that the way it has been carried out is unwise—at this point, Louis XVI still retains a nominal title without real power, a halfway measure that makes little sense in light of the charges against him.

Burke supposes that "not one in a hundred" English people shares the views of the Revolution Society. The English, he says, "know that *we* have made no discoveries [...] in morality [...] nor in the ideas of liberty, which were understood long before we were born," and will remain after they die. In England, kings, priests, and the nobility are still reverenced, "because [...] it is *natural*."

Burke continues to reinforce the idea that morality and liberty are embedded in nature and tradition, and that the English people continue to recognize this. The novelty of the French Revolution makes it inherently suspect.

Burke goes on to tell Depont, "I am bold enough to confess, that we are generally men of untaught feelings [...] we cherish [our prejudices] to a very considerable degree," especially those prejudices that have lasted for a long time. The English avoid entrusting each person to "his own private stock of reason," because it is presumably quite small; it's better to "avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages."

Burke introduces the idea of prejudice, *meaning "a natural preconception." He implicitly contrasts this with the abstract philosophical theories favored by the Revolution. Prejudice allows people to tap into a bank of wisdom much bigger, older, and therefore more reliable than themselves.*

Prejudice provides a sort of coat for "naked reason," "[gives] action to that reason, and an affection which will give it permanence." It also serves well in an "emergency," allowing access to time-tested wisdom in moments requiring clear judgment. "Prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit," allowing "duty [to become] a part of his nature."

Prejudice helps to contextualize and guide reason. Burke also implies that prejudice serves better in moments of upheaval than reason alone can do. That's because, in his view, prejudice accustoms people to virtue over the course of life, disposing them to act wisely.

Burke explains that this is a point of difference between most of the English and the "whole clan of the enlightened." The latter have far greater confidence in their own wisdom than in that of others; they will tear down old things just because they're old, and they don't worry about the durability of the hastily constructed new. Why would someone whose confidence rests in "discovery" worry much about the past, or about how long his own ideas will last? Convenience and opinion rule the day with such people, argues Burke.

Burke holds that people who trust in their own wisdom are disconnected from both the past and the future. That's why they are more inclined to dispense with the old and to insufficiently account for the future. Unlike someone whose "prejudice" had formed their character, an "enlightened" person has tunnel vision for the present.

Burke has heard that a "philosophic" faction has received credit for recent events in France. In England, such groups have frequently been composed of "atheists and infidels" and have done little more in their day than create "noise"; their works are no longer read or well regarded, and they have never gained much traction among the people, who embody "a sort of native plainness and directness of understanding."

Burke disdains philosophic factions as troublemakers who are disconnected from the mass of the people and are correspondingly rejected by them.

English people, Burke goes on, are convinced "that religion is the basis of civil society." While they are not blinded to the faults and failings that may corrupt religion, they would not call upon atheism to address those. Humanity is instinctively religious. If it became necessary to throw off England's accustomed religion, they would seek to put another in its place; but it is England's habit to "cleave closely to [establishments]," rather than disagreeing with them.

Burke does not claim that religion is perfect and unchangeable, but that French revolutionaries go too far by seeking to remedy religion's weaknesses. Religion is one of those "natural" institutions which supports society, and English people instinctively honor this fact.

SECTION 10

Burke proposes to introduce England's various establishments. First, he discusses the Church establishment, "the first of our prejudices," and one grounded in wisdom, not devoid of it. It is necessary both to form the character of people who hold any power in society, to reinforce the sense that they, too, are under authority. Burke argues that a society like France, in which the people now understand themselves to possess immense power, risks becoming shameless and fearless, lacking the built-in check that religion provides.

Burke gives specific examples of how "prejudices" are healthy for society, and how abandoning institutions like religion will actually undermine France's attempts to update aspects of its society. For example, he argues that the Church ideally restrains people's sense of their own power, but there's nothing to serve this function under the Revolution.

The problem with lacking such checks as religion is that people do not think themselves accountable to posterity, and they leave to their descendants "a ruin instead of an habitation." People would no longer study jurisprudence, which contains "the collected reason of ages"; "personal self-sufficiency and arrogance [...] would usurp the tribunal." A similar deterioration would occur in science, literature, and other areas of life in the commonwealth.

Burke goes on to show how various aspects of life and culture will suffer in the absence of controlling "prejudices." The absence of these not only displays a lack of regard for the past and harms the present, but hurts future generations as well.

To avoid "the evils of inconstancy and versatility," which are worse, in Burke's view, than stubborn prejudice, "we have consecrated the state." The state can make mistakes, but its faults should be approached "as [...] the wounds of a father." Prejudice teaches the English to "look with horror" on those "children" who heedlessly destroy their "father."

The role of the state is to contain and preserve those institutions that uphold society. It is not perfect, but it should be treated with reverence and respect—the opposite of what the French are presently doing, argues Burke.

Society, Burke goes on to explain, is a "contract." It is a more substantial type of contract than one concerning, say, trade in "pepper and coffee," or something else contracted or dissolved at will. This contract, rather, is "a partnership in all science [...] all art [...] in every virtue, and in all perfection." It's not only between the living, but between living, dead, and future generations.

Burke picks up the idea of the social contract that has been popularized in early modernity by such figures as John Locke. But Burke, expanding on this concept, doesn't just see a contract as something pertaining to two parties, or even to an entire generation, but to society as a whole—past, present, and future.

Burke explains that the state was willed by God as a means of perfecting human virtue. He assures Depont that the majority of English people have always thought this way, and that they do not think it is lawful to be without a religious establishment; in fact, the idea of one runs throughout their entire system of governance. Church and state are inseparable in English minds.

Burke ties together church and state by showing how religion has traditionally been thought indispensable to the state's aims of instilling virtue.

English education is in the hands of the Church, and has remained so throughout England's history—even the English Reformation preserved continuity with the religious past, rather than destroying it. England also finds it critical that their clergy remain independent, not unduly dependent on the crown or the nobility.

Burke argues that religion, too, like government, is one of those things that must be both mindful of the past and open to improvement—he sees the Church of England (whose so-called Elizabethan settlement had preserved aspects of both Catholic practice and Protestant theology) as an example of this.

The Church's property is private, unlike in France; the state is not its proprietor, "but the guardian only and the regulator." English society also welcomes religion's influence throughout its ranks and classes, honoring the Church hierarchy and accepting that an Archbishop should rank higher than a Duke. And the Church's wealth is not commanded by the state, since "the world on the whole will gain by a liberty, without which virtue cannot exist."

Burke continues to illustrate the distinctively English approach to the Church and its relationship to the state, in hopes of commending this to Depont. He argues that the Church must maintain a certain independence in order to fulfill its virtuous role.

Burke believes that it's primarily "envy and malignity" that leads some to scorn ecclesiastical revenues, not true concern for the poor. Until these objectors are seen giving up their own goods for the poor, the people of England will believe such "reformers" to be mere hypocrites. For all these reasons, Great Britain will never seek revenue by confiscating Church properties. France's measures along these lines are "perfidious and cruel." Only a tyrant would abruptly strip the clergy of their means of support in this way.

In France, one of the declared motivations for the confiscation of Church properties was that these monies should be in the hands of the poor. Burke argues that there's little evidence for this being the case. Furthermore, France's National Assembly also made the case that the Church was basically a creation of its legal system and thus confiscation wasn't unjust.

Burke argues that the "professors of the rights of men" are not to be believed in their claims regarding property, because they clearly do not understand that the property of the citizen, not the demands of the state, is the basis of civil society—"the claim of the citizen is prior in time, paramount in title, superior in equity." Burke points out, too, that though nothing about France's earlier government has been upheld as valid by the National Assembly, except for its financial engagements. Meanwhile, people have been denied the money they are owed because "their services had not been rendered to the country that now exists."

Burke points out various inconsistences in the way that the French government has handled the differences pre- and post-revolution. He sees a fundamental problem with France's view of the state, instead of the citizen, as primary. This view allows France to make unjust demands on citizens' properties. Burke's view of the priority of the citizen is one that he sees as embedded in nature and tradition as opposed to theory.

SECTION 11

Burke believes that France's "new monied interest" is allied with "the political Men of Letters," who have long been planning "the destruction of the Christian religion." They have used their own literary fame and "the medium of opinion" to try to monopolize "avenues to opinion" regarding religion. They have succeeded more by "intrigue" than by genuine wit. They claimed concern for the poor, while exaggerating their critique of the nobility and clergy, and allying themselves with "obnoxious wealth," Burke claims.

Here, Burke criticizes the hypocrisy in the propagandistic efforts of France's educated elite. They have mounted an intentional attack against religion, justifying this out of concern for those poor whom the Church has allegedly neglected. However, Burke charges this as being more about naked power and a desire to dismantle Christian structures—something that later events in the 1790s (brutal persecution of the clergy, brief state sanctioning of deism and atheism) will appear to bear out.

Burke questions why the properties of the clergy alone are being confiscated, and not those of financiers, bankers, wealthy nobles, and others. He believes the revolutionaries have been motivated by a "spirit of revenge" and not of justice. Eventually, the confiscated Church properties became the government's sole resource. The government ensured full participation in their confiscation scheme by requiring all payments be made in a paper currency founded on the eventual sale of Church lands. However, it was later decided that these lands wouldn't actually be sold, but would be "delivered to the highest bidder," with the full payment not to be made for a dozen years, "held on the feudal tenure of zeal to the new establishment."

Burke attacks the whole scheme of confiscation that the revolutionary government has enacted to try to drag France out of debt. He argues that its architects are being inconsistent by looking to the Church alone to fill its coffers. The entire plan has also been mishandled, with worthless paper money being issued even without the intended sale having been made.

Burke argues that, once these various confiscations and tyrannies have been carried out, "shock[ing] the moral sentiments of all virtuous and sober minds," France's new "philosophic" leaders turn to denunciation of the old monarchical government—and anyone who disapproves of their own abuses is then denounced, in turn, as a partisan of the old system. They act as though no third option is possible.

Burke argues that there is a method behind the various stages of revolution. Once the people's traditional sensibilities have been duly "shocked," there is an effort to turn the people against the monarchy, further polarizing French society. Burke argues that a middle way is possible between revolution and mere traditionalism.

Burke says he's unsure how to classify France's current ruling class. Though it claims itself to be a pure democracy, it appears to be becoming "a mischievous and ignoble oligarchy." In any case, Burke does not disapprove of any form of government on the basis of abstract principles alone. However, there is no historical precedent for a large-scale democracy, just ancient city-states. He is inclined to concur with Aristotle and other classical authors that a pure democracy is a degenerate form of a republic. The problem with such a form of government is that the majority will often oppress the minority far more harshly than a monarch would do.

Burke argues that the form of government that is taking shape in France has not really been tried before in history, which, in his view, renders its validity questionable. Even Aristotle, in his Nichomachean Ethics, *saw pure democracy as a degradation of a more balanced republican structure. That is because an unchecked majority can easily become oppressive, falling into the same errors it criticizes, or worse ones, in the previous monarchy.*

Burke questions whether the French monarchy was so bad that it was beyond the possibility of reform, that "the whole fabric should be at once pulled down, and the area cleared for the erection of a theoretic experimental edifice in its place." He argues that France had a different opinion at the beginning of 1789, and that representatives to the states-general, though hardly ignorant of existing abuses, were then seeking reform, not revolution. He asserts that France was "a despotism rather in appearance than in reality."

Burke questions whether all of this revolutionary upheaval was even necessary—he suggests once again that Frenchmen like Depont have not made a sufficient case for tearing everything down. In fact, he argues that most French people were more reform-minded than revolutionary within the past year.

To prove this statement, Burke argues that, as of 1780, France's population was still increasing, and that, whatever the precise factors in this growth, France's political institutions could not have been the world's worst. As of 1785, its wealth was also growing. No "positively destructive government" could allow for such. And when France's architectural beauties, infrastructure, fortifications, cultivation, and many other aspects are considered—to say nothing of her learned and literary achievements—then how can it be said that France's government was so thoroughly corrupt "as to be utterly unfit for all reformation"? Burke thinks it unlikely that France will be improved by the Revolution, and that, in fact, it will take years for it to regain its previous stature in population and wealth.

Burke praises a whole catalogue of France's distinctions and achievements, arguing that these prevailed until very recently, and that their existence, while not in itself an argument against revolution, suggests that the current destruction was over-hasty. His praise of existing institutions bolsters his argument that reform is generally a more measured, healthy, and respectful way of proceeding than revolution.

Burke points out that Paris is currently burdened by high unemployment and mendicancy (begging), while "the leaders of the legislative clubs and coffee-houses are intoxicated with admiration" at themselves and look down on both their own poor and the rest of the world, taking comfort in being "a nation of philosophers." Burke says that, while "virtuous poverty" with liberty is to be preferred to "wealthy servitude," one should be sure that the "liberty" that accompanies such poverty was worth the price.

Burke cites statistics to show that Paris is currently in turmoil and that the Revolution hasn't shown positive effects there yet. He implies that the elites ignore or justify all this on the basis of their superior new theories. He also suggests that the elites have sold out the common people for the sake of a counterfeit "liberty."

SECTION 12

Burke points out that, had France's "privileged nobility" been as monstrous as the revolutionaries had portrayed them, they would not have issued instructions to their representatives which "breathe the spirit of liberty as warmly, and […] recommend reformation as strongly, as any other order" of society. Everyone in France had agreed that the absolute monarchy was coming to an end; struggle only broke out afterward, when a "despotic democracy" took power.

Burke argues that, like critiques of the Church and the monarchy, critiques of the nobility were overheated and rash. Some of these very nobility had been in favor of reform a short time ago. Burke suggests that if only that course had been followed, much suffering might have been avoided.

Burke observes that although he does not know France intimately, he does know human nature, and in his observations of the French nobility, he never saw anything generally objectionable, or witnessed oppression of the common people by their superiors, to any greater degree than he has seen in England. However, they had their faults, including too great of a separation between the classes, which probably helped bring about the nobility's downfall.

Burke implies that knowledge of human nature can be generalized to cover various different people and situations. He appears to take for granted that the situations in England and France are comparable, such that he can draw conclusions about France's circumstances. It's worth noting that he didn't live for an extensive period of time in France and does make assumptions about it in the coming sections.

There is no fault in general, however, in belonging to the nobility. Burke argues that the struggle to maintain possession of one's inheritance and to distinguish oneself is an instinct which helps preserve communities overall, "a graceful ornament to the civil order." Therefore he finds the French Revolution's degradation of the nobility to be unwarranted abuse that need never have happened; "reform very short of abolition" would have sufficed.

Burke argues that the nobility, like the Church and the monarchy, plays a vital role in society—the effort to maintain inherited properties has a preserving effect in society overall. So this is another area where the Revolution has been destructively short-sighted, breaking down important cultural structures.

Burke further argues that the clergy, too, are undeserving of what has befallen them. Because they couldn't find enough vices among living clergy, Burke claims, they have ransacked "the histories of former ages […] for every instance of oppression" they could find, justifying their own persecutions. It is unjust, Burke says, to punish people for the offenses of their ancestors.

Here, Burke shifts to another discussion of the uses and misuse of history. This has been particularly flagrant with regard to the clergy, he argues, as revolutionaries have twisted the facts of history to suit their destructive purposes—namely the persecution of today's clergy because of past misdeeds.

Burke says that people do not draw the moral lessons from history that they ought to. Instead of drawing appropriate instruction from the past, people find fuel to "[revive] dissensions and animosities" from the past. There is no shortage of vices—like pride, revenge, hypocrisy, and many other such "disorderly appetites"—to critique, but such vices are causes of injustices. Things like religion, morals, and liberties are pretexts. The use of pretexts always has some deceptive appearance of genuine good. One would not, for example, "secure men from tyranny and sedition, […] by rooting out of the mind the principles to which these fraudulent pretexts apply"; if one did, one would root out "every thing that is valuable in the human breast." By eliminating monarchs or clergy, one doesn't eliminate the evils such might commit.

Burke believes that history is a source of wisdom for the present, but that people tend to draw upon it in simplistic, self-serving ways. For example, they focus on specific vices (like violence), attribute those vices to "pretexts"(like religion), and then proceed to try to eliminate the pretexts, ignoring the good that still characterizes these things. So getting rid of clergy might have an appearance of doing something productive for society, but it's just a cover-up for vices that surely remain. In this way, people target historical abuses in order to attack modern institutions they dislike.

Burke argues that "wise men […] apply their remedies to vices, not to names; to the causes of evil which are permanent, not […] the transitory modes in which they appear." If one does so, one "will be wise historically, a fool in practice." "Wickedness is a little more inventive" than to appear in the same modes in two different ages. Thus, people "think they are waging war with intolerance" while they are actually "feeding the same odious vices in different factions, and perhaps in worse."

Burke elaborates on the misuse of history, explaining that just because one may be knowledgeable about history doesn't mean that person is applying it wisely. By attacking the "modes" under which specific vices appear, revolutionaries target the wrong thing, and likely even feed those vices in themselves and others.

By way of example, Burke discusses the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre. How does it make sense to persecute today's Parisians for such an act, when they abhor what their predecessors did? However, the same feelings are kept alive—Burke describes a recent stage play which portrayed the massacre, particularly the cruelties of the Cardinal of Lorraine, in order to stir up Parisians' anger against the clergy in general, banishing the archbishop of Paris in service of the current day's prejudices. "Such," says Burke, "is the effect of the perversion of history."

Burke offers the specific example of a play dramatizing the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, a murderous plot against French Protestants in 1572—over two centuries prior to the time Burke is writing—in which many Catholic Parisian nobility were complicit. But Burke emphasizes that today's Parisian nobility do not bear responsibility for that act and don't approve of it. However, the event is used to stoke revenge against religion in general, rather than teaching people to reject intolerance itself.

Burke reckons that before the French Revolution, there were about 120 bishops in France, and that "depravity" was as rare among them as heroism. But today's ruling power has "punished all prelates" by forcing them into a lower-class status and providing for the election of future clergy, thus placing the French Church at the mercy of the scheming and flattering. The contemptuous situation of clergy suggests that Christianity won't last long in France. Indeed, Burke points out, this has been the aim of the enlightened; they intend to replace religion with something they call "civic education."

Burke argues that France's pre-revolutionary clergy were fairly average and certainly not beyond the reach of reform. However, in keeping with revolutionary short-sightedness, the current government has undertaken sweeping, de-stabilizing measures against all clergy. Burke argues that they actually have a broader aim in view—as indeed the later 1790s were characterized by a deistic civil religion in France.

Burke argues that those who reformed the Church in England bore no resemblance to the so-called reformers in Paris; even those who, in Burke's view, were too partial to the teachings of their particular sect, would scorn to be associated with the cruelty of the French. Burke points out that the so-called "tolerant" of France "tolerate all opinions [but] think none to be of estimation [...] equal neglect is not impartial kindness." Toleration makes more sense when it is based on favor and a true respect for justice toward those with whom one does not agree.

Burke anticipates that the French might appeal to the 16th-century English Reformation for evidence of revolutionary sentiments. He cuts this appeal short by arguing that even sectarian Protestants did not resort to such punitive measures as are now on display in France. He also argues that "toleration" doesn't mean anything if religion as a whole is scorned. When someone actually holds firmly to particular beliefs, yet respects those who differ, tolerance is truly valuable.

Burke fears that a fanatical atheism, disseminated through writings and sermons, has "filled the populace [of Paris] with a [...] savage atrocity of mind, which supersedes in them the common feelings of nature." These fanatics aim to spread their teachings beyond France, he fears, and some in England are ready to receive them with open arms. Burke worries lest England should ever take up a policy of property confiscation like that seen in France, or that England's citizens would become divided in a similar way. A revolutionary spirit seeks opportunities to confiscation under various names, not simply that of religion.

Throughout Reflections, *Burke is somewhat inconsistent as to the threat revolutionary sentiments pose in England. Even if he does not foresee England following the same course as France, he does seem to fear that particular strains—such as radical atheism—could make harmful inroads and stir up dissent, even if events proceeded in a different guise.*

SECTION 13

Burke argues that there ought to be a middle ground between total destruction and a complete lack of reform. A "good patriot [...] always considers how he shall make the most of the existing materials of his country." Burke believes that a true statesman has a desire both to preserve and to improve.

Burke portrays his position as a solid moderation between revolution and stagnant traditionalism. He also associates patriotism and statesmanship with an openness to reform.

Burke offers a few further thoughts on the confiscation of Church property. He explains that landed capitalists always have a surplus of income, and that the state's only concern should be that capital be "returned again to the industry from whence it came." If there is to be confiscation, there should be some expectation that those who purchase the confiscated property will be more laborious or virtuous than those from whom it was confiscated. Burke does not see why those "favorites whom you are intruding into their houses" are more worthy than the "lazy" monks who are being expelled. Why is it better that lands should be confiscated from those who have at least an outward pretense of morals, manners, and hospitality, and a virtuous order of life, than by those who do not?

Burke belabors the topic of the land confiscation because this was a major fundraising scheme for the new revolutionary government, and also because he seems to view it as a primary example of that government's hypocrisy, inconsistency, and short-sightedness. There is no real logic for wresting lands from monastic houses on the pretense that the monks aren't productive, only to bestow the same lands on people who have no claim on greater virtue. Thus, Burke implies, it's likely just another tactic for dethroning religion within French society.

Burke says that in view of the length of this letter, he must undertake a review of the establishments of France, rather than a more general discussion of the spirit of Britain's monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, as he had first intended. Burke says that he cannot think of the National Assembly as anything other than a body of men who have taken advantage of the current political situation to seize power; they do not have real lawful authority. It's only to be expected that those who value "the ancient state" of their country will question the validity of such revolutionary instincts.

Burke's letter has not been very systematic all along, but now he begins a more focused overview of the elements of France's present government, most of which he has touched on already. He begins by attacking the makeup of the National Assembly, which he sees as not based not on his own values of tradition and preservation, but on ambition and hunger for power.

Burke points out that those who have seized power "proceed exactly as their ancestors of ambition have done before them [...] never depart an iota from the authentic formulas of tyranny and usurpation." But now, in their ruling actions, they act according to "untried speculations," "loose theories," to which they would never entrust their personal concerns. Burke laments their "arrogance," which "provokes [...] us to an enquiry into their foundation."

Burke makes an ironic point that the members of the National Assembly have acted according to time-tested methods by seizing power in this way; now they embark on speculative theories, not much caring whether people will be benefited by them or not.

Burke asserts that eloquence can exist without wisdom. He observes that, in all he has observed among those of the new National Assembly, there appears to have been a desire "to evade and slip aside from difficulty." There is no comprehensiveness of thought, or prudence. Where they have failed in wisdom, they insert force instead. The more they evade difficulties, the more these sneak up on them later.

Burke makes the point that, while members of the Assembly might speak well, there's no evidence that they understand the gravity of government. This is proven by their use of force, and the makeshift character of their actions.

Burke argues that this evasion of difficulty has led to schemes of reform that are preoccupied with destruction. Destruction requires only "the shallowest understanding." It is easy to point out errors in existing structures, and to replace these structures with their opposites. However, to preserve and reform is something altogether different. It requires more carefulness, ability to compare and combine things. To the objection that this work takes a long time, Burke replies that it should. "Circumspection and caution" are part of wisdom.

Burke makes the further argument that revolution is tied to a shallow desire for destruction; it gives insufficient thought to the labors required to truly reform something. He draws a strong contrast between the prudent, disciplined work of reform and the hasty, incautious work of revolution.

While Paris seems to think that mere confidence suffices for a legislator, Burke argues that love, respect, and fear of oneself are vital. A lawgiver must be deliberative, patient, and ready to cooperate. This allows time to study the internal consistency of a governmental system, to deal with problems as they arise, to balance, "to unite into a consistent whole the various anomalies and contending principles that are found in the minds and affairs of men."

Burke argues that legislating well is a matter of personal character. This is because of the nature of governmental issues: such problems require the ability to see and understand a much bigger whole and refrain from simplistic solutions.

One of the problems of this fixation on faults, Burke says, is that "those who are habitually employed in finding and displaying faults, are unqualified for the work of reformation." They have too few "patterns of the fair and good" in their minds. "By hating vices too much, they come to love men too little." If they don't love humanity, they are not in a position to serve them, and instead they resort to tearing things down.

Further, government requires not just a recognition of what's wrong, but a larger vision of what's good and beautiful. Lacking this, it's not really possible to understand and care for actual human beings.

Burke says that someone who undertakes to remake a government, especially from scratch, should be uncommonly wise. He decides to look closely at what the National Assembly has done in order to determine if its members are of such a character. He will look first at the constitution of the legislature, then at the executive power, the judicature, the army, and the system of finance, to see if there is evidence of "portentous ability" among those who have undertaken these things.

Just as revolution should be an exceedingly rare event, it requires a rare kind of character if it's to be undertaken well. Burke lays out a plan for the remainder of the work, by which he'll examine and judge the evidence to determine whether the French Revolution has been wisely undertaken.

SECTION 14

Burke looks at the journals of the Assembly of September 29, 1789, and its subsequent proceedings, to examine the "spirit [...] tendency, and [...] fitness" of the legislature, since one would hope to discover great ability in this part of government, if nowhere else. He will also consider the internal consistency of the legislature and its own principles.

Burke's work will shift from general reflections to study of a specific document. This accords with his view that the theoretic must go hand in hand with the practical.

Burke says that people can look at the effects of old establishments in order to determine their quality. Most often, these establishments were not built on theories; rather, theories were derived from them, and experience helped refine the original scheme. Errors and deviations often prompt healthy course-corrections. However, "in a new and merely theoretic system," none of this refinement can be seen, since the builders made no attempt "to accommodate the new **building** to an old one."

Burke decides to examine the fruits of what has gone before. He argues that old establishments, unlike the newfangled ones of the Revolution, were not based on abstract theories. Institutions become healthier through reform—a combination of old material with new refinements. He uses the symbol of an old building being repaired to illustrate this point.

The new legislators sought to form their body on a basis of territory, a basis of population, and a basis of contribution. For the territorial (or geometrical) basis, they divided France into 83 squares of equal size, called departments. These, in turn, were portioned into 720 smaller districts called communes, and subdivided those once more into 6,400 cantons. Previously, the divisions of the land were more accidental, and inconveniences had been dealt with over time. By the time the state surveyors discovered that dividing France into squares might create inequalities difficult to reconcile, it was too late to change course.

Burke looks at the specific steps undertaken by the Revolution. One of these was to divide up France geometrically for purposes of representation. However, this practice could be viewed as artificial and even perpetuating the problem of unequal representation that it sought to address.

The basis of population proved more difficult. It was planned at first that every man would have a vote, and vote directly for the person he wished to represent him in government. However, there is a considerable distance between a voter and his representative. First, the voters in each canton must pay three days' labor to the public. Then, the groups of voters in each canton elect deputies to the commune, one for every 200 qualified inhabitants. Everyone who votes for the commune owes ten days' labor. And there is yet another gradation, as the communes elect someone to the department, and the department elects deputies to the National Assembly—each deputy needing to pay a mark of silver. While Burke does not object per se to the attention to property within this system, he points out that it is "unsupportable" according the French system.

Burke's major point in examining this system of representation is that, though it was founded on the pretense of making everyone equal, it eventually rests on property ownership after all, and there is also a substantial distance between people and their government. The practical outworking, then, is inconsistent with the celebrated theory of equality. Equality proves to be much more difficult to create in practice than it is to declare in the abstract.

On the third basis, contribution, "they have more completely lost sight of their rights of men," because it rests completely on property. The committee claims that this expectation does not infringe on citizens' rights because it is only meant to ensure proportionality between cities; but Burke argues that it inevitably creates an aristocracy of the rich. It does indeed render an individual less important whose votes for three members as one who votes for ten; the franchises are not equal. The wealthy have more power.

Not only does property factor in to the representation system, but it eventually reinforces existing wealth, which is out of step with the Revolution's rationalist attempts to impose equality.

Burke says that these three bases are not consistent with one another, because the basis of population operates on a different basis from those of territory and contribution—the latter two being of an inevitably aristocratic nature. Much depends on the population of the size of the cantons within a commune, whether it contains a trading or manufacturing town, and other factors which affect the number of representatives a canton will be able to send to the Assembly, as Burke demonstrates through several mathematical comparisons. The end result, he says, is a "fantastical and unjust inequality between mass and mass." The system is internally inconsistent, thanks to the ideas of "your philosophers."

Burke sums up his examination of the representation system by showing how certain historic and natural circumstances, like the location and wealth of different cities, cannot be smoothed out by a "philosophical" attempt to impose consistency and uniformity. This is an example of how abstract theories, because they are removed from on-the-ground realities, often poorly serve their intended ends, according to Burke's outlook.

Burke further contends that France's scheme will divide France into competing republics. In "barbarously" dividing up their country according to this geometric scheme, Burke argues that their rulers "treat France exactly like a country of conquest." They have "destroyed the bonds of their union, under colour of providing for the independence of each of their cities." These competing cantons will find themselves "strangers to one another" and will look more like military colonies back in the waning days of the Roman Empire. "Your child comes into the world with the symptoms of death."

One problem with this new system of representation is that it will actually render France more internally divided, just in a different way than before. It's an attempt to create something new and fresh, but someone who's mindful of history—which the revolutionaries aren't—would recognize that it's reminiscent of systems that portended the demise of their societies. It also divides up French citizens in arbitrary ways.

Burke argues that the ancient legislators of republics understood that they "had to do with men, and they were obliged to study human nature." Modern legislators, by contrast, "confound all sorts of citizens […] into one homogeneous mass," and the mass into "incoherent republics." Their preoccupation with numbers abstracts them too much from on-the-ground realities. Burke says that the British system is completely different, because there is a much closer relationship between a representative and his people, whereas in France, there are three elections and two sets of magistrates between these representative and citizen. The people really do not substantially contribute to their governance.

Burke maintains that older political theorists were more closely in touch with concrete realities than today's revolutionaries are. Revolutionaries theorize about humanity as a whole and end up harming actual communities, undercutting their own supposed aims in so doing.

Finding this system incoherent, Burke looks at the "cement" for the constitution, to be found in the confiscation, the supreme power of Paris, and the army. The confiscation, with its related paper currency, could suffice to hold things together for a while; however, the confiscation might not prove to be sufficient to support the paper coinage in the long run, which will only lead to confusion. Since the currency is not based on real money and is forcibly substituted for the coin of the kingdom, it will mainly serve to put most power into the hands of the "managers and conductors of its circulation," producing an oligarchy. The speculation-based currency, in fact, essentially turns France into "a nation of gamesters," and the many are at the mercy of the few who oversee the game, to the inevitably disadvantage of the rural peasant.

Here, Burke looks at those institutions that are intended to hold the French government together. He's already discussed the confiscation of Church lands at length. There is no evidence, in his view, that the confiscation will fulfill its intended goals. It's also a confusing system that the common people can't easily understand, since it's based on speculative money. This means that those with the power and knowledge to game the system will inevitably thrive better under this system. It doesn't actually equalize society whatsoever.

SECTION 15

The second "cementing material" is the superiority of Paris. Burke believes this issue is closely tied to the monetary issue and the way France is being divided up. The power of Paris is central to the success of the new government. This compact city enjoys disproportionate strength compared to any of the "square republics" newly formed as subdivisions of France. With Paris at the enter of power, "people should no longer be Gascons, Picards, Bretons, [or] Normans," but Frenchmen.

Burke believes that the centralization of power in Paris will also serve to weaken French culture and society. Though Paris has always been a significant cultural center, locating so much power in the capital pulls people's loyalties away from their natural regional identities, vacating much of what makes French culture rich and various, and ultimately undermining the whole.

Burke argues that the call to be mere "Frenchmen" will not work: "no man ever was attached by a sense of pride, partiality, or real affection […] to a description of square measurement." This is because affection begins in families. From there, it grows to include neighborhoods and provinces. It's nourished by habit, not by "a sudden jerk of authority."

Burke's comments here recall his earlier remark about "little platoons"—the local basis for citizenship and love of one's country. This is something that must be locally nurtured and not something that can be forcefully imposed from without.

Burke next discusses the National Assembly, which he says is constituted with "every possible power, and no possible external control." Because it has no established procedures, it can't be held to any specific system. This means that the current Assembly's successors will have nothing to go on, and are more likely to act boldly than with "perfect quietude."

The structure of the National Assembly is a good example of that ignorance of history and future that Burke so often bemoans. It has been given no guidelines, which encourages the Assembly to be as bold as possible.

In their "hurry to do every thing at once," the legislators have neglected to form a senate, or a similar body, to which foreign governments might address themselves, and which might give "a bias and steadiness." Most monarchies have them, occupying a middle space between the people and the executive power; but France has no such thing.

In another example of haste, the revolutionaries have focused on investing power in the people's hands and neglected the value of placing a buffer between the people and both their own and foreign executive governments.

France's executive power consists of "a degraded king." He is really just "a channel" to convey information to the National Assembly. He is not viewed as "the fountain of justice." He is now entrusted with only the most "odious" duties of justice, basically "one degree above the executioner" and able neither to respect himself nor command respect. Similarly, he has no real executive powers; his name and authority are merely used to execute others' decrees.

The monarchy has been stripped of most of its traditional dignities and privileges. The king is a king in name only—more of a figurehead who can't act in his own name.

Burke argues that nobody can truly a respect a king whom they have mistreated and imprisoned; if they expect otherwise, "you ought to make a revolution in nature, and provide a new constitution for the human mind." Moreover, the king's current situation is so degraded that it has unfitted him for office: "at best, his conduct will be passive and defensive."

Burke argues that there is no point in maintaining such a "king," because he cannot command respect; in fact, he cannot even respect himself, and his situation will not dispose him to act in a kingly manner, even if he has the opportunity.

The dauphin (the heir to the throne) will be educated so as "to conform to his situation," but Burke argues that this will be no education at all. As soon as he learns of his royal ancestry, he will be moved by "Nature" to avenge his parents. The executive ministers are not in a much better position, as they have no real discretion or choice, but must carry out what committees of the National Assembly tell them to do.

Similarly, Burke argues that the plan for raising the young heir to the throne is self-defeating. If, as Burke believes, nature wins out over theory, the dauphin will likely seek to escape his figurehead role. France is attempting to maintain some traditional structures while emptying them of their historic meanings, which will not prove to be tenable in the long run.

The judicature is little better. For one thing, instead of reforming the parliaments, the French Revolution abolished them. Their strength had been their independence and the stability this afforded during times of upheaval. Thus the parliaments had served as a "corrective to the excesses and vices of the monarchy." Such a body is not less necessary under a democracy, but more so. In their place have been appointed "elective, temporary, local" judges, who are bound to be factional. Worse, they have no settled jurisprudence, but are to be supplied with rules from the National Assembly from time to time.

In a supposed attempt to make the judicatory more fair, the Revolution has established a parliament that is more likely to be beholden to the public will. It also has no consistent body of jurisprudence to guide its reasoning, unlike the centuries-old judicial institution prized in England.

Next, Burke addresses the state of the army, the third "cementing principle" for the French nation. There has been a breakdown of discipline in the army, unsurprising given that they have been encouraged in the name of the king to join in public feasts and entertainments, rather than undergoing military training. The "mixing [of] mutinous soldiers with seditious citizens" cannot have a good outcome. The relationship between army and crown is likewise problematic, since the army cannot be expected to "yield obedience to a prisoner." It will probably not be long, either, until the army begins to demand the "right" to elect their officers. And overall, the problem is that, with internal bonds of the nation weakened by revolution, much may depend on the army's ability to keep order.

Much like the other institutions, the army has lost much of what make it cohesive and effective. By mixing soldiers and citizens, the army weakens itself, and its inability to respect the king undermines its existence, too. Democratic sentiments are likely to impact an army that has nothing beyond itself to command its respect. All of this becomes even more ominous in light of the fact that France's other internal structures are not self-supporting, and the weak army might be called upon to supply that lack.

Burke observes that there has been no respect paid to property rights since the French Revolution. When people refuse to pay their rents, as has lately happened in Lyons, they are threatened with troops, But this will not be a long-term solution to unrest—they cannot continue undermining principles of subordination in the army, yet expect to "hold in obedience an anarchic people by an anarchic army."

The practical example of unrest in Lyons reinforces the problem of the army. People who refuse to pay their rents are unlikely to be controlled by an army that doesn't even command respect in itself.

SECTION 16

Burke turns to the subject of revenue. It's an important subject because "the revenue of the state is the state [...] all depends upon it, whether for support or for reformation." It's what allows for "public virtue." Countries generally flourish when there's a reciprocal proportion between "what is left to strengthen the efforts of individuals, and what is collected for the common efforts of the state."

Burke addresses the subject of revenue as more than just money, but as the means for the government to do the things it must do. Both the health of people's private means and the collection of tax revenues are indicators of a state's health.

Burke reports that, within the past year, France's national revenue has diminished by more than one-third of the whole. The Assembly has blamed this on such things as the public monopoly of salt, which they publicly denounced even as they continued to collect it. Pretty soon, those provinces most heavily burdened by the salt tax ceased paying it. It soon followed that the most submissive and orderly parts of France began bearing most of the tax burden, and the state's insufficient authority could do nothing to remedy this; attempts became more and more despotic.

The example of the salt tax is another illustration of how a weakened government undermines itself. By denouncing the salt tax as despotic, the government gave license for the people to ignore it, too, and inequality has resulted.

Burke last examines France's system of credit. Essentially, it has no credit. This is largely because "their fanatical confidence in the omnipotence of church plunder, has induced these philosophers to overlook all care of the public estate," and they place an almost superstitious faith in the power of paper money (the *assignats* based on the confiscation). Only "the most desperate adventurers in philosophy and finance" would have destroyed settled revenues in the hope of rebuilding it with confiscated property, says Burke. There has never actually been a clear statement of the value of the confiscated estates compared with the regular income by revenue. Burke calls it neither "plain-dealing, nor […] ingenious fraud." In the end, France's condition is "the effect of preposterous politics, and […] short-sighted, narrow-minded wisdom."

Finally, the disastrous state of France's credit, too optimistically grounded on the plan to gain revenues from confiscated Church properties, is a prime example of the new government's lack of seriousness. The state of things in France unsustainable on its face, no matter whether it has come about through intentional trickery or simple lack of wisdom.

SECTION 17

What is liberty, Burke wonders, without virtue? It is actually "folly, vice, and madness." It's easy to form a government, and to grant freedom, but to form a free government "requires much thought, deep reflection, a […] combining mind."

Burke returns to some of the main themes of the work. He repeats his point that making a workable government is difficult, and that it especially cannot be done in the absence of virtuous character.

Burke commends the example of the British constitution to the French. He believes the "happy situation" of England is owing to the whole of the constitution, and not any single part of it; to what has been left after several reformations, as well as what's been improved. Any future change should be for the sake of preservation, and following the example of his ancestors—making "the reparation as nearly as possible in the style of the **building**."

Burke reiterates the beauties of the enduring English constitution, which has endured precisely because of the people's fidelity to the past and their cautiousness in making changes. Returning to the symbol of a building, he reminds his audience that making consistent repairs is completely different from tearing down a foundation.

Burke concludes that he can only recommend his opinions on the basis of his lifelong observation and long work in public service, exerting himself "For the liberty of others," and in whose breast "no anger […] has ever been kindled, but by what he considered as tyranny." He does not know that his beliefs are likely to change Depont's, but perhaps they will someday be of some use to him, "in some future form which your commonwealth may take."

It turns out that Depont is rather appalled by Burke's anti-revolutionary sentiments, and that some of Burke's most pessimistic predictions about the Revolution—especially about its violence—would come to pass. However, many of Burke's arguments about the importance of history, tradition, nature, and practicality have been valued and appropriated across a broad political spectrum in later centuries.

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