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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

EDMUND BURKE was born in Dublin in January, 1729, the son of an attorney. His father was Protestant, his mother Catholic; and though the son followed his father's religion, he was always tolerant of the other faith. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, where he took his B.A. in 1748, coming to London two years later to study law. But his tastes were more literary than legal, and on giving up law, against his father's wish, before he was called to the bar, he was forced to resort to his pen for a livelihood.

The first of his productions to gain notice was his "Vindication of Natural Society, by a late noble writer," an ironical imitation of the style and arguments of Bolingbroke, carried out with great skill. This pamphlet already showed Burke as a defender of the established order of things. In the same year, 1756, appeared his famous "Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful."

For five years, from 1759 to 1764, Burke's time was largely occupied by his duties as secretary to William Gerard Hamilton, practically his only publications being in the "Annual Register," with which he was connected for many years; yet in this period he found time to form intimacies with the famous group containing, among others, Garrick, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Dr. Johnson. During the short administration of Lord Rockingham, Burke acted as that nobleman's private secretary, and in January, 1766, he became a member of the House of Commons. Almost at once he came into prominence as a speaker, displaying in the debates on American affairs, which then occupied the House, much independence and a disposition toward a wise expediency rather than a harsh insistence on theoretical sovereignty in dealing with the colonists.

In 1768 Burke bought an estate in Buckinghamshire, for which he was never able to pay in full; and during most of his life he was in financial difficulties. During the Grafton ministry his chief publication was his "Thoughts on the Present Discontents," in which he opposed the reviving influence of the court, and championed the interests of the people. American affairs continued to engage the attention of Parliament, and throughout the

struggle with the colonies Burke's voice was constantly raised on behalf of a policy of conciliation. With the aid of his disciple, C. J. Fox, he forced the retirement of Lord North, and when the Whigs came into power in 1782 he was made paymaster of the forces. Aristocratic jealousy, and the difficulties of his own temperament, kept him out of a cabinet position then and later.

The next great issue on which Burke employed his oratorical talents was the impeachment of Warren Hastings. Beginning in 1787, it dragged on for seven years, Burke closing his colossal labors with a nine days' speech. Though Hastings was acquitted, Burke's fervid indignation in supporting the impeachment, and the impeachment itself, were indications of the growth of the sense of responsibility for the humane treatment of subject peoples.

Meantime, the sympathy expressed in England for the French Revolution in its earlier stages roused Burke to express his opposition in his famous "Reflections." In the debates which followed, Burke became separated from his friends Sheridan and Fox, and finally from his party, and he closed his political career in practical isolation.

On his retirement from Parliament in 1794, the King granted him a pension which Pitt found means to increase, but even this well-earned reward he was not allowed to enjoy without the grudging assaults of enemies. His last days were spent in vigorous support of the war against France; and he died July 9, 1797.

Burke never attained a political office in any degree proportioned to his ability and services, but he succeeded, nevertheless, in affecting profoundly the opinion of his time. Latterly the House of Commons tired of his fervid and imaginative eloquence, unwilling perhaps to make the effort necessary to follow his keen intellectual processes, but he found through his writings a larger audience. "Bacon alone excepted," says Buckle, Burke was "the greatest political thinker who has ever devoted himself to the practise of English politics."

## PREFACE

I HAVE endeavoured to make this edition something more full and satisfactory than the first. I have sought with the utmost care, and read with equal attention, everything which has appeared in public against my opinions; I have taken advantage of the candid liberty of my friends; and if by these means I have been better enabled to discover the imperfections of the work, the indulgence it has received, imperfect as it was, furnished me with a new motive to spare no reasonable pains for its improvement. Though I have not found sufficient reason, or what appeared to me sufficient, for making any material change in my theory, I have found it necessary in many places to explain, illustrate, and enforce it. I have prefixed an introductory discourse concerning Taste: it is a matter curious in itself; and it leads naturally enough to the principal inquiry. This, with the other explanations, has made the work considerably larger; and by increasing its bulk, has, I am afraid, added to its faults; so that, notwithstanding all my attention, it may stand in need of a yet greater share of indulgence than it required at its first appearance.

They who are accustomed to studies of this nature will expect, and they will allow too for many faults. They know that many of the objects of our inquiry are in themselves obscure and intricate; and that many others have been rendered so by affected refinements or false learning; they know that there are many impediments in the subject, in the prejudices of others, and even in our own, that render it a matter of no small difficulty to show in a clear light the genuine face of nature. They know that, whilst the mind is intent on the general scheme of things, some particular parts must be neglected; that we must often submit the style to the matter, and frequently give up the praise of elegance, satisfied with being clear.

The characters of nature are legible, it is true; but they are not plain enough to enable those who run, to read them. We

must make use of a cautious, I had almost said a timorous, method of proceeding. We must not attempt to fly, when we can scarcely pretend to creep. In considering any complex matter, we ought to examine every distinct ingredient in the composition, one by one; and reduce everything to the utmost simplicity; since the condition of our nature binds us to a strict law and very narrow limits. We ought afterwards to re-examine the principles by the effect of the composition, as well as the composition by that of the principles. We ought to compare our subject with things of a similar nature, and even with things of a contrary nature; for discoveries may be, and often are, made by the contrast, which would escape us on the single view. The greater number of the comparisons we make, the more general and the more certain our knowledge is like to prove, as built upon a more extensive and perfect induction.

If an inquiry thus carefully conducted should fail at last of discovering the truth, it may answer an end perhaps as useful, in discovering to us the weakness of our own understanding. If it does not make us knowing, it may make us modest. If it does not preserve us from error, it may at least from the spirit of error; and may make us cautious of pronouncing with positiveness or with haste, when so much labour may end in so much uncertainty.

I could wish that, in examining this theory, the same method were pursued which I endeavoured to observe in forming it. The objections, in my opinion, ought to be proposed, either to the several principles as they are distinctly considered, or to the justness of the conclusion which is drawn from them. But it is common to pass over both the premises and conclusion in silence, and to produce, as an objection, some poetical passage which does not seem easily accounted for upon the principles I endeavour to establish. This manner of proceeding I should think very improper. The task would be infinite, if we could establish no principle until we had previously unravelled the complex texture of every image or description to be found in poets and orators. And though we should never be able to reconcile the effect of such images to our principles, this can never overturn the theory itself, whilst it is founded on certain and indisputable facts. A theory founded on experiment, and not assumed, is always good for so much as it explains. Our inability to push it indefinitely

is no argument at all against it. This inability may be owing to our ignorance of some necessary *mediums*; to a want of proper application; to many other causes besides a defect in the principles we employ. In reality, the subject requires a much closer attention than we dare claim from our manner of treating it.

If it should not appear on the face of the work, I must caution the reader against imagining that I intended a full dissertation on the Sublime and Beautiful. My inquiry went no farther than to the origin of these ideas. If the qualities which I have ranged under the head of the Sublime be all found consistent with each other, and all different from those which I place under the head of Beauty; and if those which compose the class of the Beautiful have the same consistency with themselves, and the same opposition to those which are classed under the denomination of Sublime, I am in little pain whether anybody chooses to follow the name I give them or not, provided he allows that what I dispose under different heads are in reality different things in nature. The use I make of the words may be blamed, as too confined or too extended; my meaning cannot well be misunderstood.

To conclude: whatever progress may be made towards the discovery of truth in this matter, I do not repent the pains I have taken in it. The use of such inquiries may be very considerable. Whatever turns the soul inward on itself, tends to concentrate its forces, and to fit it for greater and stronger flights of science. By looking into physical causes our minds are opened and enlarged; and in this pursuit, whether we take or whether we lose our game, the chase is certainly of service. Cicero, true as he was to the academic philosophy, and consequently led to reject the certainty of physical, as of every other kind of knowledge, yet freely confesses its great importance to the human understanding; "*Est animorum ingeniorumque nostrorum naturale quoddam quasi pabulum consideratio contemplatioque natura.*" If we can direct the lights we derive from such exalted speculations, upon the humbler field of the imagination, whilst we investigate the springs, and trace the courses of our passions, we may not only communicate to the taste a sort of philosophical solidity, but we may reflect back on the severer sciences some of the graces and elegancies of taste, without which the greatest proficiency in those sciences will always have the appearance of something illiberal.