

Introduction: Principles and Circumstances

by Ian Crowe

There is something peculiarly elusive about Edmund Burke. This is not just a practical problem, that “to do him justice,” in Hazlitt’s words, “it would be necessary to quote all his works”, or that he maintained a frustrating silence over his personal affairs and burned piles of such papers shortly before he died. It is also an intellectual problem: his career and writings present us with an abundance of apparent contrasts that are difficult to resolve satisfactorily.

These apparent contradictions were pored over by his contemporaries. Hester Thrale was forcibly impressed by domestic contrasts when she “lived with him and his lady at Beaconsfield among dirt cobwebs, pictures and statues that would not have disgraced the city of Paris itself: where misery and magnificence reign in all their splendour, and in perfect amity.” Burke’s professional face was equally bemusing. He constantly argued the case for circumspection and moderation, but in a style that was often impatient and aggressive: even his friend and great admirer William Windham was once moved to comment on a “passion so unreasonable and manners so rude”. Burke was renowned in his own time for his political wisdom, grounded, as he was always keen to stress, on a study of human nature: yet Horace Walpole—in a judgment no less pertinent for being complimentary—said that “Of all the politicians of talents I ever knew, Burke had the least political art.” Burke’s humanity was evident time and again, over India, the plight of Irish Catholics, the slave trade. He appealed for clemency on behalf of men arrested in the wake of the Gordon Riots, during which his own life had been endangered more than once: yet Lord Inchiquin felt that, “He is admired by everybody, but has no friends.” He was a parliamentarian of such stature that his pall-bearers included the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Lord Chancellor and the Secretary of State for War: to Hazlitt, however, the truth was simply that this great man “was out of his place in the House of Commons”.¹

Over two hundred years the contrasts have persisted. Burke is remembered for his suspicion of political solutions based upon dogmas and theorems, and for his practical attention to reality; but he is known by maxims that have impact precisely because of their universal application. “People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors”; “I am most afraid of the weakest reasonings, because they discover the strongest passions”; “Those who attempt to level, never equalize.” Few people in history can have been quoted more frequently out of context than this man, for whom the context was everything. As a consequence his is a confusing legacy: too much a philosopher for politicians, and too much a politician for philosophers; the father of a party he never knew, with a name he never spoke; the ideologist of an anti-ideology and a philosopher of pragmatism.

Edmund Burke moved through strongly contrasting worlds and experienced widely fluctuating circumstances. He was born in Dublin—or, perhaps, Shanballymore—but soon after he reached twenty he moved to London, where he later abandoned what security he had enjoyed there from study in the Middle Temple to try his fortune as a writer, journalist and moral philosopher. We have few records for these years, but in this competitive and hostile world

¹ *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe (London, 1932), vol VII, p. 301; *Thraliana*, ed. K. Balderston (Oxford, 1951), p. 475; *Diary of William Windham*, ed. (London, 1866), p. 167; *Last Journals of Horace Walpole during the Reign of George III, from 1771-1783* (London, 1910), p. 82; *The Farington Diary*, ed. J. Greig (London, 1922-28), vol I, p. 191; Hazlitt, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

Burke would have found it essential, practically and emotionally, to preserve his ties of kinship and the *mores* of his upbringing. At the same time he would have found it essential to conceal them. He knew that his ambitions and talents were woven in with ties that would restrict as well as secure him.

These ties did not escape the notice of his political opponents, and Burke never wrestled himself loose from the ambiguity of his position. Just a year after he had entered Parliament, for example, he wrote in some anxiety to his old school friend, Richard Shackleton: "I am given to understand that you had received at some time a letter from England, some way relating to me. Have you ever received such a letter?" Shackleton admitted that he had, and had replied to it, as requested, by offering personal memories of Burke and his family. The enquirer was never identified, but his motives became apparent three years later, when the piece appeared in the *London Evening Post*. This prompted a sharp rebuke from Burke to Shackleton: "It is full of anecdotes and particulars of my life. It therefore cuts deep. I am sure I have nothing in my family, my circumstances, or my conduct that an honest man ought to be ashamed of. But the more circumstances of all these which are brought out, the more materials are furnished for malice to work upon: and I assure you that it will manufacture them to the utmost."²

Burke entered politics in 1759. By that time he had established a sound reputation as a writer, with his works *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756) and, more especially, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757)—the second of which drew him into a valuable and productive correspondence with Adam Smith. He was also earning £300 a year for editing Dodsley's *Annual Register*, and working on a history of England. His friend William Dennis wrote to Richard Shackleton in 1757, "Ned I fancy writes pamphlets for the great ones."³ Paul Langford considers as "truly remarkable" the speed with which Burke, an outsider, moved into the highest circles of political life in Britain.⁴ His first political appointment was as secretary to William Hamilton, who became Chief Secretary for Ireland in 1761, and in 1765 Burke entered the employment of the Marquis of Rockingham. Within six months, through the generosity of his "cousin" William Burke, he secured the seat of Wendover and he first spoke in the House within days of the opening of the new session, in January 1766. His earliest speeches, delivered in his first month in the House, were on American affairs—the Stamp Act disturbances and the Rockinghamite Declaratory Resolution—and were received with great enthusiasm. Richard Burke, his brother, wrote to the painter James Barry that Edmund "has gained prodigious applause from the public, and compliments of the most flattering kind from particulars".⁵

Burke understood the tensions and conflicts that such rapid advancement could produce. Men of his background could rise in politics, but only usually to the level of minor administrators. Burke shot beyond this, and his studied silences over his career before entering parliament attest to the strain. Journalism, even of the highest order, was not a training to be flaunted, and there is no reference in his hand to the pamphlets he produced to earn a living. Nor did he ever acknowledge publicly his editorship of the *Annual Register*. Instead he chose to deal with his past by analogy, readily clothing himself in Cicero's toga as the new arrival, and accepting the parvenu's rôle with its implications of quiet pride and loyal service. This was first illustrated in

² Burke to Richard Shackleton, 19 April 1770. *Correspondence*, II, 130.

³ *Correspondence*, I, 124 n5

⁴ *Writings and Speeches*, II, 4 .

⁵ Richard Burke to James Barry, 11 February 1766. *Correspondence*, I, 238.

his confrontation with Sir William Bagot on the floor of the House in 1770. William Burke recalls that, on that occasion, Edmund told Bagot that, “he took to himself the appellation of a *novus homo*. He knew the envy attending that character. *Novorum hominum industriam odisti*; but as he knew the envy, he knew the duty of the *novus homo*”; and he warned the House of “the impropriety and danger of discouraging new men,” stating that “rising merit stamped with virtue would indeed seek to rise [and perhaps become] equal, nay...superior to the lazy something that came by inheritance”.⁶ This was a message, a motivation, that Burke had not lost by the end of his life. In his *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796), he wrote that, unlike his antagonist the Duke of Bedford, he had not been, “swaddled, and rocked, and dandled into a legislator; ‘*Nitor in adversum*’ is the motto for a man like me...At every step of my progress in life (for in every step was I traversed and opposed), and at every turnpike I met, I was obliged to show my passport, and again and again to prove my sole title to the honour of being useful to my country.”⁷

Burke’s ambivalent attitude to his origins was heightened by the religious issue (upon which, he noted, Shackleton had dwelt long enough in his piece to raise suspicions). He wrote, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), “We are Protestants, not from indifference, but from zeal”, but his own background perhaps led him to add that such Protestant zealotry was no longer a threat to Roman Catholicism.⁸ His father had been a dubious convert to Protestantism, his mother was a Catholic (who, according to Shackleton, “practised the duties of the *Romish religion* with a decent privacy”⁹), and he married a Catholic. His sympathies with Roman Catholicism remained strong to the end of his life through family and friends, and were strongly apparent in his later writings against the spread of atheistic Jacobinism in France and Ireland; they also added a sinister shading to his political face. Just before the appearance of Shackleton’s potted biography in April 1770, Sir William Bagot had attacked Burke in the House of Commons as a man thinking like “one bred at St Omer’s...and fitted to be Secretary to the Inquisition”.¹⁰ In June 1780 Lord George Gordon’s speeches against Catholic Emancipation singled out Burke in particular. In 1796, William Miles, writing to defend the Duke of Bedford against Burke’s excoriating *Letter to a Noble Lord*, wished Burke had taken his retirement from Parliament more seriously: “His chaplet and rosary, it was thought, would have exercised his meek faculties in a species of arithmetic, very different to that which he had studied in his commerce with a profane world.” Instead, Miles continued, in his demands for a war of extermination against the French revolutionaries, Burke had remembered his confessions of early life and endeavoured “to replunge an emancipated world once more into ignorance, barbarism, and vassalage” through the restoration of the power of his Mother Church.¹¹

In the way of *Novi Homines*, Burke had a burning pride in the very struggles which he found it necessary to conceal. At the same time he sought acceptance in the world that demanded such concealment. His estate at Beaconsfield is an illustration of this conflicting drive. It was bought at heavy cost in 1768 and sustained thereafter through the accumulation of debts that must at times have strained his principles and compromised his devotion to the dogged integrity of the *Novus Homo*. In his will, Rockingham cancelled “certain bonds” in Burke’s name which have

⁶ William Burke to William Dennis, 3, 6 April 1770. *Correspondence*, II, 128.

⁷ *Works*, V, 124-25.

⁸ *Reflections*, 187.

⁹ *Correspondence*, II, 129.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 127.

¹¹ W.Miles, *A Letter to Henry Dunscombe, Esq....* (London, 1796), pp. 1-2.

been estimated at £30,000 in value.¹² Despite injudicious investments in East India stock by his closest associates, the embarrassments of Lord Verney's financial difficulties (when Burke was sued in chancery by Verney for £6,000 in debts) and Horace Walpole's affected outrage at his use of patronage for the short time he was in office, charges against Burke's integrity in his financial and political affairs have simply not been proven. But the strain of a life stretched across different worlds is evident, from the passion of his reaction to criticisms of his pension in the last years of his life right back to the outburst that accompanied his break with William Hamilton in 1765. Burke had acquired a much needed pension through Hamilton, but had then become agitated when it appeared that Hamilton unreasonably expected to be able to draw on his secretary's services at his pleasure. "Mister Hamilton is begged to consider," Burke wrote in his own defence, "that no obligations which include the whole life and existence of a man are valid in any country from which actual servitude is excluded." This tortuous self-justification runs to several pages, but no word in it carries more import than *servitude*.¹³

Burke's experiences, in their complexity and obliqueness, arose from the need to hold on to principles while learning to adapt to changed and changing circumstances; that is, to distinguish, as Burke himself put it, between the principles themselves and the forms in which they were variously manifested.¹⁴

It is, then, no surprise that his early political career concerned, in Paul Langford's words, "the construction of a rational defence for the principle of party".¹⁵ He committed himself early to a group of men in Parliament who claimed ties of impartial duty and civic virtue above those of patronage and personal connection, and his defence was articulated in his highly praised tract, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770). The concept of 'party' that he propounded there, of "a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed",¹⁶ provided a means by which Burke, and people from his social background, could best influence political decisions. At the same time he professed himself a strong advocate of the aristocratic system, insofar as the landed interest was best suited, by independence, upbringing and the responsibilities of trusteeship, to combine private with public good and so to preserve liberty. When, later, aristocracy itself seemed under threat from Jacobinism, he wrote: "The strong struggle in every individual to preserve possession of what he has found to belong to him and to distinguish him, is one of the securities against injustice and despotism implanted in our nature."¹⁷ Within the British constitution, however, party could cut across the exclusive ties of social groupings and cliques. It was grounded in the great land-owning interest, but its non-sectional aims and flexible social base could provide opportunities for rising talent to perform its service to the state. This in itself was a great benefit to government, for, as Burke wrote in his *Reflections*, "there is no qualification for government but virtue and wisdom, actual or presumptive."¹⁸ In his embittered last year he made the same point rather differently in a letter to his friend Thomas Hussey. Here he spoke of a Jacobinism more dangerous than that "which is speculative in its origin, and which arises from wantonness and fullness of bread": it was the Jacobinism "which

¹² Earl Fitzwilliam to Burke, 3 July 1782. *Correspondence*, V, 8.

¹³ See *Correspondence*, I, 182-86.

¹⁴ *Writings and Speeches*, VI, 345.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* II, 12.

¹⁶ *Works*, I, 375. Compare Burke's words in the House of Commons in 1791: "A party...". *Parl. Hist.*, XXIX, 421 or 491.

¹⁷ *Reflections*, 245.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 139.

arises from penury and irritation, from scorned loyalty, and rejected allegiance".¹⁹

Party also appealed to Burke because it combined principles with political action. He believed that a party should be a moral body, but one which existed only in particular circumstances and for particular goals. By combining philosophy with action it nurtured that "first of all virtues", prudence,²⁰ and embodied Cicero's great dictum in his work *On Duty*: "the whole glory of virtue is in activity".²¹ This was Burke's element: the philosopher in action, striving to reconcile those potentially conflicting elements, principles and circumstances, by means of party.

The troubles in the American colonies provided the first test for this virtuous mechanism. Was the Rockingham party, within which Burke soon acquired considerable influence, to stress the principles that bound it, and which it saw as threatened by British policy in the American colonies, or to stress the need for a pragmatic approach within the practical limitations of British rule there? Burke certainly declared himself persuaded by the crisis "that government was a practical thing".²² Policies of successive administrations, such as the Stamp Act, Townshend Duties or Tea Act, were attacked by the Rockinghamites for failing to take account of the circumstances existing in America at the time of the dispute over taxation and imperial policy. In 1766, Burke asserted that the rule of the imperial constitution should be "taken from its own circumstances and its local aptitudes", not based on theoretical imperial rights, and he praised the year-long Rockingham administration of 1765-6 for its treatment of "the passions and animosities of the colonies" over trading interests, which were allayed and composed "by judicious and lenient measures".²³ Over the next decade his position did not change. In 1772, on a different parliamentary matter, he reminded John Cruger, the Speaker of the General Assembly of the Province of New York (for which Burke was the London agent at the time) that, "everything in political conduct depends upon occasions and opportunities",²⁴ and five years later he mused, of the growing unrest in America, that, "instead of troubling our understandings with speculation concerning the unity of empire...it was our duty...to conform our government to the character and circumstances of the several people who composed this mighty and strangely diversified mass".²⁵

And yet, at the same time as advocating the politics of circumstance, Burke's American writings were filled with the language of principles. The Rockingham ministry of 1765-66 itself passed a Declaratory Act which had as its purpose the reassertion of full British sovereignty over the colonies, and Burke referred in his speech in support of this measure to "the principles of the British constitution", that could make particular distinctions between America and Britain "vanish into air". These were the "principles of freedom", upon which an empire should be governed. In 1774 he begged the House to "revert to your old principles", and the next year his plan for conciliation with the colonies was constructed upon his assertion that America was "devoted to liberty...on English principles".²⁶ It became clear in 1790, on the publication of his *Reflections*,

¹⁹ Burke to the Rev. Thomas Hussey, *post* 9 December 1796. *Correspondence*, IX, 162.

²⁰ *Reflections*, 153.

²¹ Cicero, *De Officiis* (Loeb Classical Library), p. 21.

²² *Works*, II, 29.

²³ *Writings and Speeches*, II, 46, 55-56.

²⁴ Burke to J. Cruger, 30 June 1772. *Correspondence*, II, 309.

²⁵ *Works*, II, 28-29.

²⁶ *Works*, I, 432, 464.

that even his closest political friends had been convinced, wrongly, that his sympathy with the colonists had been grounded, like their own, on abstract principles of liberty.

In 1782 the Rockingham party had its second, brief spell in power, during which time Burke was Paymaster General. The administration was brought to an end by the death of Rockingham in July of that year. From that time, and perhaps earlier, Burke showed himself to be disillusioned with party as a means of restoring virtue to public life. With the collapse of the Fox-North Coalition at the end of 1783 on the defeat of Fox's East India Bill, he became increasingly isolated, and his prudence, certainly, deserted him. However, he remained loyal to the principles that had bound him to his party, and if he had been unable to secure the supremacy of those principles, he could now, at least, fight to avoid their being overwhelmed by the murky alliance of political expediency and corruption.

In this frame of mind Burke began to concentrate on an exhausting campaign against misrule in India, which had been agitating him increasingly since his appointment to a select committee on Indian affairs in 1781. The campaign culminated in the impeachment, for "high crimes and misdemeanours",²⁷ of Warren Hastings, the Governor-General of Bengal whom Burke, as the chief prosecutor, believed had presided over a corrupt and arbitrary government on behalf of the East India Company. This clear and passionately held brief offered a prospect for Burke's contemporaries to clarify the apparent ambiguity in his thought between principles and circumstances.

His charges against Hastings were of a similar nature to those which he had levelled against British policy in America, although he recognised a wide difference of degree. British rule in India, he argued, had become little better than despotism, where the interests and goals of the governors were in direct conflict with those of the governed, and where a policy of exploitation and extortion broke the social and political bonds of that community. Prudence was no quality of the Hastings régime, as he explained in his speech in support of Fox's East India Bill: "All this vast mass, composed of so many orders and classes of men, is again infinitely diversified by manners, by religion, by hereditary employment, through all their possible combinations. This renders the handling of India a matter in a high degree critical and delicate. But oh! it has been handled rudely indeed."²⁸ Burke pointed out that Indian communities could not be regulated according to principles appropriate to the circumstances of English villages and estates, but he feared that even reformers of the government of India had forgotten this basic rule of prudence.

However, Burke's plan of prosecution could only work—before a British court on behalf of Indian subjects—if he could elevate the issue above the distinguishing circumstances of widely different continents. Hastings' crimes had to be ones against humanity, not Indians, or Hindus, and so the laws invoked had to rest on principles that were universal: "The sun in his beneficent progress round the world does not behold a more glorious sight than that of men, separated from a remote people by the material bounds and barriers of nature, united by the bond of a social and moral community, all the Commons of England resenting as their own, the indignities and cruelties that are offered to all the people of India."²⁹ For Burke, the process of impeachment had become the means whereby the constitution of the empire could rescue a sense of those principles which it had been the purpose of party to promote. It is not surprising, then, to see the *novus homo* take on, again, the mantle of Cicero, who had led the

²⁷ *Parliamentary History*, XXV, 1394.

²⁸ *Works*, II, 182-83.

²⁹ *Writings and Speeches*, VI, 457-58.

impeachment of Verres, the corrupt governor of Sicily, in 70 BC.

In this light it might appear, ironically, that Hastings had broken the bonds of the moral community by fitting his power too closely to the circumstances he had found in India: “Mr Hastings...says: I had an arbitrary power to exercise; I exercised it. Slaves I found the people; slaves they are. They are so by their constitution; and if they are, I did not make it for them. I was unfortunately bound to exercise this arbitrary power, and accordingly I did exercise it. It was disagreeable to me, but I did exercise it, and no other power can be exercised in that country.”³⁰ Burke’s contrary belief that, “the laws of morality are the same everywhere”, echoes his words two years earlier, in his speech on the Rohilla War: “It was a tenet in politics which he ever had, and ever would hold, that all British governors were obliged to act by law. In India to be sure it could not be expected that they could practise Magna Charta. But there they had the law of nature and nations, the great and fundamental axioms on which every form of society was built.”³¹ A British governor should “govern upon British *principles*, not by British *forms*”,³² but even Burke’s parodies of the Hastings’ position failed to clarify to the full satisfaction of his audience the distinction he was trying to make.

Burke’s thought on empire was very much more than an *ad hoc* extension of domestic political conflicts. Certainly these principles seem to form a constant theme running back to his writings on the Irish issue which date from before his entry into Parliament. In his *Tracts Relative to the Laws against Popery in Ireland* (“completed” by 1765 but unpublished in his lifetime), Burke described the damage that laws restricting the freedom of the Catholic majority were having on the prosperity of the country and explained that “a law against the majority of the people, is in substance a law against the people itself”. This was so, he continued, because such laws infringed “a superior law, which it is not in the power of any community, or of the whole race of man to alter—I mean the will of Him who gave us our nature, and in giving imposed an invariable law upon it”.³³ Any principles enshrined in that superior law bound imperial government as surely as they bound individuals in their ordinary, private relations. It was, indeed, a shared belief in those principles that secured the empire, with ties as “light as air [and] as strong as links of iron”.³⁴

The French Revolution of 1789 broke into the impeachment proceedings and here, too, Burke concentrated first on the danger of implementing political programmes in defiance of circumstances. This applied both to the support offered to the French revolutionaries by British radicals and Whigs and to his attack on what he saw as the “false principles” of the revolutionaries: “I cannot stand forward, and give praise to any thing which relates to human actions, and human concerns, on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of any relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction.”³⁵ Whereas he had fought to uphold liberty in America and India, for the French he spoke contemptuously of their *liberté* as poised perilously upon “abstract principles” and “pretended rights”. Real liberty, he had written at the time of the American Revolution, “inheres in some sensible object”—that is, it is a principle only to be enjoyed when tempered by circumstance. In its abstract purity, it is a

³⁰ *Writings and Speeches*, VI, 346-47.

³¹ *Ibid.* 346, 109.

³² *Ibid.* 345.

³³ *Works*, VI, 20-21.

³⁴ *Ibid.* I, 508.

³⁵ *Reflections*, 89-90.

course; it must be “limited in order to be possessed”.³⁶ Now, in the *Reflections*, the point is sharply made by analogy: “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?”³⁷

But Burke also identified the Revolution’s false principles in order to contrast them with true ones, and his anti-revolutionary writing refers ever more frequently to the latter, from “sacred principles of property” to the “first principles of law and natural justice”. As the Jacobin threat spread, the stress he placed on these principles became stronger because they appeared in danger not merely of being ignored but of being totally subverted. The Jacobin menace heralded, for Burke, an apocalyptic battle between true and false principles. In these circumstances, practical and prudential considerations meant less and less to him. From 1791 he began to agitate for the invasion of France on behalf of principles of international law and, it seemed, in defence of a system that had outlived its purpose. Consequently, as Burke lay dying at Beaconsfield, with the Jacobin fleet rigged to invade his homeland, the resolution of principles and circumstances seemed as far away as ever.

It is possible to conclude from some of his own writing that Burke was not unaware of the continuing ambiguity of his position. In 1791 he published *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* to clarify a number of points he had made in the *Reflections*. Here, his repeated and sincere refusal to offer specific advice on political developments in France—“I must see with my own eyes, I must, in a manner, touch with my own hands, not only the fixed, but the momentary circumstances, before I could venture to suggest any political project whatsoever”³⁸—was contained within some of the most confident, rich comments on human nature, learnt presumably in Britain and Ireland and yet deployed to pull apart the aspirations of the French revolutionaries.

If it is true that Burke was ultimately unable to reconcile these apparently conflicting stresses, it is hard to see what value his writings have for anyone but the historian of eighteenth-century British politics, and difficult to refute the argument that exploring his legacy is a futile and even disingenuous exercise. This has, indeed, been a favoured response of a number of political theorists and commentators in recent years.³⁹

A modification of this bleak conclusion has been to circumvent the problem by firmly subordinating one side of the perceived conflict to the other. Thus Burke was a supreme pragmatist—more or less sincere—who either used principles as a movable rhetorical device for pursuing particular short-term political aims, or accumulated and modified principles in a committed but confused fashion. Alternatively, his thought presents us with a set of consistent principles propounded through circumstances that were cleverly or unintentionally shaped to fit the point: this was a process that took him further away from the reality of politics and frustrated his record of political achievement, but made him a man for all time.

³⁶ *Works*, I, 464 and II, 30.

³⁷ *Reflections*, 90.

³⁸ *Works*, II, 549.

³⁹ There is an invaluable survey of literature on Burke in, *Edmund Burke, A Bibliography of Secondary Studies to 1982*, eds. Clara I. Gandy and Peter J. Stanlis (New York, 1983). See also Conor Cruise O’Brien, *The Great Melody* (London, 1992), pp. xxxi-lxxv.

Neither approach really leads to a richer appreciation of Burke's legacy. In the first case, his thought collapses into a 'pick and mix' arrangement for literary pragmatists. It becomes a resource for sound-bites. In the second, Burke's principles will be seized upon by those who are inclined to believe them already, but they will be insufficiently rooted in neutral ground to persuade the open-minded. They might strengthen conviction, but they will never convince. Both are popular approaches, but each supposes that a resolution of the problem of circumstance and principles is not possible, at least in the terms that Burke bequeathed. There are, however, two points that they overlook, which Burke might have deployed in his own defence and which, taken together, offer a more optimistic and productive approach to his thought.

One of these was a practical defence, which he laid out in his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*. This tract was published in 1791, as a direct response to the charges of his former Whig allies that his views on liberty in America and France were inconsistent. He protested that changing circumstances required different stresses in argument to counter different threats, and that there had once been a time when people had been able to "distinguish between a difference in conduct under a variation in circumstances, and an inconsistency in principle".⁴⁰ *This is the reason why we need to remember that all of Burke's political writings after 1759 were written in response to specific political issues, not so that we can prove his inconsistency by forced comparisons of language.*

The other defence is an intellectual one. It could be argued that the distinction between principles and circumstances has often been drawn too sharply by his critics. Burke, after all, clearly believed that principles vary in degree according to different departments of activity, with some naturally more or less rigid in their application than others—principles of charity, principles of rhetoric, commercial principles, or principles of political action broadly appropriate to common and anticipated circumstances. Most are conditional by their nature, being constructs either of abstract theory or of past experience, and the rôle of the statesman, as we have seen, is to act prudently in marrying these principles with the new realities of existing circumstance. But this art does not, in itself, make the statesman *merely* a pragmatist in Burke's eyes: there are two further points to consider.

First, Burke did hold to a belief in certain "first principles", implanted in our nature by God, and expressed in our "untaught feelings".⁴¹ These principles, he believed, are the basis of those contingent principles of action, by which we regulate our social and political life. They do not change. They are Burke's articles of faith, and we shall not resolve any riddle in his life unless we accept unequivocally his sentiment as expressed in the *Reflections* that, "man is by his constitution a religious animal".⁴² This was a proposition he had made clear in his early writings on *Religion*⁴³ and the *Tracts Relative to the Laws against Popery in Ireland*, and he made it clear again at the end of his life, when he focused on the atheistic nature of Jacobinism as the fundamental threat to society. It is precisely when Burke's writings are taken as a whole, as Hazlitt recommended, that this underlying consistency appears, and it is one that is based, inescapably, on the belief that there is a common law of morality that binds all human beings.

⁴⁰ *Works*, III, 27.

⁴¹ *Reflections*, 183.

⁴² *Ibid.* 187.

⁴³ See, Ian Harris (ed.), *Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 78-87.

Second, these “first principles”, like the rights of men, are “incapable of definition, but not impossible to be discerned”.⁴⁴ Such principles are transmitted through the circumstances of history, but they are not created by history. We certainly do not learn them from the schoolbook or decide upon them in the debating chamber, but neither are they the accumulated wisdom of the much vaunted University of Life: “My principles enable me to form my judgment upon men and actions in history,” Burke once explained, “just as they do in current life; and are not formed out of events and characters, either present or past”. In other words, “history is a preceptor of prudence, not of principles”.⁴⁵ We do, indeed, learn about principles by observing circumstances, but this is because those circumstances are working upon our “untaught feelings”.

Early in his career Burke wrote—as so often, in self-justification—“the principles of true politics are those of morality enlarged, and I neither now do or ever will admit of any other.”⁴⁶ There is no evidence to show that Burke ever went back on his word. They were the principles that Burke attempted to defend against Jacobinism; they were the law before which he tried to bring Hastings to justice; they were the proper links of empire; they were the aim of party.

As these principles of morality were universal, but dealt with the particular circumstances of man, they were also vital guides for the *novus homo*. For the same reason they can guide us today. They have never provided aspiring politicians with plans of action, because they do not run ahead of circumstances, and for this reason they are ill-suited to forward the career of any man who holds to them. But they have alerted people to injustice, and made them keen in sensing danger to their liberties and well-being, and sometimes they have vested their defenders with a prophetic and timeless wisdom that has benefited future generations.

⁴⁴ *Reflections*, 153.

⁴⁵ Burke to William Markham, *post* 9 November 1771, *Correspondence*, II, 282. This part of the manuscript is in William Burke’s hand. See *ibid.* 252.

⁴⁶ *Correspondence*, II, 282.