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# *Burke's Historical Morality*

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The precise meaning of the terms “historical understanding,” “historical sense,” or “historical consciousness” can vary greatly, but they are generally understood as referring to an awareness of the dependence of human existence on the development of events that have taken place in the past. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a number of thinkers from various fields of study, whose early expositors include Vico, Burke, Herder, Hegel, and Nietzsche, began to explore this theme. Along with this fundamental insight came the related understanding of the fact that the political choices we face, our language, our meanings, and our values, are embedded within and contingent upon unique, present circumstances. Despite the emergence of an increasingly widespread historical sensibility among philosophers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the further implications of these basic insights remain unclear and disputed. Consequently, many modern thinkers who share what may be broadly described as a historicist orientation nonetheless disagree on much else, including the implications of our historicity for human knowledge, freedom, and morals. Much of this article is therefore devoted to identifying a particular strain of historicism and defending it as an approach to thinking about morality and moral decision-making. The article will proceed by first introducing some of the historical aspects of Burke’s thinking and a unique brand of historicism that his thought inspires. It will then look more closely at the implications of this Burkean-inspired

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historical consciousness for an understanding of morality. Finally, it will explore how the past continues to “live” in the present insofar as it shapes the thought and action of moral decision-makers.

### *Interpreting Burke*

Since the early 1950s, the scholarly attention focused on the thinking of Burke has been marked by two dominant strains of interpretation.<sup>1</sup> First is the critical reading of Burke penned by Leo Strauss in his now famous tract *Natural Right and History*, in which he sets forth a defense of what he terms “classic natural right.”<sup>2</sup> The troubling development in modern thinking, according to Strauss, is the tendency toward historical consciousness, which has led to the relativization of all standards or claims to right or justice once the latter were viewed as the mere accidents of history or convention. The charge that Burke is substantially responsible for this development is leveled in the final pages of this text, where Strauss is at pains to establish Burke’s credentials as a modern thinker. According to Strauss, Burke’s opposition to French rationalism “parts company with the Aristotelian tradition by disparaging theory and especially metaphysics.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, by stressing the importance of

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<sup>1</sup> An additional strain of scholarship has emerged since the early 1990s associated with thinkers who have variously appropriated Burke’s critique of modern rationalism, as well as his early aesthetic theory, often for the purposes of anti-foundationalist theory and critical theory. See Stephen K. White, *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics, and Aesthetics* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), Uday S. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: a Study in Nineteenth Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), and Luke Gibbons, *Edmund Burke and Ireland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965 [1953]), 120. It is disputed whether the conception of natural right presented therein in fact approximates the thinking of the ancient philosophers whom Strauss claims as his inspiration. Claes G. Ryn has noted, for example, that classical thinkers such as Aristotle and even Plato demonstrate an awareness of the temporality of experience and historical circumstance that Strauss altogether neglects. That this abstract conception of right represents an imputation of modern ideas, which actually distorts classical thinking and is closer in spirit to the ethical ideas of the French Enlightenment, is argued in Ryn, *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 75.

<sup>3</sup> Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 311. While Strauss appears, at first glance, to view Burke approvingly for his having “restored the older view [of natural right] according to which theory cannot be the sole, or the sufficient, guide of practice” (*ibid.*, 303), his criticism mounts in the course of these pages, culminating in his conclusion that Burke “prepared an approach to human affairs which is even more foreign to

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tradition, “Burke’s political theory is, or tends to become, identical with a theory of the British constitution, i.e., an attempt to ‘discover the latent wisdom which prevails’ in the actual,”<sup>4</sup> thus deriving its normative authority from the mere accident of its historical evolution. That a tradition, as such, can take on this normative authority is not only mistaken, for Strauss, but leads to the deleterious transformation of political thought from the study of that which ought to be into the mere understanding of the actual or what is.<sup>5</sup> Once traditions are assumed to be just, simply by virtue of their survival or existence, Strauss questions how any can be deemed morally deficient. He claims that, by making “ought” dependent upon “is” in this manner, Burke sows the seeds of the moral relativism that later emerges in nineteenth-century German philosophy, whose more thoroughgoing historicism proceeds to view all normative claims as contingent upon their particular, historical contexts.

*According to Strauss, Burke’s opposition to French rationalism leads to moral relativism.*

In marked contrast to this view, the reading of Burke put forth by Peter Stanlis and Francis P. Canavan places his thinking squarely within the canon of traditional natural law theory. Stanlis, for example, relies more heavily than Strauss on the distinction between natural law as conceived by the ancients and Aquinas and that put forth by the modern natural rights philosophers of the Enlightenment, claiming that Burke is much closer in his thinking to the former than the latter. Stanlis maintains that, while the older doctrine is capable of taking tradition and historical experience into account, the newer doctrine that culminates in the thinking of the *philosophes* is much more abstract. Therefore, when Burke famously rails against the “clumsy . . . political metaphysics”<sup>6</sup> of the French radicals, Stanlis thinks it is not metaphysical reasoning *per se* that is the object of Burke’s criticism, but the particularly dangerous, abstract form of metaphysics that he sees ravaging France and threatening all of Europe. Providing an abundance of textual

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classical thought than was the very ‘radicalism’ of the theorists of the French Revolution,” and that “[w]hat would appear as a return to the primeval equation of the good with the ancestral is, in fact, a preparation for Hegel” (*ibid.*, 319). That Strauss sees Burke as an eminently “modern” thinker may also be indicated by his placement in the text, whose order of treatment appears intended to mark the decline of modern thought, beginning with Hobbes, proceeding on to Rousseau, then Locke, and ending with Burke.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>6</sup> Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. with intro. J. G. A. Pocock (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987), 51.

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*Stanlis places  
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in the classical  
and Scholastic  
tradition.*

support for his thesis, Stanlis counters the notion that Burke was an anti-metaphysical thinker. He argues that, far from disparaging metaphysics, Burke was unwavering in his adherence to the classical and Scholastic tradition of natural law thinking, so thoroughly that Stanlis even denies any “development” of this tendency in Burke’s thought. He marvels: “What was most remarkable in Burke was the sustained consistency of the Natural Law in his thought and career.”<sup>7</sup>

That such dissimilar readings of the same thinker are plausible points to the severity of the apparent tensions residing within the corpus of Burke’s work. On the one hand, Burke is comfortable speaking in the language of natural law and, in this respect, he does appear to echo the classical, metaphysical conception of a universal hierarchy of ends whose normative authority supports what is right and just in the world. On the other hand, Burke’s concern for a pragmatic awareness of circumstance, together with his historical sense, appears to signal a new development in the theory of knowledge and in morals that ought not to be dismissed as merely realigning the natural law tradition with its experiential strain. Will Herberg dubs this tension “the Burkean paradox” and succinctly poses the problematic as follows: “How can a man be an advocate of expediency and an apostle of principle at one and the same time? How can he, for example, excoriate the French Declaration of the Rights of Man as ‘abstract’ and ‘metaphysical’ in almost the same breath that he denounces the French revolutionaries for their crimes against ‘the eternal immutable law’?”<sup>8</sup>

Rejecting interpretations that tend to emphasize either of these aspects of Burke’s thinking at the expense of the other, this article argues that it is possible to conceive of Burke as laying the foundation for a historically informed understanding of morals, which sees them as existing concretely in human conduct. Noting that Burke fits neatly into neither category, natural lawyer nor historical relativist, Claes Ryn has argued that Burke’s thought points toward the possibility of synthesis between historical existence and a universal moral order. Burke’s thinking thus serves as the inspiration for a moral theory developed by Ryn, which he terms “value-cen-

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1958; New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003). Citations are to the Transaction edition.

<sup>8</sup> Will Herberg, “Natural Law and History in Burke’s Thought,” *Modern Age* 3 (1959): 325.

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tered historicism.” According to this theory, Burke’s fundamental insight is “[seeing] the transcendent moral order as potentially inhering in history.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, Burke expresses an awareness of the importance of historical context and particularity in human existence. However, rather than inferring the relativity of morals, Ryn suggests a novel understanding of morality that sees it as manifested diversely in concrete human experiences. He explains this insight:

*Ryn’s  
value-centered  
historicism  
inspired by  
Burke.*

It is possible to reconcile the acceptance of universality with a historicist appreciation for the particularity, diversity, and changeability of human existence. What is here called value-centered historicism refers precisely to the needed reconstitution and synthesis of philosophical elements. In this form of historicism real universality is not separated from the particulars of history; universality is seen as present to human consciousness in concrete form. Ethical universality is at the same time transcendent of historical experience and immanent in it.<sup>10</sup>

This appropriation of Burke and the unique form of historicism that it inspires has significant implications for the way in which we conceive of morality and moral decision-making. Consequently, the remainder of this article will focus on demonstrating in greater detail what it means to bring history to bear on morality in this way. The new understanding will be compared and contrasted with both traditional, intellectualist notions of morality and more thoroughgoing varieties of historicism.

### *The Contextual Character of Morality*

The fundamental idea behind the concept of value-centered historicism is that the good can be located, “not in abstract theoretical ‘principles’ or other ahistorical judgment or vision, but in concrete experience; that normative authority, in so far as it exists for man, resides in historical particularity.”<sup>11</sup> While Hegel is perhaps better known for pioneering the idea that the normative is capable of such concretization or instantiation within phenomenal experience, it is Burke who, earlier, introduces this idea to the English-speaking world through his writings on politics. Moreover, he does so without the unfortunate rationalist tendencies that characterize

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<sup>9</sup> Ryn, “History and the Moral Order,” in *The Ethical Dimension of Political Life*, ed. Francis J. Canavan (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983), 103.

<sup>10</sup> Ryn, *A Common Human Ground*, 81.

<sup>11</sup> Ryn, “Universality and History,” *Humanitas* 6: 1 (1992), 11.

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*Experience of good and evil in history makes it possible to distinguish between them.*

Hegel's thinking. Hegel's progressivist philosophy of history, which ultimately sees normative reason as ubiquitous, culminates in a pantheistic form of rationalism that makes distinctions between good and evil problematic. However, in avoiding—indeed, in combating—such rationalist tendencies, Burke is able to discern the variegation and complexity within the concrete normativity that he observes. He asserts that “steady, independent minds . . . will judge of human institutions as they do of human characters. They will sort out the good from the evil, which is mixed in mortal institutions, as it is in mortal men.”<sup>12</sup> Burke senses not only that such distinctions are possible, but that good and evil exist nowhere for man outside of the phenomenal reality of everyday life. For Burke, there is no abstract model against which such phenomena must be measured in order to determine their moral status. Rather, man comes to recognize and know the normative character of phenomena through the immanent experience of their historical manifestations. Thus, it is only by virtue of moral phenomena coming-to-be in the world of human experience that man can develop his normative awareness and the capacity to make these distinctions between good and evil.

*Good and evil transform themselves in different social contexts.*

The manifestation or instantiation of good and evil in concrete experience is intimately connected with the complexity of morality mentioned above. For, if good and evil are historical, if they are concretized within phenomenal reality, then good and evil are subject to the fleeting nature of phenomena. As such, their concretization must always take place anew and must always be historically unique. Moreover, it must take place within new circumstances, which change the moral character of what is concretized. For Burke, all of this contingency implies not a radical undermining or incoherence of good and evil (to be discussed below), but that the same moral quality or “spirit” essentially transforms itself in different social contexts. Each context provides a historical backdrop in which morality is then instantiated as concrete, social interaction. Burke thus argues that, while the “disorderly appetites” such as pride, ambition, lust, and avarice are the real causes of the world’s miseries, “[r]eligion, morals, laws, prerogatives, privileges, liberties, [and] rights of men” are often the “pretexts” in which they are manifested. Consequently, Burke argues, “Wise men will apply their remedies to vices, not to names; to the causes of evil which are

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<sup>12</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 111.

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permanent, not to the occasional organs by which they act, and the transitory modes" in which evil becomes concrete.<sup>13</sup> According to Burke, "[w]ickedness is a little more inventive" than to have "the same modes of mischief" in more than one age.<sup>14</sup> Instead, he explains, "[t]he . . . same vice assumes a new body. The *spirit* transmigrates, and, far from losing its principle of life by the change of its appearance, it is renovated in its new organs with a fresh vigor of a juvenile activity."<sup>15</sup> Burke thus hints at the heightened need for moral discernment and vigilance that such variation makes necessary. Because he sees the social interaction in which morality manifests itself as "transitory," and historically unique, he thinks it difficult to predict the form in which good or evil will appear or to assert in advance what they will look like. What emerges upon examining Burke's suggestion that particular forms of social interaction serve as the pretexts or vehicles for manifesting good and evil is the contextual or situated character of morality.

*Form in which good and evil will appear in future difficult to predict.*

The neglect of this contextual character of morality represents one of the most egregious oversights of the abstract rationalism Burke famously criticized. Burke's response to the French radicals' unqualified demand for "liberty" in the abstract reflects well his thoughts on the problematic nature of acontextual thinking:

I cannot stand forward and give praise or blame to anything 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 color and discriminating effect. The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind.<sup>16</sup>

Morality's "contextual" nature thus refers not only to the uniqueness of these concrete instantiations, but to the influence of circumstance in creating distinct moral imperatives. Yet this role of circumstance in shaping the demands of morality need not imply moral relativism, as intellectualists and thoroughgoing historicists alike may well infer from such an assertion. On the contrary, the implication is that close attention to the circumstantial dimension of moral problems is essential to their most just moral resolution

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 125. Emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

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*Liberty's moral significance dependent on its place within a broader social context.*

and that to neglect circumstance, even in the name of principle, can actually be unjust or immoral.<sup>17</sup>

Burke employs an example to illustrate the centrality of circumstance in determining the moral character of phenomena: "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? Am I to congratulate a highwayman and murderer who has broke prison upon the recovery of his natural rights?"<sup>18</sup> The appropriateness of such congratulation or moral approbation with respect to liberty, Burke indicates, can only be determined by considering liberty's place within a broader context of social arrangements, i.e., how liberty combines in any particular instance with other features of social life, such as order, religion, manners, self-restraint, etc. In other words, it can never be determined *per se* that liberty is "among the blessings of mankind." Rather, liberty's meaning and value can only be fully grasped in the light of its relation to other social structures and arrangements. It is only with respect to this broader social context that liberty takes on its full, moral significance for human life. The point being made here ought to be distinguished from its distant cousin, often made in an Aristotelian vein, that metaphysical principle needs to be supplemented by an awareness of empirical reality in order to achieve its prudential application by a wise legislator or moral actor. In contrast, the point being made here is that there is no metaphysical principle awaiting prudential application. Rather, context alone is constitutive of a particular historical or existential matrix in which real moral imperatives may be said to arise or originate.

It is worth noting that Burke sometimes speaks of these moral imperatives in the language of necessity, such that some interpret-

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<sup>17</sup> For further development of the idea that "principled" neglect of circumstance is in fact morally harmful, see Ryn, "The Politics of Transcendence: The Pretentious Passivity of Platonic Idealism," *Humanitas* 12: 2 (1999), 4-26. The charge is leveled at the moral and political theory in Plato's *Republic*: "Innumerable readers of Plato have found his moral idealism and his refusal to compromise indicative of complete dedication to the Good. But is it? A case can be made that, by associating political morality with an unattainable, ahistorical standard and urging those who aspire to virtue to contemplate the ideal rather than the possible, Plato falls prey to a romantic abstractionism that *undermines* political morality." *Ibid.*, 7. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>18</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 7.



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ers have been led to read him as advocating a crude pragmatism or utilitarianism.<sup>19</sup> However, careful attention to certain passages in which Burke invokes a concern for what is necessary suggests that he may in fact have been attempting to articulate a kind of necessity that is intimately related to morality or a concept of morality that recognizes the moral significance of practical, circumstantial considerations. The English “Revolution of 1688,” which Burke defends and contrasts with the French Revolution, affords him the opportunity to discuss how such considerations relating to what is practicable or suitable to a situation can determine what is moral. Burke’s aim here is to emphasize England’s rejection of the right “to choose our own *governors*, to cashier them for misconduct, and to form a government for *ourselves*,”<sup>20</sup> in contrast to the democratic claims of the French revolutionaries. Burke argues that the “Declaration of Right,” which emerged out of the Revolution of 1688 itself, was explicitly meant to establish the proper hereditary succession of the crown.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Burke admits that, in replacing King James with William of Orange, the Revolution of 1688 did

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<sup>19</sup> The secondary literature devoted to utilitarian and pragmatic interpretations of Burke alone is extensive. Interpretations of Burke as a utilitarian dominated during the nineteenth century, including Henry T. Buckle’s *History of Civilization In England* (London: J. W. Parker and Son, 1857-1861) and John Morley’s *Edmund Burke: A Historical Study* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1867). Numerous studies have since followed along lines similar to these early interpretations. Joseph Baldacchino has effectively countered several of these readings of Burke as a utilitarian in “The Value-Centered Historicism of Edmund Burke,” *Modern Age* 27, no. 2 (1983). Some of the studies mentioned in footnote 1 above have given renewed life to the interpretation of Burke as a pragmatist insofar as they read his respect for cultural difference—particularly in the case of India—as emerging from a recognition of the “strangeness and viability of [other ways] of life.” Uday S. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 15. Emphasis in the original. J. G. A. Pocock, in his informative introduction, goes so far as to claim that the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is in fact part of a long-standing debate about the true nature of the Revolution of 1688. In opposition to the radical current of thought represented by John Locke, Pocock explains, Burke makes the more orthodox (and thus *not* reactionary) argument that “in terminating the kingship of James II and transferring the crown to William and Mary, the nation had acted by the authority and according to the forms of the ancient constitution: of King, Lords and Commons, the common law and its judges, extending back through Magna Carta to the Norman Conquest and beyond. All had been done by precedent and authority, nothing by the *tabula rasa* of the uncommitted intellect. The people had been less free to choose a king or a government than obliged to maintain and preserve a constitution already existing.” Pocock, introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, xii.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

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represent “a small and temporary deviation from the strict order of a regular hereditary succession.”<sup>22</sup> But what is important, Burke notes, is that no general principle was or should have been inferred from “a law made in a special case and regarding an individual person” to serve a “temporary” need.<sup>23</sup> In other words, here Burke defends a decision that he claims established no precedent, nor was derived from any principle—it was in every sense exceptional and particular to its situation. Therefore, if no principle supported the decision to remove King James and replace him with King William and this was intended to serve only a temporary need, one might inquire: Was this decision based on mere expediency? More to the point, in defending the Revolution of 1688, is Burke in effect advocating a decision that is pragmatic over one based on moral considerations?

*An action that reflects no principle can still be moral and not merely pragmatic.*

Despite the fact that this action reflected no principle, but was serving a situational need, it may nonetheless have represented a moral decision and not been pragmatic, or at least not pragmatic in the barest sense of the term. Burke argues that “to all those who did not wish, in effect, to recall King James or to deluge their country in blood and again to bring their religion, laws, and liberties into the peril they had just escaped, it was an act of necessity, *in the strictest moral sense in which necessity can be taken.*”<sup>24</sup> In other words, if what was necessary or pragmatic was the impetus for action here, Burke thinks it was a type of necessity that was nonetheless moral. Such a “moral necessity” is conceivable if the underlying need is understood to be a situational moral imperative, i.e., a moral requirement that arises out of its unique, historical circumstances and cannot be anticipated by an *a priori* rule or principle.

Burke returns to the subject of the Revolution of 1688 later in the *Reflections* and, in doing so, reaffirms this link between the necessary and the moral: “The Revolution of 1688 was obtained by a just war, in the only case in which any war, and much more a civil war, can be just. *Justa bella quibus necessaria.* [Wars are just when they are necessary.]”<sup>25</sup> To be sure, it is possible to read Burke’s remark here in a *strictly* pragmatic light, according to which he is not referring to the “moral necessity” presently being attributed to him. This

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27, 220. Emphasis in the original.

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strict, pragmatist reading of Burke would then interpret him as saying that justice, and the justice of a war in particular, is merely a function of what is necessary or expedient *as such*. However, it is also possible to read Burke as arguing that the morality of any war must be based on whether war serves the needs of justice in the particular situation. This interpretation is supported by its clear contrast with the position Burke in fact is opposing—that of the French radicals who see war, particularly revolution, as a matter of the absolute right of the subject for all times and places. Burke refutes this position by underscoring the need for situational moral judgment, as opposed to abstract rules conceived in advance:

The speculative line of demarcation where obedience ought to end and resistance must begin is faint, obscure, and not easily definable. It is not a single act, or a single event, which determines it. . . . Times and occasions and provocations will teach their own lessons. The wise will determine from the gravity of the case; the irritable, from the sensibility to oppression; the high-minded, from disdain and indignation at abusive power in unworthy hands; the brave and bold, from the love of honorable danger in a generous cause; but, with or without right, a revolution will be the very last resource of the thinking and the good.<sup>26</sup>

*"Revolution will be the very last resource of the thinking and the good."*

Viewed in the broader context of his opposition to the abstract right of the subject to revolt, Burke appears to have in mind a necessity that relates to situational moral imperatives and the keen moral discernment this requires. In stating that "wars are just when they are necessary," he is not advancing the strictly pragmatic view that what merely works or is expedient is what is right, but the view that whether war is right will depend upon what justice requires within a particular, political context.

This theme of moral necessity appears to emerge again when Burke rebukes the French revolutionaries' treatment of the French nobility, arguing that the nobility's punishment was incommensurate with their supposed mistreatment of the French populace. While Burke admits that there is, on rare occasion, the need to hold accountable a cruel and unjust nobility, he argues that the instance in question fell well short of this type of situation. Still, Burke's hypothetical is instructive, for he notes that when such occasions do arise, "The statues of Equity and Mercy might be veiled for a moment. The tenderest minds, confounded with the dreadful exigency in which morality submits to the suspension of its own

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

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Burke  
articulates a  
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rules in favor of its own principles, might turn aside whilst fraud and violence were accomplishing the destruction of a pretended nobility."<sup>27</sup> The quote is revealing for its insight into the nature of moral necessity, or "exigency," that arises in exceptional situations. Yet the precise meaning of Burke's metaphor is not immediately obvious: What is the distinction that he aims to establish between morality's "rules" and its "principles"? It appears that the contingent nature of moral necessity is ill-suited to the formalistic and law-like character of "rules." Burke claims that meeting certain moral imperatives would require the suspension of such rules. Groping for a different term, Burke says that morality's "principles" would have to take precedence—though he clearly does not intend this term to carry with it its intellectualist connotations, as the contrast with moral "rules" indicates. Instead, Burke appears to be struggling to articulate a conception of morality that is non-legalistic, one according to which justice transforms itself to meet the particular moral needs of particular situations. To conceive of justice in this way is to suggest more explicitly what has been latent in this contextual understanding of morality: that justice is mutable and capable of serving unique moral imperatives that arise in connection with our changing historical circumstances.

Burke's assault on abstract metaphysics reveals this sense of justice's mutability. The neglect of moral complexity that he attributes to the *philosophes* results directly from their ignorance of justice's need to vary in order to meet the distinct moral requirements of changing, historical circumstances. Burke, on the other hand, displays a keen awareness that what is right or just will not always look the same and thus cannot be stated so uniformly and unequivocally as the *philosophes* assume. He communicates morality's complexity in the *philosophes'* own terms, i.e., in the language of "abstract right" itself: "These metaphysic rights entering into common life, like rays of light which pierce into a dense medium, are by the laws of nature refracted from their straight line. Indeed, in the gross and complicated mass of human passions and concerns the primitive rights of men undergo such a variety of refractions and reflections that it becomes absurd to talk of them as if they continued in the simplicity of their original direction."<sup>28</sup> Though expressed in the vocabulary of metaphysics, Burke's prism

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 118-119.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 54.

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metaphor is not evidence of the metaphysical underpinnings of his thinking. Rather, it ought to be viewed as a heuristic device that uses metaphysical imagery to communicate that justice must undergo variation in order to cope with the messiness of circumstance in the real world. Burke's metaphor further underscores the notion that describing moral imperatives in terms that convey uniformity is inappropriate, insofar as such imperatives are dependent upon complex and unpredictable historical circumstances.

To say that justice is mutable and that it adapts to meet moral needs specific to historical circumstances is not to imply that justice is arbitrary or historically relative, as both intellectualists and radical historicists may be tempted to infer. Rather, justice's mutability can be interpreted to mean that "the transcendent reveals itself in history by becoming selectively immanent in it."<sup>29</sup> In other words, just as Burke noted that evil undergoes permutations across various contexts, such is the case with what is good or just: "The spirit transmigrates, and, far from losing its principle of life by the change of its appearance, it is renovated in its new organs."<sup>30</sup> Therefore, while what is good, in one sense, never changes, insofar as its "spirit" is concerned, each manifestation of it must, in another sense, be *sui generis*, in that its occurrence is within the uniqueness of a historical moment. Concrete instantiations of goodness are unique both in their adaptation to circumstances that are situational and idiosyncratic, and in that they themselves are enacted within history. As will be discussed shortly, Burke is comfortable with the idea that what is constant or enduring in human life is maintained, not in spite of the change and flux of history, but *because of* and *through* such historical change itself.

The historicity of experience is what makes abstract speculation inadequate to the task of making judgments of a moral or political nature. Interestingly, the cost of such speculation appears greater to those who are less radical in their historicism. In other words, the moral stakes are higher for those who see morality as concretized within history than for those who interpret moral variation in history as implying the relativity of morals. For those who see justice or the good as transforming itself to meet the moral needs of particular situations, moral and political decisions based on abstraction and absolutes threaten to violate real, historically spe-

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<sup>29</sup> Ryn, "Defining Historicism," *Humanitas* 11: 2 (1998), 88.

<sup>30</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 124.

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cific, moral imperatives. The speculation of the human intellect, divorced from concrete reality, then, informs decisions that are insensitive to moral needs and thus morally harmful. While the historical relativist might view intellectualist thinking about morality as narrow-minded, the notion that there may be moral “costs” associated with abstract decision-making is knowledge of which the relativist thinks we are deprived. Ahistorical thinking, for the relativist, can and perhaps ought to be viewed as ignorant, but it cannot be understood as having normative significance beyond the confines of its historic situation.

*Good government must accommodate changing needs of political life.*

However, for Burke and the position being advanced here, the purpose of opposing abstract speculation and remaining sensitive to the needs of particular political contexts is decidedly moral. Thus, Burke repeatedly emphasizes the *virtues* of making small adjustments to attend to political problems and criticizes French lawmakers for their grand schemes that have no relation to circumstance.<sup>31</sup> One such scheme of which Burke is particularly critical is the attempt to re-configure the political jurisdictions in France according to a highly rationalistic, geometrical design.<sup>32</sup> Burke favors the more prudential approach of the lawmaker who instead works to improve upon “useful parts of [the] old establishment.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, he prefers to have numerous legislators contributing to political arrangements in a piecemeal fashion over time, thus providing “the aid of more minds than one age can furnish.”<sup>34</sup> With this basis in particular knowledge, the political system becomes more nuanced, more attuned to specific moral needs. Having the flexibility to adapt and adjust political designs, “[t]he evils latent in the most promising contrivances are provided for as they arise. One advantage is as little as possible sacrificed for another. We compensate, we reconcile, we balance.”<sup>35</sup> According to Burke, the best legislators are aware that good government is that which accommodates the contingencies of political life with its “plastic nature.”<sup>36</sup> Realizing the most just outcomes requires precisely this plasticity and responsiveness to particular moral needs on the part of moral and political decision-makers.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

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The subject of the mutability of justice is considered in depth in Ryn's essay "History and the Moral Order." A striking part of this discussion is that Ryn finds some limited support for and development of the idea that justice varies to meet contingent moral needs in the thinking of Leo Strauss, a self-avowed anti-historicist.<sup>37</sup> Ryn points to Strauss's dispute with Thomas Aquinas over the interpretation of Aristotle's assertion in *The Nicomachean Ethics* that "all right—hence also all natural right—is changeable."<sup>38</sup> According to Strauss, Thomas had read Aristotle too narrowly when Thomas interpreted Aristotle's remark to mean that only specific, derivative rules of justice could be mutable.<sup>39</sup> Strauss insists, on the contrary, that Aristotle unequivocally asserts natural right's mutability, and Strauss ultimately places Aristotle's concept of justice somewhere between the Averroistic view that natural right is a product of human convention and what Strauss perceives to be the moral absolutist reading rendered by Thomas.<sup>40</sup>

In what follows, Strauss aims to discover a "safe middle road"<sup>41</sup> between these two extreme positions. As Ryn correctly observes, Strauss's efforts here suggest that it may be possible to get away from an understanding of natural right conceived as propositions or rules.<sup>42</sup> Contemplating this possibility, Strauss remarks, "One is tempted to make the following suggestion: When speaking of natural right, Aristotle does not primarily think of any general propositions but rather of concrete decisions. All action is concerned with particular situations. Hence, justice and natural right reside, as it were, in concrete decisions rather than in general rules."<sup>43</sup> Ryn reads Strauss as considering the problems of legalistic conceptions of morality,<sup>44</sup> particularly the fact that general rules, because of their rigidity, may actually prevent just outcomes.<sup>45</sup> Strauss reflects on the potential implications of the conception of justice as residing in con-

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<sup>37</sup> See Ryn, "History and the Moral Order," 92-96. The remarks that follow draw heavily on Ryn's reading of Strauss in this essay. I am also indebted to Professor Ryn for discussions relating to this section of *Natural Right and History*.

<sup>38</sup> Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 158, cited in Ryn, "History and the Moral Order," 93.

<sup>39</sup> Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 157-58.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Ryn, "History and the Moral Order," 94.

<sup>43</sup> Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 159.

<sup>44</sup> Ryn, "History and the Moral Order," 94.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

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crete decisions: "In every human conflict there exists the possibility of a just decision based on full consideration of all the circumstances, a decision demanded by the situation. Natural right consists of such decisions. Natural right thus understood is obviously mutable."<sup>46</sup>

Although Strauss subsequently rejects this view in favor of the intellectualist conclusion that general principles are somehow implied within or presupposed by all concrete decisions,<sup>47</sup> the thought experiment he undertakes here is instructive. For he illustrates the direction in which one's thinking is forced in considering how it is possible to meet the unique moral demands associated with contingent circumstances. According to Strauss, legalistic conceptions of morality appear inadequate where "extreme situations" can arise. Then perhaps "the normally valid rules of natural right are *justly* changed."<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Strauss appears to acknowledge the validity of Aristotle's suggestion that "there is not a single rule, however basic, which is not subject to exception."<sup>49</sup> Moreover, with respect to how a just society might deal with "an absolutely unscrupulous and savage enemy" he goes so far as to say that "[t]here are *no limits* which can be defined in advance, *there are no assignable limits to what might become just reprisals*."<sup>50</sup> Illustrating this potential, Strauss notes that, where the survival of a society is at stake, the use of espionage—which he says even the most just society cannot forgo—will require the suspension of the rules of natural right.<sup>51</sup>

What is particularly interesting is that Strauss's remark here is reminiscent of Burke's statement that morality's "rules" might, on occasion, need to be suspended in favor of its "principles." Moreover, Strauss adds that "[n]atural right must be mutable in order to be able to cope with the inventiveness of wickedness,"<sup>52</sup> appearing to echo Burke's remark that "[w]ickedness is a little more inventive"<sup>53</sup> than is implied by a morality based on formalistic rules. The purpose of drawing these parallels is to suggest that Strauss may have become aware that Burke—in part reacting to the excessive abstractionism of his own age—had explored the

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<sup>46</sup> Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 159.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 160. Emphasis added.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>53</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 124.



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problems of moral intellectualism and had begun to consider what it would mean to reconceive justice in more historical terms. What Strauss appears to recognize, and we ought to recognize as well, is that Burke had broken with the moral and political philosophy that had preceded him precisely by virtue of his emerging historical consciousness. As the preceding discussion has attempted to make clear, Strauss hesitantly acknowledges the fact that conceiving of justice concretely means recognizing that sometimes justice requires exceptional, unanticipated action. The conclusion that Strauss ultimately abandons, but which Burke does not, is that such exceptional circumstances bring with them exceptional moral imperatives and a reconsideration of what actions are properly considered “just.”

*Exceptional circumstances give rise to exceptional moral imperatives.*

### *A Living History*

Two interrelated aspects or dimensions of Burke’s emerging historical consciousness bear importance for the thought and action of moral decision-makers. First is Burke’s sense that man’s normative orientation is shaped not only by the cultural embeddedness of the present in which he lives but also by the tradition into which he is born that exists over time. Second is the related awareness that man’s historical situation is the inheritance of a past whose continuity with the present and future is an ineradicable fact of life. Each of these aspects of Burke’s historical consciousness—his awareness of the normativity and facticity of man’s historical existence—will be treated in turn. Comprehending both of them requires an appreciation of the sense in which what endures and what changes—i.e., life’s universality and its particularity—are in a dialectical relationship.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> It is important to distinguish the use of “dialectical” here from Hegel’s original use of the term. Much has been written and disputed concerning what Hegel meant by “dialectic.” Most fundamentally, Hegel may be understood as referring to the inner movement and development of a given subject matter. Many attribute to this dialectical movement the schema “thesis-antithesis-synthesis.” While Hegel never uses such terminology, this is the triadic form used by Kant which served as an inspiration for Hegel’s dialectic and to which the stages of the dialectic correspond. Hegel’s concern is to show how the finite understanding can grasp the metaphysical absolute, an apparent contradiction. He does this by demonstrating that reason must first posit something that is unconditioned or absolute (the thesis), then examine this thing and discover that it is only understandable by distinction and relation to other things (the antithesis), and finally realize that what is in fact unconditioned is neither of these parts but the whole that they comprise and upon which they depend (the synthesis). But to understand this whole, it must be differentiated from similar wholes, which can then be synthesized into a larger whole.

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*Tradition communicates normativity as such—both good and evil—and serves as a medium for its future manifestations.*

It has been mentioned that Burke sees good and evil as intermingled and residing within phenomenal reality. Because Burke views concrete, historical experience as normative, history may be understood as at once expressing and shaping our normative orientation. In other words, history is both the forum where social interactions are realized and the background in which the normative awareness of individual and collective actors is shaped. History being comprised of both good and evil, it is wrong to think of Burke as looking to the past with simple nostalgia, as a romantic reactionary who sees only goodness in an inherited tradition and wishes to restore a preexisting social order. This is frequently thought to be Burke's attitude toward the feudal order of old Europe. On the contrary, Burke explicitly contends that one of the most cherished aspects of having an inherited tradition is the ability to "draw moral lessons . . . from [it]"<sup>55</sup> regardless of whether one discerns the need to cleave to or depart from a given tradition. Burke goes so far on one occasion as to focus exclusively on the evil that may infect tradition and its didactic quality: "In history a great volume is unrolled for our instruction, drawing the materials of future wisdom from the past errors and infirmities of mankind."<sup>56</sup> He continues: "History consists for the greater part of the miseries brought upon the world by pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy, ungoverned zeal, and all the train of disorderly appetites which shake the public with the same

'—troublous storms that toss

'The private state, and render life unsweet.'"<sup>57</sup>

Thus, tradition for Burke is not simply the embodiment of what is right or just, and he hardly advocates the restoration of the old order. Rather, he sees the importance of tradition as its ability to com-

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This is said to continue until knowledge of the absolute is reached. Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 159-169. The use of the term "dialectical" in the present project is not meant to imply this process of rational development or unfolding. However, the term is nonetheless employed because, by "dialectic," Hegel also captures the coexistence, interdependence, and harmony of certain antithetical qualities in human existence. For example, Hegel's dialectic shows a thing can both be conditioned and unconditioned at the same time, both F and -F. As Beiser argues, this does not imply a violation of the law of contradiction, since F and -F are true of distinct aspects of what is being described. In other words, reality cannot be completely determined with one predicate (F or -F) alone. *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>55</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 124.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* Here Burke quotes Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, II. c.7, st. 14.

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municate normativity *as such*—both good and evil—and to serve as a medium for its future instantiations.

Yet, in another sense, it is exclusively the instantiations of good accumulated in historical experience—what Burke calls “the general bank and capital of nations and of ages”<sup>58</sup>—that he finds valuable in a tradition. The latter has a special role in bringing about future moral action. In order to frame possibilities for action out of the flux of phenomenal experience, the individual must draw on an awareness of the positive worth of particulars communicated to him through past experience. Such awareness is what makes incipient action appear worthwhile. To assume a normative sense in the absence of this contact with historical particulars is to assume an ahistorical actor or subject for whom present choices miraculously acquire value *ex nihilo*. In this manner, the historical dimension of moral decision-making is frequently ignored by Enlightenment thinkers who then explain moral decisions either in terms of “self-evident” moral knowledge or by reducing such decisions to mere interests or preferences. In contrast, Burke sees in history examples that provide us with a normative orientation and, in so doing, facilitate creative moral action. He rails against the *philosophes* for ignoring this indebtedness to the past in moral decision-making:

*Historical examples provide a normative orientation, facilitating creative moral action.*

[Y]ou chose to act as if you . . . had everything to begin anew. . . . [But,] under a pious predilection for [an earlier race of] 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. . . . [B]y following wise examples you would have given new examples of wisdom to the world.<sup>59</sup>

For Burke, a tradition is essential to making moral decisions, not because the past is to be copied, but because it provides the normative orientation that is essential for new moral decisions. Rightly understood, a tradition thus provides a normative sensibility and inspiration to moral decision-makers rather than patterns of conduct merely to be replicated.

It is in the human capacity to make use of the past in the present that one first encounters the quality of dialectic in Burke’s historicism. Insofar as Burke shows past concretizations of the good as inspiring their own vital appropriation and novel application under

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

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*The good  
relies upon  
particular  
instantiations  
for its very  
existence.*

present circumstances, the past can be seen as a “*living past*.”<sup>60</sup> As such, the normative character of past experience is shared by those actions inspired in decision-makers of the present. There is a dialectical quality to such present concretizations in that they are in one sense universal and in another particular. On the one hand, present concretizations of the good are universal insofar as they exhibit this superior normative quality; on the other hand, such instantiations are particular with respect to the uniqueness of their historical realization. Each of these qualities—universality and particularity—are needed to predicate such historical concretizations. Once the idea of morality has been historicized in this manner, and intellectualist assumptions about metaphysics have been abandoned, the good can be seen as actually *relying upon* particular instantiations for its very existence. As individual and society find inspiration in the “bank and capital” of past concretizations, they continually create and enrich the good as they reconnect with the past. Burke suggests this dialectical coexistence of what endures and what changes, what is in one sense transcendent and in another immanent, when he says of British society that “in what we improve we are never wholly new; in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete.”<sup>61</sup> The British tradition is thus constantly being renovated through new, historical concretizations while, at the same time, the connection between past and present is maintained by way of a normative continuity.

In addition to this sort of continuity, Burke displays an awareness of a second sense in which the past can be understood as “*living*” in the present: our historical situation is the culmination of a series of past events that determine all of the problems we confront and even the way society conceives of alternatives for action. Burke demonstrates an awareness of this continuity in his frequent allusions to the corporate nature of a society that exists over time, which so many Enlightenment rationalists were prone to neglect in their ahistorical focus on the individual. Burke’s idea of the individual’s place within this larger whole is made readily apparent in his allusion to society as “a permanent body composed of transitory parts,” a description which tends to mitigate the importance of the individual vis-à-vis the larger society. And yet Burke also recognizes that the corporate nature of society is only possible insofar

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<sup>60</sup> Ryn, *A Common Human Ground*, 94. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>61</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 30.

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as it coexists with and is dependent upon variation and renewal, since change is indeed in the nature of history. Thus, he admits the need for individuals who, despite their transitory nature, make society's continuity conceivable. Once again, Burke demonstrates a propensity for dialectics in his thinking: change and continuity *both* qualify the nature of a society that exists over time. He thus marvels that "by the disposition of a stupendous wisdom, molding together the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, the whole, at one time, is never old or middle-aged or young, but, in a condition of unchangeable constancy, moves on through the varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression."<sup>62</sup> Despite the uniqueness and variation among transient individuals, they inherit and pass on to one another a history that binds them as part of a greater, corporate whole.

This idea of society's continuity amidst historical change can also be detected in Burke's discussion and critique of the Enlightenment's ahistorical idea of the social contract. Burke rejects the conception of society modeled on the idea of an economic transaction in which the fleeting demands of utility are met. For Burke, society evolves slowly and organically over time, based on nothing resembling the rational calculations or agreements of *homo economicus*:

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, calico, 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 upon 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 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.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, beyond the narrow economic meaning, Burke cleverly employs "contract" here as a metaphorical reference to the bond established through everything we inherit and bequeath to one another across generations—not simply our material possessions, but our

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 84-85.

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*The present is a living and growing history which will be constitutive of the "presents" of those who follow us.*

habits, our manners, and our culture. Burke is thus cognizant—where social contractarians working from a “blank slate” are not—that this inheritance establishes a strong continuity between past and present. Individuals do not make choices in a vacuum but are embedded within a historical society where they confront circumstances that grow out of a unique past. From the alternatives for action with which we are presented to the language and logic we use to contemplate those alternatives, Burke is aware that we are unavoidably part of the movement of history. To make the point more acutely, it may be more accurate to describe the present as a living and growing history which in turn will be constitutive of the “presents” of those who follow us. The historical is ceaseless both in its growth and in its constitution of the present, which are in fact two ways of stating the same phenomenon, two sides of the same coin.

Despite this prominence of the historical in Burke’s thinking, it ought to be made clear that he is not a historical determinist. For, although Burke considers history to be ubiquitous in human decision-making, he sees history as at once liberating and constraining, thus exhibiting yet another dialectical antithesis in his thought. In one sense, history limits our choices by virtue of the particular context or framework within which it forces us to choose, and yet, in another sense, history provides concrete opportunities for choosing, the necessary “friction” that makes creative movement within a life possible. Illustrative of this dualistic perspective is the emphasis Burke places on reform and making the most of the particular circumstances with which one is confronted. Burke seeks “a middle”<sup>64</sup> between the extremes of revolutionary leveling, on the one hand, and blind acquiescence to the *status quo*, on the other. He elaborates: “There is something else than the mere alternative of absolute destruction or unreformed existence. *Spartam nactus es; hanc exorna*. (Sparta is your lot; now adorn it.) This is, in my opinion, a rule of profound sense and ought never to depart from the mind of an honest reformer.”<sup>65</sup> The importance placed on reform here or “working with what is already there” indicates a wariness of both the radical freedom assumed by those who treat society as if it were a “*tabula rasa*” (blank slate) and a fatalistic resignation to the historical circumstances one inherits. Burke’s reformist stance suggests, in contrast to these dispositions, that one is capable of

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 138.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

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shaping history while nonetheless acknowledging that one's "lot" is always shaped by history. These two sides to Burke's position are, in fact, not merely compatible but are actually implicated in one another, insofar as the concrete choices of the reformer are fully acknowledged to be the inheritance of an unchosen history.

At this point, it is worth considering a potential objection from those with a more thoroughgoing historicist orientation. It might be maintained that, contrary to the appropriation of Burke set forth here, careful attention to the historical nature of human existence tends to undermine the prospect of continuity amidst historical change. It may be argued that history implies change, contingency, and flux of a much more radical kind than has been acknowledged. This view challenges the foregoing analysis in two ways. First, once history is understood to imply substantial changes in language, culture, and meaning across time, a problem emerges with respect to the normative status of past concretizations of the good. The situatedness that is implied by history effectively makes each historical period "time-bound." As such, the perspective of the individual who draws inspiration from the past is historically contingent to such a radical extent that past concretizations cannot be understood in the same manner as they were by those who realized them. If our normative understanding is merely perspectival, how can what is concretized in history be described as "good" in any objective sense of the word? One cannot even say with confidence that past concretizations one believes to be "good" were viewed as "good" by the historical actors who realized them! Second, for the same reason (i.e., the time-boundedness associated with radical change and contingency), Burke's notion of an inherited past that shapes our present must be brought into question. For, if time-boundedness implies radical limitations on perspective, there is no meaningful sense in which our social context is an "inheritance" that binds us as an intergenerational, corporate social entity. On this view, our particular social context simply represents the facticity of our historical existence, interpreted uniquely by us in our present circumstances and understood by past and future generations in ways incomprehensible to us. Their habits, manners, and culture have no bearing on our own.

However, in conceiving of history as a series of discrete, hermetically sealed moments, such time-bound conceptions tend to atomize history and altogether neglect its fluidity and the ultimate

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*Time-bound conceptions of human historicity neglect the ultimate inseparability of "past" and "present."*

inseparability of "past" and "present." Time-bound understandings of history tend to reify and isolate historical moments and, in doing so, refuse to recognize the possibility of continuity existing together with—or, more accurately—*through* what changes. However, as the foregoing arguments have attempted to make clear with respect to the dialectical nature of human existence, such qualifications need not imply the absence or exclusion of their antithesis. In fact, historicists of widely divergent stripes who share a notion of life's dialectical nature have come to appreciate the sense in which man's historical existence must be predicated by both continuity and change.

Ryn and the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer are two such historicists who appear to share an awareness that continuity is able to coexist with historical change.<sup>66</sup> It has been remarked that Gadamer has an appreciation for "the fundamental continuity of history."<sup>67</sup> Every act of interpretation, for Gadamer, is a fusion of the horizons of past and present, whereby the two become indistinguishable.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, Gadamer is explicit that "the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired."<sup>69</sup> This dependence of the present on the past refers to the fact that "[t]he prejudices and interests that mark out our hermeneutical situation are given to us by the very movement of tradition."<sup>70</sup> Similarly combating the tendency to hypostatize past and present, Ryn rebukes modern abstractionists for assuming they can "[choose] between modern and premodern thought."<sup>71</sup> He continues: "Such differentiations must . . . not be mistaken for sharp divisions within concrete reality itself. Actual thought is marked by a perpetual give and take between differ-

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<sup>66</sup> The influence of Hegel's philosophy on both Ryn and Gadamer may be responsible for this affinity. Hegel's impact on Ryn is transmitted through the thinking of the Italian Hegelian Benedetto Croce. Hegel is also known to have had a direct bearing on the thinking of Gadamer, particularly through the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. Paul Gottfried, *The Search for Historical Meaning* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), 157.

<sup>67</sup> David E. Linge, introduction to *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, by Hans-Georg Gadamer (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), xvi.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and ed. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 305.

<sup>70</sup> David E. Linge, introduction to *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, xvii.

<sup>71</sup> Ryn, *A Common Human Ground*, 80.



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ent points of view and defies the neat boundaries of abstractly conceived categories.”<sup>72</sup> Boundaries between “past” and “present” are thus revealed to be mere imputations of the intellect upon a historical existence that does not contain such strict separations. In contrast to these abstractionist views that see our situatedness as an obstacle to interpreting “the past,” both Ryn and Gadamer see historical particularity as productive, facilitating a mediation of past and present. There is no “past” or “present” as such, but only situated orientations that, with every act of understanding, fuse historically particular horizons.

This notion of the fusion of horizons between past and present weakens both potential criticisms of the appropriation of Burke presented here. First, if the past is implicated in every understanding of the present and the present in every understanding of the past, the atomistic variety of perspectivism that radical historicism relies on for its critique is brought into question. Insofar as the hermeneutical situation of our present emerges from within a particular tradition,<sup>73</sup> the idea that our habits, manners, and culture do not connect us with the past but constitute an idiosyncratic present does not hold water. Moreover, insofar as the particularity of the present mediates our understanding of the past, the past cannot be understood apart from the present. Though there is not an ahistorical vantage point from which to comprehend and assess the past, the present nonetheless provides a particular orientation from which one can interpret the past—indeed, such interpretation contributes to what the past is. But interpreting the past also changes the present. Every understanding is a hermeneutical mediation of the one by the other, such that the two horizons are ultimately indistinguishable. In attempting to articulate a concept of discrete historical periods, one in which radical historicity severs the continuity between past and present, allegedly more thoroughgoing historicisms in fact begin to appear ahistorical. At a minimum, the very historical change they describe is incomprehensible unless the “present” is in some sense the organic outgrowth of a particular

*Interpreting  
the past  
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present.*

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. For a fuller treatment of some of the epistemological issues associated with the historical nature of thought and writing, see Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason: Babbitt, Croce, and the Problem of Reality*, 2nd expanded edition with a major new introduction by the author (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997), especially Chapter 7.

<sup>73</sup> Ryn characterizes this as the past “moving in” the present. Ryn, “Defining Historicism,” 89.

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*Human understanding and moral action are at once historically situated and morally meaningful beyond the historical moment.*

“past” that is responsible for present circumstances and the changes that have taken place.

Second, the continuity between past and present achieved by particularity’s mediation is sufficient for the task of finding inspiration in the instantiations of the good in the past. For it is not necessary in order for such inspiration to occur to understand the concrete good of the past precisely as it was understood by those who realized it. All that is necessary is for such concretizations to evoke the quality of inspiration associated with “the general bank and capital of nations and of ages,” as seen through the lens of one’s particular historical situation. Individuals and societies will always grasp historical episodes from within the particularity of their own perspective, which is to say, they will take inspiration and appropriate history in ways that are unique and meaningful for their own perspective. In fact, the understanding of those who previously realized the concrete good would be anachronistic from the perspective of the person acting in the present, since it is the particularity of his own perspective that alone has meaning for him. Consequently, the concretized good is not good from an “objective” point of view, if by objective one means understood and assessed from an ahistorical vantage point. Insofar as man is concerned, his understanding and moral action are at once historically situated and morally meaningful beyond the confines of their historical moment. Obtaining objectivity of perspective in the manner of a purported ahistorical observer is both impossible and beside the point.

### *Summary*

The development of historical consciousness among modern thinkers has not resulted in a consensus on the implications of the historicity of human existence for morality. The purpose of this article has been to identify a particular strain of historical thinking and to defend its interpretation of what it means for morality to be conceived historically. Burke’s writing inspires a way of thinking about morality—what Ryn terms “value-centered historicism”—that is at odds with both the intellectualist tradition in moral philosophy and historically informed theories that infer the relativity of morals. Rejecting the notion that justice ought to be conceived as abstract principles of the intellect, Burke’s thinking instead suggests that morality comes to be in concrete, human conduct. Burke

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sees both good and evil as manifested in various forms of social interaction, each time realized anew within history and under new circumstances. But this situated character of morality need not imply moral relativism. In fact, Burke's concern with abstract norms is that their insensitivity to circumstance precludes the realization of just outcomes. What is just varies based on the historical context of human action and must, in that sense, be considered mutable. While justice is particular, insofar as its form is always changing, it is, in another sense, universal, insofar as its spirit endures and transcends these permutations within history.

The idea that what endures coexists with what changes expresses the dialectical character of Burke's historical consciousness. There are two senses in which Burke comprehends continuity in the face of historical change. First is his notion that concretizations of the good in the past can inspire in the decision-makers of the present novel action of a superior normative quality. As such, the good is itself expanded and enriched as "the bank and capital of nations and of ages" is further built upon with every new historical instantiation. Second, insofar as we inherit a past from generations before us, it affects everything we are, from the problems we confront to the way in which we conceive of alternatives for action. Burke's references to the intergenerational society that exists over time implies the sense that we inherit and bequeath to one another more than mere material possessions—a real history and culture that binds the ages. There is continuity *through* change with respect to both the normativity and the facticity of man's historical existence.