Scraping the Barrel? Burke, Rousseau, and the Roots of Authoritarianism.

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"I would have loved my fellow-men in spite of themselves. It was only by ceasing to be human that they could forfeit my affection."

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker.*[1]

In 1791, Edmund Burke wrote of the revolution in manners and morality that he detected shaping events in revolutionary France: "I am certain that the writings of Rousseau lead directly to this kind of shameful evil."[2] Burke's assessment of Rousseau's influence on the French Revolution has inevitably come under critical scrutiny from historians, as have more recent attempts to connect that assessment, prophetically and instructively, to the emergence of the totalitarian state in the twentieth century.[3] In this paper, I shall try to modify and update this perspective, and ask whether Burke's analysis of Rousseau as a man, and of Rousseau's elevation of the "goodness" of natural man above the morally corrupting influence of "civilization," may help us understand the related concept of modern political "authoritarianism" – arguably a more virulent and insidious threat to Western liberal democracy in our present century.

Burke's critique of Rousseau appears at its sharpest in his *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, published in May 1791. In this work, Burke presents to us a philosopher of some undoubted genius, venerated by members of the French legislative, but a peddler in paradoxes,

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[1] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Peter France (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), 27.

[2] Edmund Burke, *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Daniel E. Ritchie (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1992), 53.

[3] I am thinking here of works such as: Irving Babbitt's *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919); Robert Nisbet's 1943 article "Rousseau and Totalitarianism" (Journal of Politics 5, no.2 [May 1943]); Ross J.S. Hoffman and Paul Levack (ed), *Burke's Politics: Selected Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke on Reform, Revolution, and War* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949) -- "All the rationalistic errors of the age of Rousseau and Paine came coursing back with the upsurge of socialism communism, and fascism … " (p. xxxiv); and, of course John Talmon's seminal work *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952).

whose character is defined by vanity and shamelessness: in short, and memorably, an "insane *Socrates* of the National Assembly."[4] That reference is intended to remind us of Plato's description of Diogenes the Cynic as "[a] Socrates gone mad."[5] Diogenes, we may recall, challenged Plato with a philosophy based upon the alliance of reason and nature (rather than metaphysics): "Table and cup I see," he remarked to Plato on one occasion, "but your table-hood and cup-hood … I [cannot] see."[6] In undermining the authority both of metaphysics and of convention, Diogenes' particular marriage of reason and primal nature expressed itself in those outrageous statements and public spectacles that drew upon him ridicule, pity, and admiration.

On one level, Rousseau – ridiculous, pitiable, and admirable – fits easily into the Cynic's barrel; and, while the "unexamined life" may, indeed, not be worth living, anyone who has perused Jean-Jacques' *Confessions* will appreciate that, to examine it to excess, however brilliantly, is to risk wallowing in paradox and madness. Rousseau's insanity, as Burke saw it, arose from the "paradoxical morality" that he employed to sever and then to reconstruct the relationship between human freedom and social virtue.[7] Such a project, Burke remarks in the *Letter*, engenders principles that "are so inapplicable to real life and manners, that we [British] never dream of drawing from them any rule for laws or conduct, or for fortifying or illustrating any thing by a reference to his opinions. They have with us the fate of older paradoxes."[8] There

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[4] Burke, *Further Reflections*, 48. Burke had written a few sentences earlier that "madness is ever vitious and malignant" (47). Note also the comment in a review of Emile, published in the Annual Register for 1762, and probably written by Burke: by never knowing where to stop in his imaginative reasoning, Rousseau shows in his intellect and imagination how "[p]overty can hardly be more vicious than such an abundance." Edmund Burke, *Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis (New York: Gateway, 19xx), 95.

[5] The report can be found in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, VI.2.54, and also in Aelian, *Varia Historia*, xiv.33.

[6] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, VI.2.54.

[7] Rousseau writes, in Book 1, chapter 8 of the *Social Contract* (1762): "Man's actions receive a moral character [in entering society] which was wanting to them before … [F]rom a stupid and limited animal e now for the first time becomes a reasoning being and a man."

[8] Burke, *Further Reflections*, 53. Rousseau's paradoxical statements in the *Social Contract* are familiar. Robespierre paraphrased one of the most famous in his report on *1 florial, an II* (May 7, 1794), entitled "On the Connection

follows a quotation from Horace extolling the vital relationship of *mos maiorum* to justice, fully in the spirit of that firm opponent of Cynicism, Marcus Tullius Cicero.[9]

Is there, though, anything more than a passing allusion in this parallel between two insane Socrates? Something in that reference to "older paradoxes," perhaps, that might explain how a political revolution for liberty mutated into an authoritarian nightmare under the Jacobins? I think an answer may be found in an entry in Burke's private *Note-Book* titled "Several scattered hints concerning philosophy and learning collected here from my papers."[10] It was composed in the 1750s, before Burke entered politics, and never published during his lifetime.

Clear themes of continuity give these "scattered hints" an overall coherence: Burke esteems learning and curiosity, but praises a broad education above narrow specialism, since "the end of learning is not knowledge but virtue." He recommends a moderate skepticism. "[D]oubts and uncertainties," he notes, "affect our understandings as fermentation affects liquors – It disturbs them for a while, but it makes them both the Sounder and clearer ever after." In short, the hints are thoroughly *Ciceronian*: reason respects custom, which is "a more sure guide than our Theories," and advances hand in hand with humility and curiosity. Virtue is realized in action, and action proceeds by probability, not certitude.[11]

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between Religion and Moral ideas with Republican principles and national festivals": "Nature tells us that man is born for freedom, and the experience of the ages shows us man enslaved." (Quoted in Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue. The Language of Politics in the French Revolution* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986], 241.)

[9] The quotation from Horace praises utility as "naturally the mother of justice and right." Cicero's own understanding of "right reason" in relationship to nature (that is, *prudentia*) is expanded in his works *De officiis* and the *Academica* in particular, where one can also find expressions of his contempt for Cynicism as a philosophical system. See, e.g., *De officiis* 1.128, 148. For Ciceronian "right reason," see *De re publica* 3. 22 – a crucial chapter in the Ciceronian *oeuvre*, which has clear resonance in the rhetoric of Burke's famous prosecutorial speeches against Warren Hastings in the 1780s. The passage is also quoted at some length, in relation to the natural law tradition, in Raymond Plant, *Politics, Theology and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2001), 146.

[10] H.V.F. Somerset (ed.), *A Note-Book of Edmund Burke* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1957), 81-98.

[11] Ibid, 82, 89, 90.

Amid such reflections, Burke inserts the following anecdote about Diogenes the Cynic:

> When Diogenes was dying, his friends desired to know how he would have his Body disposed of. 'Throw it into the fields.' Says he. They objected that it might be liable to be devoured by wild Beasts. 'Then set my Staff by me to drive them off.' One answered, 'You will then be insensible and unable to do it.' 'So shall I be' (sayd he) 'of their injuries.'[12]

Burke's response to the story is to admire the "vivacity of the Turn," and then to declare the philosophy behind it "shewy" but "ha[ving] no substance," since turning it into a general principle would result in obvious ill consequences. Then, expanding upon the theme, Burke turns to the subject of "funeral ceremonies," arguing that such rituals "throw a decent Veil over the weak and dishonourable circumstances of our Nature. What shall we say to that philosophy," he asks, "that would strip [that Nature] naked?"[13]

Well, why not call it a "philosophy of vanity," since it elevates the authority of the individual's reason above the social customs (the *mos maiorum*) that are, in fact, essential for its operation?[14] We might also consider it a source of "paradoxical morality," for

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[12] Ibid, 91. See also Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 1.43.

[13] Ibid. "A man [not] anxious…about the fate of his body…never considers what a nuisance it would be to Society if it was exposed." On this topic, see John Casey, "Our Duty to the Dead," in Roger Scruton (ed.), *Conservative Thoughts: Essays from* The Salisbury Review (London: The Claridge Press, 1988), 173-80.

[14] I am thinking here of the argument that right reasoning must proceed from a proper understanding of the "I" and "you" relationship. The philosopher Roger Scruton identifies the flaw in much modern thinking about this relationship when he remarks that, "One thing that is unacceptable in the political philosophies that compete for our endorsement today is their failure to recognize that most of what we are and owe has been acquired without our own consent to it." (Roger Scruton, *On Human Nature* [Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2017], 126.) This highly Burkean observation Scruton explores with particular reference to the concept of "personhood." "My freedom," he writes elsewhere, "is not an uncaused eruption into the world of human events; it is a product of my social condition, and it brings with it the full burden of responsibility to the other and the recognition that the other's voice has just as much authority as mine." (Ibid, 110-11.) The significance of this line of thought for exposing the flaws of Cynic or Rousseauian thought is summed up in the following statement, from another of Scruton's works: "[Religions] feed into the distinctively human emotions, like hope and charity, which lift us above the motives that rule the lives of other animals, and cause us to live by culture and not by instinct." (Roger Scruton, *The Soul of the World* [Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2014], 27).

Burke proceeds to show how the shamelessness released when "right reason" acts upon the instincts of Nature "strip[ped] naked" produces a new sense of shame when that same reason meets its actual limitations in attempting to master or comprehend those instincts. Applying a striking analogy, some (unnamed) authors, Burke comments, having reduced love and the social rituals of courtship to "mere procreation, [then] talk of the Generation of mankind as getting rid of excrement; who lament bitterly their being subject to such a weakness."[15] In the *Letter*, over thirty years later, Burke was to denounce Rousseau as a father who "casts away, as a sort of offal and excrement, the spawn of his disgustful amours."[16]

The social and political consequences of embracing a "philosophy of vanity" in society, then, with its attendant "paradoxical morality" was not, in Burke's mind, so much the liberation of natural man from the oppressive structures of shame as the emergence of a new kind of shaming – designed this time not to cover the natural weaknesses of our nature, but to deny the limitations of an instrumental reason working upon an elemental human nature. It is in the denial, or *defiance*, of the paradox that the insanity resides, a point Burke clarifies in the next paragraph of those "scattered hints" where he turns to the logical distinction between a contradiction and a contrariety: "No man *in his Senses* can agree to a Contradiction," he states, and then counters, (reflecting, again, his debt to Cicero) that a truly symbiotic marriage of reason and nature can be achieved only by factoring mystery and probability into our rational calculations above abstract theory and

[15] Ibid, 92. Adam and Eve's awareness of their nakedness after their transgression may be interpreted as the shame induced by their sexual arousal that their procreative instincts and impulses remain beyond the control of their intellects. Rousseau's shamelessness, in a kind of inversion of this frustrated wish to act as gods over their own created bodies, is revealed, Burke states, in his public reveling in a life that "he flings in the face of his Creator" (*Further Reflections*, 49).
[16] Burke, *Further Reflections*, 49.

certitude – in a word, by embracing Contrariety, for "an apparent, nay a real, Contrariety in things, may not only be proposed and believed, but proved beyond any reasonable doubt."[17] Burke rounds out this gathering of thoughts with a powerful rhetorical question that could have served as an antidote to authoritarianism *avant la lettre*: "Why should I desire to be more than a man? I have too much reverence for our nature to wish myself divested even of the weak parts of it."[18]

I see Burke here settling early in his career on the conviction that any system claiming to harmonize liberty and justice through human reason and natural instinct was doomed unless it embraced, also, the inescapable mystery of that harmony as mediated through custom and convention.[19] That position rests upon the principle that human nature contains an essential transcendent dimension that prevents its own full disclosure to our reason – even *right* reason, and even when supposedly "stripped naked" for the purpose. If we apply that insight to the Rousseauian influences that Burke thought he saw working upon the French Revolution, we might reasonably deduce that authoritarianism feeds upon the weakening perception of that transcendent dimension by providing the necessary mechanism for action while denying the contradictions upon which such action

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[17] Burke argues that, in assenting rationally to propositions concerning "abstruse matters," people "don't sufficiently distinguish between a Contrariety and a Contradiction" (*Note-Book*, 92). This may reflect acquaintance with the broad discussion over the legacy of Aristotelian and Scholastic logic, played out in the works of thinkers such as Locke, Hutcheson, Hume, Stewart, and Reid; but, more directly, we might note Burke's reference as an undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin, to the work of the "hideous" Burgersdiijk, whose *Institutionum Logicarum Libri Duo* was a staple text of logic in the eighteenth century, designed to promote a unity between Aristotelianism and Ramist critques in the teaching of logic to students. I have touched upon Burke's encounter with Burgersdijk elsewhere – see Ian Crowe, "Echoes from Mulla's Shore. Spenserian Currents and Edmund Burke's Early Literary Career in London," *Studies in Burke and His Time* 24 [2014]: 62-88 (especially 70-71). For Burgersdijk and the structure and influence of his work, see E.P. Bos and H.A. Krop (ed.), *Franco Burgersdijk (1590-1635): Neo-Aristotelianism in Leiden* (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993). Burke's description appears in a letter of 24 May, 1744, to Richard Shackleton.

[18] Burke, *Note-Book*, 92. Later, in the *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, Burke was to describe Rousseau, famously, as a "lover of humanity and a hater of his kindred" (50).

[19] I have made this point elsewhere in relation to Burke's early publication *A Vindication of Natural Society*.

must proceed.[20] Such a mechanism could comprise the acknowledgment of greater liberties for the people in certain areas of life combined with an expansive, ideological tightening of legal restrictions in other areas. It would be a bargain willingly entered into by many, since the weakening is itself a mark of pride, or vanity, by which shamelessness becomes a liberating sign of virtue.[21] Any effort, then, to recover the authority of the transcendent, by an appeal to our social nature through custom or convention, becomes shameful, and its proclamation a vice that is literally seen as *inhumane*. Frustrated by the paradoxical claims of a liberating reason and the obstinate, ultimate unfathomability of our primal nature, we – the people – become complicit in a state-sponsored authoritarianism artfully designed to hide the contradiction that lies behind our own vain aspirations. As Diogenes is *also* reputed to have taught: "[F]or the conduct of life we need right reason *or a halter*."[22]

[20] Is the alternative, then, inaction or potential gridlock? Not if one considers Burke's argument that contrariety can be accepted as a basis for action proceeding from probability. Indeed, such an actualizing of a choice is, for Cicero and for Burke, the very summation of the virtuous life – the act of a prudent, and not just a wise, person: "*virtutis enim laus omnis in actione consistit*," as Cicero remarked in *De officiis* – "The whole praise of virtue lies in action." (Cicero, *De officiis*, I. 6.)

[21] "The Revolution involved a war against religion: an attempt to re-create the world as a world uncreated." Roger Scruton, *The Philosopher on Dover Beach. Essays* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1990), 197.

[22] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, VI. 2. 25.