

Virtue and Utility in Collins' Burke

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Gregory Collins's book, as its title indicates, is concerned with the relationship between Burke's political philosophy and his economic ideas (Collins 2020). It is in fact the first serious monograph dedicated to examining his views on political economy. It deals with its material with authority and insight, building on substantial scholarship. The book includes a rich commentary on *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (1795); a discussion of Burke's project of Economical Reform; an account of his views on colonisation, American taxation, Irish trade restrictions, and the regulation of the East India Company; and an analysis of his writings on France. The result is an important and original study that adds significantly to our understanding of Burke. The central question raised by Collins concerns the relationship between markets and morals.¹ On the one hand Burke celebrates the role of commerce and on the other extols virtue. But how does he reconcile these two positions?

Collins puts it this way: "How can a political community conserve the strength of culture and religion while securing the right to pursue profit?" (Collins 2020, p. 6). He correctly sees this question as addressing the problem of how utility can be harmonised with morality. There exists a large literature on Burke that views his career as divided uncomfortably between these two commitments. From Alfred Cobban to Judith Shklar, the goal of morality—supported by tradition—is seen as conflicting with the commitment to commercial prosperity in Burke's writings.² The relation between morality and tradition raises a subsidiary set of issues. For early modern philosophers generally, morality required us to render justice and achieve beneficence. These twin elements of ethical life were usually distinguished in terms of the enjoyment of rights and the cultivation of goodwill. For many, like Hume, rights were protected by prescription while beneficence was fostered by growth and social stability. Rights and beneficence were therefore seen as guarded by tradition. The question was whether morality, supported by custom, was threatened by the pursuit of advantage that underpinned commercial society.

Collins dramatizes the tension between ethical life and acquisition as an apparent conflict between two of Burke's works: "How, then, could the thinker who wrote the *Reflections*, considered the authoritative Western defense of cultural traditionalism in modernity, also compose a tract called *Thoughts and Details*, in which the same writer provided steadfast support for Enlightenment, market-based principles that were perceived by contemporaries as a threatening force to settled social conventions?" (Collins 2020, p. 3). The goal of Collins's book is to show that there is no incompatibility between these alternatives. Much of the

literature on this period mistakenly describes these polarities in terms of an opposition between enlightenment and traditionalism. For his part, Collins is surely right to see Burke as striving to reconcile transactional conduct with historically grounded duties: the ambition to unite these principles is indeed evident across Burke's corpus. However, the aim of accommodating right and interest is equally obvious in the major works of Montesquieu, Hume, Rousseau, Smith and Kant. Despite an endless stream of commentary to the contrary, the eighteenth century is not usefully seen as a contest between the enlightenment and its opponents.

While Collins's book is rooted in the eighteenth century, he also writes with an eye on the dominant traditions that have shaped the political thought of post-War Europe and the United States. In America in particular, party strife is standardly represented in terms of a contest between liberalism and conservatism. Collins wishes to transcend the liberal-versus-conservative standoff by showing that the ideological commitments advanced by each were accommodated by Burke. He writes that "Conservatives, classical liberals, and libertarians are fond of extolling the benefits of commodification and competitive capitalism, yet Burke's thought discloses an awareness that life is not simply about entering into temporary socioeconomic arrangements, maximizing one's investment, and satisfying one's material desires" (Collins 2020, p. 535). To that extent, as Collins sees it, Burke bridges the divide. But while it is true that Burkean principles offer what look like lessons in ecumenism in the face of dogged modern partisanship, we also need to bear in mind that the history of post-War party combat does not neatly mirror ideological divisions. In fact, there are no compact 'unit ideas' underlying modern political thought, although academic writers struggle to accept the implications of this conclusion.³

F. A. Hayek famously invoked Burke as an exemplar of what is commonly described as classical liberalism (Hayek 1960). In this he was building on an Austro-Hungarian interest in Burke that had begun with Carl Menger in the late nineteenth century. Burke, Menger believed, had been peculiarly sensitive to the achievement of social order as an unintended consequence of individual choices (Menger 1883). Much of Hayek's intellectual career is a development of that insight. Yet for Collins Hayek's overarching vision needs to be distinguished from Burke's. For Burke, Collins thinks, unlike for Hayek, markets are not merely compatible with morals; rather, morals are an essential precondition for the operation of market society. In this, Collins argues, Hayek diverges from Burke – just as Burke had allegedly set himself apart from the thought of Scottish enlightenment figures (Collins 2019, pp. 502-3). Competition for Hayek drove civilisation, yet for Burke social progress depended on virtue. How do these causal mechanisms work?

Collins's argument at this point is a development of an account of Burke originally advanced by J. G. A. Pocock (1985). For many eighteenth-century Scottish commentators on political economy, Pocock argued, commerce was the engine of social development and the enabling condition of modern sociability. Yet for Burke commercial society was founded on self-interest. While its capacity to increase wealth and refine manners could not be doubted, both these advances depended on an antecedent regulation of behaviour. "Even commerce, and trade, and manufacture," Burke wrote, "the gods of our oeconomical politicians, are themselves perhaps but creatures" (Burke 2001 [1790], p. 242). These "oeconomical politicians," Pocock supposed, referred to students of political economy like David Hume, Adam Smith and John Millar. For each of them commerce was an agent of improvement. However for Burke, Pocock noted, "commerce, and trade, and manufacture" were the effects of deeper causes on whose ongoing support they depended.

We need to ask now whether Pocock was right to have taken Burke's "economists" to refer to Scottish enlightenment thinkers. Burke's long meditation in the *Reflections* on the culture of modern Europe as a product of a system of manners that rose in the aftermath of the age of barbarism triggered by the fall of the Roman Empire follows on immediately from his outraged observations on the treatment of Marie Antoinette during the March on Versailles on 6 October 1789. The "age of chivalry" was gone, Burke wrote; an era of "oeconomists, and calculators" had succeeded (Burke 2001 [1790], p. 238). One period had succeeded another and, at the same time, one mode of conduct had supplanted its opposite: an attitude of ruthless self-assertion had replaced a spirit of accommodation. This is clearly an historical judgment, but it is underpinned by a set of philosophical assumptions. The philosophical point is that human beings are

capable of both ferocity and respect, and that circumstances determine which disposition prevails. Burke shares this perspective with Hume and Smith, and with commentators influenced by their writings like Robertson, Ferguson and Millar. To this extent, therefore, there was no rift between Burke and the Scots. For key differences, which inevitably exist, we must look elsewhere.

Burke's system of "antient chivalry" had multiple components. It comprised deference, self-restraint and a degree of subterfuge. Each of these implied some kind of moral aptitude. Along with their native fierceness, human beings were capable of deferring to the wishes of others, for example out of admiration. By implication, they were also capable of restraining their own desires and aspirations. Deference and self-restraint did not, however, extinguish self-serving inclinations, although operating together they might encourage us to hide the ongoing presence of self-love. To this extent the more generous sentiments, mixed with self-interest, fostered what I have called subterfuge: the capacity to cover up, and inadvertently diminish, the temptations of self-advancement. We are able, Burke was contending, to mask our passions. We could, in effect, civilize our brutal or "bestial" impulses without ceasing in the process to be animals. This involved refining our natures without completely transforming them. Such refinement spawned culture—the "pleasing illusions" and "decent drapery" of life. Culture appeared in this context as a kind of second nature that both camouflaged our vices and increased our fund of virtue. The "defects" of our "naked shivering nature" were incrementally amended by social artifice (Burke 2001 [1790], p. 239).

The process of refining our passions—not only directly, by holding them self-consciously in check, but also indirectly, by disguising their active presence—was commonly seen in the eighteenth century as the source of "politeness." Human behaviour across time, both in rural and urban settings, regularly banked on such circumspection and polish. It was widely thought, however, that politeness flourished under monarchies. Under the Emperor Trajan, Adam Smith observed, the Roman people enjoyed peace and security of property, giving rise to luxury and, with this, the "Refinement of manners" (Smith, 1985, p. 122). Smith, along with many of his contemporaries, thought, however, that ancient monarchies were established on precarious foundations. By comparison, modern "civilized" monarchies, as Hume described them, enjoyed superior security of tenure, and the art of politeness was freer to develop (Hume 1985 [1742], p. 126).

Hume contrasted modern politeness with ancient rusticity. Social and political conditions had given rise to the difference. "Where power rises upwards from the people to the great, as in all republics... refinements of civility are apt to be little practised," he observed (Hume 1985 [1742], p. 126). This was because, as Machiavelli had shown in the case of Rome, where the orders (*ordini*) were pitted against one another an equilibrium was maintained, curtailing social hierarchy and reducing emulation. The contrast with modern monarchy was striking. Here, social differences were extensive but also graduated: "there is a long train of dependence from the prince to the peasant" (Ibid.). The cleavages were not so sharp as to generate open conflict, but they were sufficient to stimulate social aspiration. This fostered an inclination in all members of society to strive to please their superiors. Burke had this process in mind when, in the *Reflections*, he celebrated "that generous loyalty to sex and rank, that dignified submission" which typified French society before the Revolution (Burke 2001 [1790], p. 238). Loyalty and submission characterised relations permeated by what Burke termed a "noble equality"—an equality based on harmonised social differences (Burke 2001 [1790], p. 239).

For Hume, then, reciprocity in modern societies was facilitated by cultural conditions sustained by constitutional arrangements. Those conditions included the habits of politeness fostered by aristocratic manners that prospered in constitutional monarchies. In such a world commerce could readily flourish. Indeed, from a historical perspective, trade and manufactures, as Burke made the point, grew out of this environment in which property was secure and luxury increased. It was only a short step to the conclusion that accommodation in the midst of hierarchy had its origins in the practice of fealty. Fealty was one facet of chivalry. The others were piety and gallantry—or, as Millar put it, "the love of God and the ladies" (Millar 2006 [1771], p. 138). Millar further noted that these principles continued to influence "the taste and sentiments even of the present age" (Millar 2006 [1771], p. 139).

Hume likewise contrasted modern gallantry with the oppressiveness of relations between the genders in earlier civilisations. In promoting “respect” and “complaisance,” gallantry bolstered politeness. True to Burke, Collins observes that “Public opulence derived not simply from the wheel of exchange but from a code of manners” (Collins 2019, p. 487). My point is that this applies equally to Hume, Smith and Millar. Whoever the “oeconomical politicians” snubbed by Burke in the *Reflections* were, they were not the Scottish political economists from whose arguments he was in fact borrowing. For all of these writers, commercial manners over the course of the history of modern Europe had been grafted onto an older collection of civilities rooted in fealty and gallantry. As Hume argued, although we are naturally “proud” and “selfish” in temperament, and “apt to assume the preference above others,” the right culture can dispose us to become more yielding (Hume 1985 [1742], p. 132). Civilised monarchies founded on graduated ranks engendered societies in which acquiescence became habitual.

Adam Smith argued that a purely functional society was in principle possible: “Society may subsist among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection” (Smith 1982 [1759], p. 86). Under such conditions, property would be respected, contracts would be observed, and the principles of basic (commutative) justice would generally be observed. But the social graces would disappear, and beneficence would not be practiced. Social relations would be held together “by a mercenary exchange of good offices” (Ibid.). Mercenary interaction of the kind was not inspiring, even if it was based on a peculiarly human tendency—the “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another” (Smith 1982, pp. 570-71). Animals did not bargain, Smith astutely commented, though the activity came naturally to humans. But while the inclination to “truck” was sufficient for rudimentary cooperation, the absence of beneficence, and consequently of gratitude, would render social relations both atrophied and precarious.

Social manners “beautify and soften” human interaction; in their absence reciprocity is permanently imperilled (Burke 2001 [1790], p. 239). Along with Burke, Smith believed that beneficence was the “ornament that embellishes” social relations. However, at the same time, he also thought that mores could save society from descending into mutual recrimination. Bargaining was best secured against a background of trust. Just as Burke had drawn attention to the emotions of pity and fear awakened by the sight of greatness brought low in the figure of Marie Antionette (Burke 2001 [1790], p. 243), so Smith reflected on the spectacle of a “fall from greatness” as shocking to the human mind (Smith 1982 [1759], p. 56). Where manners founded on the esteem of social preeminence were replaced by empty forms of equality suffused with bitterness and rancor, opportunity was ampler for envy, malice and resentment.

None of this is to argue that the reconciliation of virtue and utility in Burke’s thought involved a simple reprise of Scottish enlightenment ideas. The differences between them were manifold, as one might expect.⁴ For one thing, Burke believed that Christianity facilitated morals while Hume was a persistent critic of piety and other faith-based virtues. At the same time, it is important to recognise that Burke’s position did not mean that he disavowed enlightenment in the service of religious conviction. On the contrary, he shared with Montesquieu, Rousseau and Kant a commitment to faith as a vehicle of improvement. But he also shared with Hume, Smith and Millar the insight that market relations were supported by forms of socialisation that reconciled us to disparities in fortune. None of these figures doubted that utility motivated productivity; but, equally, they all agreed that what Hegel would term the “system of needs” (Hegel 1991 [1821], §190) would have to be buttressed by the social virtues if capitalism was to survive. For economic exchange to function at any level of complexity, self-interest would have to be, in Burke’s words, “subdued by manners” (Burke 2001 [1790], p. 239).

NOTES

- 1 For essays on this theme in the history of political thought see Kapossy et al. eds. 2018.
- 2 Cobban 1962; Shklar 1969.
- 3 For “unit ideas” in intellectual history see the first chapter in Lovejoy 1936. For a critique see Skinner 1969. For the persistence of the notion of unit concepts in attempts to understand political ideologies see Bourke 2018.
- 4 On Burke’s reaction to the French Revolution compared to the Scots see Plassart 2015, Chapter 1.

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