

# On Edmund Burke's A Vindication of Natural Society

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SINCE ITS PUBLICATION in 1756, Edmund Burke's *A Vindication of Natural Society* has been the source of not a little confusion and perplexity. Written in the form of a "Letter" to an unidentified "Lord," and ostensibly composed "by a Late Noble Writer," the *Vindication* was the anonymous author's first foray into the republic of letters. Some early readers, including Lord Chesterfield and Bishop Warburton, took the author's attack on "artificial" society at face value, and attributed the work to the late philosopher-statesman Lord Bolingbroke.<sup>1</sup> Others correctly identified the *Vindication* as a clever satire on Bolingbroke and, more generally, the deistic rationalism that was then becoming fashionable among the educated classes. One reviewer even opined that the Letter had been written by "an ingenious young gentleman, a student at the Temple."<sup>2</sup> (Burke was twenty-seven at the time, and had studied law at the Middle Temple.)

Such contrasting views prompted Burke to add a preface to a second edition published in 1757. Without identifying himself as the author, he indicates that the work was meant as a satire, albeit a serious one. Only an ironic read-

ing, he suggests, can square with its actual "design," that is, "to show that, without the exertion of any considerable forces, the same engines which were employed for the destruction of religion might be employed with equal success for the subversion of government."<sup>3</sup>

For most contemporaries, the preface confirmed the suspicion that the *Vindication* was indeed a burlesque; an ironical *reductio ad absurdum* aimed at exploding the "fallacious" principles of Bolingbroke and his "free-thinking" ilk. Burke's clarification did not, however, prevent others from persisting in a literal reading. William Godwin, for example, saw in the *Vindication*'s condemnation of all forms of government an anticipation of his own utopian anarchism. More recently, it has been argued (unpersuasively) that the *Vindication* is "a sober work by Burke, and not a satire."<sup>4</sup> In a more subtle vein, Isaac Kramnick has found enough seriousness in the *Vindication* to declare it an early instance of Burke's "ideological ambivalence."<sup>5</sup>

While the suggestion that Burke "is fighting with himself in its pages" is questionable, there are aspects of the *Vindication* that are likely to puzzle the reader.<sup>6</sup> Such "ambivalence" was probably deliberate, calculated to make the satire all the more effective; indeed, so effective it almost misfired. Yet even when on solid

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ground, the *Vindication's* "arguments" are so patently one-sided and hyperbolic that its author must be judged one of two things: a purblind sophist or a skilled satirist. Critics of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) would charge Burke with sophism; the latter appellation, however, best fits the author of the *Vindication*.

This is not to say that the Letter lacks passages which, in isolation, fully comport with a literal, sincere reading. In context, however, such passages tend to heighten the irony by making a mockery of what might otherwise be held in good conscience. Woodrow Wilson, a warm admirer of Burke, appears to have sensed this peculiar feature of the *Vindication*. "Much that Burke urges against civil society he could urge in good faith, and his mind works soberly upon it. It is only the main thesis that he does not seriously mean."<sup>7</sup>

Given its indirect method and "negative" result (nothing is "vindicated"), it is not altogether surprising that the *Vindication* has received scant attention, even among Burke scholars. Most commentators simply affirm that the Letter was intended as a satire, and that its implicit attack on abstract, "natural" reason anticipates Burke's developed views. Few, however, have sought to show that the work is a parody, or attempted to distinguish its deliberately spurious from its more plausible elements.<sup>8</sup> To do so in a thorough manner would require a monograph. Here I simply seek to resolve certain "ambiguities" in the *Vindication* by examining those parts that merit a (more or less) literal reading, and those that are clearly satirical. In particular, I focus on the noble writer's critique of the "forms of government," which comprises over a third of the Letter. As we shall see, this section contains the main thrust of Burke's satire.

Burke was no less at odds with the *mode*

of reasoning employed by his "free-thinking" contemporaries than with their "dangerous" *conclusions*. He directly linked this mode—at once abstract, simplistic, and unhistorical—to the nascent radicalism of the age.<sup>9</sup> This "preposterous way of reasoning" (as he would later call it) is lampooned throughout the *Vindication*, along with its corollary, that what is "natural" is good, what "artificial" bad.<sup>10</sup> The former is mimicked at the outset, where the writer boldly proclaims that "error and not truth of any kind is dangerous; that ill conclusions can only flow from false propositions, and that to know whether any proposition be true or false it is a preposterous method to examine it by its apparent consequences." Burke's position, of course, was just the opposite: in politics it is precisely the *consequences* that demand utmost consideration. As he later wrote, "Political problems do not primarily concern truth or falsehood. They relate to good or evil. What in the result is likely to produce evil, is politically false: that which is productive of good, politically is true."<sup>11</sup>

Burke next turns his sights on that idealized brand of *naturalism* that Rousseau and others were beginning to make popular in the mid-1700s.<sup>12</sup> In bald, unqualified language, the writer assures us that "Nature ... if left to itself were [*sic*] the best and surest guide" in human affairs, and conversely, that "every endeavor which the art and policy of mankind has used from the beginning of the world to this day, in order to alleviate or cure them [the 'inconveniences' of the 'state of nature'] has only served to introduce new miseries or to aggravate and inflame the old." Such observations form the basis of the distinction between "natural" and "artificial" (or "political") society, and the writer's condemnation of the latter as the chief source of mankind's collective ills. Certainly Burke viewed the natural-artificial dichotomy as shallow, misplaced, and of little rel-

evance to practical morals and politics. As C. B. Macpherson observes, the author of the *Vindication* “wanted to demonstrate what an absurd conclusion (that is, that we should abandon political society and return to a state of nature) could be reached by starting from such abstractions as ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ society.”<sup>13</sup> Beyond the wild accusations the noble writer levels at all forms of “political” society, there is ample support for this conclusion. For instance, the ills of “artificial” society are ultimately blamed on *human nature* itself—hardly a strong inducement for returning to a “state of nature.” Indeed, the all-important transition from “natural” to “political” society is placed squarely on man’s fallen shoulders: “Thus far nature went, and succeeded; but man would go farther.”

This sentence, I believe, is among the keys to understanding the sophisticated satire of the *Vindication*. Here pseudo-Bolingbroke “unwittingly” places nature and man *at odds*, implying that there is something “artificial” in man’s native constitution. He does not, of course, use this word, but he does attribute the leap into “political” society to a defect in human nature: “The great error of our nature is not to know where to stop, not to be satisfied with any reasonable acquirement; not to compound with our condition, but to lose all we have gained by an insatiable pursuit after more.”<sup>14</sup> The “unintended” implication is that man is something *more* than a “natural” being, and that it is consistent with his *nature* to enter civil society; a position held (in one form or another) by a long line of political thinkers, from Plato and Aristotle to Hobbes and Locke. The simple dualism of “natural” and “artificial” is essentially meaningless as applied to human affairs.<sup>15</sup> Having tacitly undercut the central presupposition behind the attack on “political” society, Burke paves the way for the *reductio ad absurdum* which follows.

We are now in a position to proceed

with our original query: What in the *Vindication* can be read in a (more or less) literal vein and what is decidedly satirical? As suggested above, the question does not always admit a clear-cut answer.<sup>16</sup> Just as there is a grain of truth in many of the writer’s most dubious claims, the most defensible ones are not without a portion of error. This fact, no doubt, contributed to the initial confusion regarding Burke’s intent. It also speaks to his subtlety and broad-mindedness: the *Vindication* is no simple spoof, but a work of considerable depth and artistry. It would be mistaken to say it is always possible to determine precisely when and to what degree Burke is being serious or ironical. Without the assistance of the added preface and his subsequent writings, an attempt to separate even the more obvious instances would largely be a matter of guesswork. With the benefit of hindsight, however, it is possible to discern something like a pattern in the literary hybrid that is the *Vindication*.

The first substantive attack on “artificial” society is perhaps the easiest to decipher. Here the writer aims to show that enmity, war, and destruction are not merely the grievous *appendages* of “political” society, but constitute its very *essence*. With an unflinching eye and notable economy, the writer chronicles history’s sad parade of carnage, which he blames on the division of peoples into “artificial” societies. As such, the *Vindication*’s bracing account of collective brutality (complete with a running body count) may be taken at face value. Burke was too serious a thinker to trivialize such horrific events with satire. Only near the section’s close does he signal his actual intent. Here the author blames “the whole of these effects on political society,” which “is justly chargeable with much the greatest part of this destruction of the species.” Admitting that the fault (in part) rests with “a haugh-

teness and fierceness in human nature," he nevertheless insists that "political regulations" are responsible for making human conflicts "so frequent, so cruel, and attended with consequences so deplorable."

In broader context, the most striking feature of such statements is their *circularity*. The writer tacitly concedes that something in human *nature* drove mankind into "political" society, which by its nature resulted in the "glaring" horrors he so rightly condemns. Is there not, then, a certain inevitability about this "deplorable" state of affairs? And if "artificial" society is inevitable, have not some societies served the cause of humanity better than others? Apparently not, for the noble writer tars them all with the same brush: Egypt, Assyria, Persia, Judea, Greece, Rome, the barbarian kingdoms, and the modern nation-states are all raked together into one damnable heap. No writer with Burke's historical sense would show such flippancy in cataloguing the sins of "artificial" societies. Nor would he exhibit a total lack of appreciation for the palpable *benefits, advances, and achievements* which have paralleled the crimes of organized peoples. This is perhaps the most spurious aspect of the *Vindication's* abridged history: it is one-sided in the extreme, for it wholly fails to consider the palpable *advantages* of civilization.

The noble writer turns to consider the different forms of government in terms of their relation to mankind's God-given "ideas, axioms, rules of what is pious, just, fair, honest...." Initially he suggests that some regimes are in greater conformity with these principles than others. Assessing regime-types in accordance with such standards first arose among the ancient Greeks—the earliest recorded discussion appearing in Herodotus. Plato, and particularly Aristotle, approached the matter in a more systematic way, making regime-analysis a centerpiece of

political science. A "curious" aspect of the *Vindication's* analysis is its departure from the standard mode of classification.

In the *Republic*, for example, Plato detailed how the "rule of the best" devolves into timarchy, and thereafter into oligarchy, democracy, anarchy, and finally tyranny. Later, in the *Statesman*, he contrasted regimes which governed on the basis of law—monarchy, aristocracy, democracy—with their "corrupt," lawless opposites—tyranny, oligarchy, anarchy. In his last dialogue, the *Laws*, Plato introduced the notion that the best practicable state (the "law state") will occupy an "intermediary" position between different regime types. Such a state "will form a mean between a monarchical and a democratic constitution, and our constitution should always stand mid-way between these." Building on Plato, Aristotle conducted a detailed analysis of actual regimes, but retained the basic taxonomy (and emphasis on law) developed by his teacher. He did, however, maintain that the best state in practice ("polity") will exhibit a judicious blend of oligarchic and democratic principles—a "mixed" constitution.

For the remainder of the ancient period, and again in the later Middle Ages, many political thinkers adopted some form of Aristotelian classification and analysis. Polybius, for example, attributed the success of the Roman republic to its "mixed" constitution, particularly in terms of moderating the clash of popular and aristocratic interests. Among medieval writers, Thomas Aquinas largely followed Aristotle and also endorsed a form of mixed government. During the Renaissance, even innovative writers such as Machiavelli could not entirely escape the influence of classical categories.

In canvassing the forms of government, the author of the *Vindication* veers sharply from this long tradition—a departure all the more remarkable for its presumed adherence to precedent. Instead of dis-

tinguishing regime-types on the basis of conformity to law or the blending of constitutional principles, he simply excoriates *all* forms of government as (more or less) equally pernicious. For pseudo-Bolingbroke, “monarchy,” “aristocracy,” and “democracy” are just different words for “tyranny,” “oligarchy,” and “anarchy”; they are all *inherently* malign forms of “artificial” society. Even “mixed” government—the famed remedy for the defects of the simple modes—is condemned as little better than a “tyranny.”

From this summary, it should be clear that the *Vindication*’s treatment of regime-types was intended as a deliberate parody. In addition to its collapse of categories, the writer’s hyperbolic solecisms all point to the same conclusion. Here, at least, one can agree that the satirical aim of the work “should have been obvious to any but the illiterate.”<sup>17</sup> A few examples will suffice to confirm the assertion.

Beyond omitting “true” (lawful, limited, constitutional) monarchy from his account of one-man rule, the writer’s depiction of “despotism” does not instantly belie a satirical intent. Given his audience (freedom-loving, despot-hating Britons), it would have been difficult to strain reader credulity on this score. That despotism is a detestable form of government will, of course, be denied by no one of sense—to urge the point amounts to little more than redundancy.<sup>18</sup> Circularity is compounded by a series of dubious assertions that give rise to further suspicions regarding the author’s candor. For instance, he observes that the “favorites and ministers” of a prince are invariably worse than the prince himself, who in most cases “is governed in as arbitrary a manner as he governs the wretches subjected to him.” Apparently there is no such thing as a *prudent* advisor, a *reputable* counselor, or a minister of *trust*, much less a *good* king: tyrants, knaves, and criminals all. Even “anarchy,” we are told, nay “death itself is preferable” to the “slavery”

of despotism.

The generous reader might attribute the *Vindication*’s overwrought treatment of “despotism” to a just indignation at tyranny and a sincere enthusiasm for liberty. Even the unsuspecting, however, will pause at the author’s concluding remarks on the subject, for upon affirming that despotism is “worse than the most disorderly anarchies,” he proposes to consider “[h]ow much other forms [of government] exceed this....” If tyranny is worse than the worst anarchy, what can be worse than tyranny?

Similar inconsistencies arise when the writer turns from despotism to “aristocracy.”<sup>19</sup> His “account” of aristocracy’s origins—the overthrow of a tyrant by a group of discomfited nobles—follows traditional lines. But instead of distinguishing aristocracy from oligarchy, he lapses into a series of unqualified and suspect assertions. While aristocracy may have originated from laudable motives, “it is now found by abundant experience, that an *aristocracy* and a *despotism* differ but in name; and that a people who are in general excluded from any share of the legislature, are to all intents and purposes, as much slaves, when twenty, independent of them, govern, as when but one domineers.” If the notion that an “aristocracy”—*any* aristocracy—is no different from a “despotism” appears odd, the assertion that those barred from legislating for themselves are no better than “slaves” supports the suspicion. An aristocracy is by definition *exclusionary*, but it is *not* for that reason the same as a *tyranny*, any more than either Genoa or Venice was simply “a concealed *despotism*.” Such glib reductionism overlooks important differences between aristocracy and autocracy—differences only the myopic could fail to recognize.

The author does, however, acknowledge that “[i]n one respect the *aristocracy* is worse than *despotism*.” While “it is pos-



sible to meet with some good princes”—benevolent despots as it were—“[n]ever was it known that an *aristocracy*, which was haughty and tyrannical in one century, became easy and mild in the next.” In addition to contradicting earlier statements regarding the *intrinsically* tyrannical nature of despotism, the sweeping indictment of aristocracy is easily contradicted by the experience of Great Britain itself. It is no surprise, then, that Denmark, Poland, and Venice, but not England, are enlisted as supporting examples. In his remarks on Venice—long admired as a model of political stability—the writer takes exaggeration to new heights. Not only are the people of Venice “slaves” who have been “denied...the liberty of reason” by the ruling oligarchy, they are as “scandalously debauched a people” as any in the world. Remarkably, the oligarchic masters, instead of prospering under this dispensation, are themselves “in an infinitely severer state of slavery.” If this were not enough to raise the brow of even a credulous reader, the assertion that “the regular and methodical proceedings of an *aristocracy* are more intolerable than the very excesses of a *despotism*” must give pause.

Having “shown” that aristocracy “is no more than a disorderly tyranny,” the writer proceeds to examine “democracy.”<sup>20</sup> Given his zeal for the natural “rights of man,” one might expect a more sympathetic treatment of a form of government founded upon the sovereignty of the people. As noted above, however, he simply ignores the distinction between democracy and ochlocracy (or mob rule) and condemns “popular” government root and branch. We learn, for example, that ancient Athens first degenerated into a tyranny not by foreign conquest or accident, “but by the very nature and constitution of a *democracy*.” And while the Roman republic conducted its affairs “with greater wisdom and more uniformity,” it did so only “so far as related to the

ruin and oppression of the greatest part of the world....” Neither the ancient republics, Carthage and Sparta included, nor the modern ones, such as Florence and Venice, were much better. Indeed, the differences in these regimes are declared superficial and irrelevant, for they are “all alike in effect; in effect...all tyrannies.”<sup>21</sup>

Among the obvious defects in this account is its failure to distinguish the actual forms of government in question. This is apparent in the writer’s indiscriminate use of “democracy,” “republic,” and “popular” government. Not a few of Burke’s readers, however, were aware of important differences between the “democracies” of the ancient world, between these and the modern republics, and among these republics themselves. Periclean Athens may with some justice be labeled a democracy, but Rome, Sparta, and Carthage were well-known examples of the “mixed” regime, which combined elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. Renaissance Florence and Venice, while known as “republics,” also partook (in differing degrees) of the mixed form. The *Vindication* simply ignores the varieties of “popular” government and the relative merits of such regimes. Since most of the inhabitants of these nations did not enjoy even a “nominal political freedom,” the writer finds it absurd that they should be described as “free states.” The fact that not a few persons who lived under “popular” governments did enjoy *some* measure of freedom, and at least a *share* in political power, is conveniently overlooked. Hence, whatever name one chooses to attach to such states, “they must appear in reality and truth, no better than pitiful and oppressive oligarchies.” “Natural reason,” it would appear, is a decidedly blunt instrument when applied to the dissection of popular regimes.

At this point in the Letter, even the obtuse reader will begin to sense that the *Vindication* is a parody. The suspicion is

piqued when pseudo-Bolingbroke pauses to pronounce the veracity of his claims. "After so fair an examen [*sic*], wherein nothing has been exaggerated; no fact produced which cannot be proved, and none which has been produced in any wise forced or strained, while thousands have, for brevity, been omitted; after so candid a discussion in all respects; what slave so passive, what bigot so blind, what enthusiast so headlong, what politician so hardened, as to stand up in defense of a system calculated for a curse to mankind?"

With this mocking cant the *Vindication* attains the acme of ironic absurdity. For the noble author has *exaggerated* much, *proved* very little, *omitted* a great deal, and been far less than *candid*. There is, of course, a strong dose of truth in his attack on government and "artificial" society. Yet the sensible reader is time and again compelled to reply that it is the *abuse* of power, rather than government *per se*, which is rightly condemned. This distinction is flatly denied. "In vain you tell me that artificial government is good, but that I fall out only with the abuse. The thing! The thing itself is the abuse!"<sup>22</sup> Such an "incomparable force of reasoning and luster of eloquence" may have bouyed Godwin's anarchism, but it is poorly calculated to move more sober heads.<sup>23</sup>

The noble writer concludes his polemic on "political" society with an attack on the so-called "mixed" constitution, of which eighteenth-century Great Britain provided the most illustrious example.<sup>24</sup> As noted above, the mixed constitution—in some form or another—had been praised by the ancients (Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Polybius) as a corrective to the inherent defects of the "simple" modes of government.<sup>25</sup> Even in the later Middle Ages, when princes and prelates dominated the political landscape, the concept of the mixed regime remained a venerable ideal among a number of impor-

tant thinkers. During the Renaissance, the mixed constitution was revived, both in theory and in practice, in some of the Italian city-states. The "Serene Republic" of Venice, for instance, was invariably singled out for its stability, which was attributed to the judicious blending of monarchical, aristocratic, and (to a lesser degree) popular elements. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli (*pace* Polybius) praised Rome's mixed constitution as the key to the Republic's strength and longevity, and the safeguard of its citizens' liberties. Under the influence of the Roman model, he divided power among a number of bodies and incorporated a system of checks and balances in his plan for remodeling the Florentine state.

After the Restoration (1660) the British constitution embodied a balanced or mixed regime, insofar as king, lords, and commons shared power and exercised a due measure of restraint over one another. Just as Polybius and Machiavelli attributed Rome's success to its mixed polity, thinkers such as Hume and Montesquieu identified this mixture as the chief source of English liberty, prosperity, and stability. Such accounts did not always square with practice, but there was a general consensus that Great Britain in no small part owed its enviable position in the world to its "mixed" form of government.

Against this backdrop, the author's frontal assault on the mixed constitution is highly revealing. Having overcome his "prejudice" for "this last contrivance of policy," he denies that "the errors of the several simple modes are corrected by a mixture of all of them, and a proper balance of the several powers...." "[S]uch a government must be liable to frequent cabals, tumults, and revolutions, from its very constitution." Far from a corrective, the mixed constitution gives rise to incessant conflict within the government over the use of authority and the right of office, while "all manner of abuses and villainies

in officers remain unpunished, the greatest frauds and robberies in the public revenues are committed in defiance of justice; and abuses grow by time and impunity into customs....” Moreover, “the several parts of this species of government, though united, preserve the spirit which each form has separately. Kings are ambitious, the nobility haughty, and the populace tumultuous and ungovernable.” Instead of serving to restrain one another and preserve a balance, the “government is one day arbitrary power in a single person, another a juggling confederacy of a few to cheat the prince and enslave the people, and the third, a frantic and unmanageable democracy.” At the root of all of these mutations, “and what infuses a peculiar venom into all of them,” is the spirit of “party”; “the spirit of ambition, of self-interest, of oppression, and treachery.” So pernicious is this spirit, that it “entirely reverses all the principles which a benevolent nature has erected within us; all honesty, all equal justice, and even the ties of natural society, the natural affections.” And while there would appear nothing worse than a despotism ...or an aristocracy...or a democracy, “such oppression from party government [is such] as no tyranny can parallel.”

Up to this point, the writer has attacked mixed government *in abstracto*, without direct reference to the political system of Great Britain. Now he applies his general conclusions to the English constitution with a vengeance. Assuring readers that “I do not put forth half my strength,” the writer proceeds to savage the British polity and “the excesses of party...in our own nation.” The notion that such “excesses” have been moderated by a division of power and statutory protections is summarily dismissed. Indeed, the “opportunity of doing all this mischief...had [its] origin and growth from the complex form of government [itself]....” Far from serving as a brake on arbitrary power, England’s “complex” government has

spawned a long line of kings and parliaments who debauched the constitution, abused public authority, and trampled the “rights of man.” Such “evils” have repeatedly called out for “reformations,” but only resulted in “reformations more grievous than any evils.”<sup>26</sup> Of what value, then, is a “mixed” constitution that not only fails to moderate, but actively fosters “corruption, venality, the contempt of honor, the oblivion of all duty to our country, and the most abandoned public prostitution...”? Whether such evils “are preferable to the more glaring and violent effects of faction [in a democracy],” the self-effacing nobleman “will not presume to determine.”

With this Parthian shot pseudo-Bolingbroke completes his demolition of the forms of government, ancient and modern, simple and mixed. Yet as a committed “follower of Truth” he is too clever to believe that the “Leviathan of Civil Power” can be slain without striking directly at its roots. There is something even more fundamental to “political” society than government—*law*. Though suffering the same “defects” which expose the *Vindication* as a species of satire, the diatribe on law is remarkable as a specimen of literary sensibility, and not without rhetorical effect, moral seriousness, even humor. Like all classic writers, Burke often defies paraphrasing, which is much the case here. It will be necessary, however, to hazard a few summations.

While the noble author invoked the authority of Locke in condemning “tyranny” and defending “natural” society, his account of the origins of law turns Locke rudely on his head.<sup>27</sup> In his *Second Treatise of Government* (1690), Locke drew a generally benign picture of the pre-political “state of nature,” but reasoned that its “inconveniences” (the absence of an impartial arbiter of disputes) could only be remedied by a more settled, regular



form of social organization: what Locke calls “civil society,” a society based on law. The writer abruptly upsets the Lockean solution. Earlier the author acknowledged the “many and great inconveniences” in the “state of nature,” but cast grave doubts on the desirability of the “cure.” Yet mankind, not knowing “where to stop,” pressed headlong into “artificial” society. And since “nature has formed no bond of union” beyond the family, the founders of states “supplied this defect by laws.” The promise of law, however, would prove illusory. The first judges, whose word alone was law, soon became arbitrary and corrupt. In defense, men “flew” to written laws, persuaded that parchments would provide “some certainty upon what ground we stood.” “But lo! Differences arose upon the sense and interpretation of these laws. Thus we were brought back to our old incertitude.” With this revelation Burke’s prose rises to the majesty of his subject.

New laws were made to expound the old, and new difficulties arose upon the new laws; as words multiplied, opportunities of caviling upon them multiplied also. Then recourse was had to Notes, Comments, Glosses, Reports, *Responsa Prudentum*, learned readings: Eagle stood against Eagle: Authority was set up against authority. Some were allured by the modern, others revered the ancient. The new were more enlightened, the old more venerable. Some adopted the Comment, others stuck to the text. The confusion increased, the mist thickened, until it could be discovered no longer what was allowed or forbidden, what things were in property, and what common. In this uncertainty (uncertainty even to the professors, an *Egyptian* darkness to the rest of mankind) the contending parties felt themselves more effectually ruined by the delay than they could have been by the injustice of any decision. Our inheritances are become a prize for disputation; and disputes and litigations are become an inheritance.

Anyone ever confounded by the law

(or lawyers) will find not a little to sympathize with here. Burke himself found law sufficiently disagreeable to abandon a legal career over the protests of his father, an attorney himself. He did not, however, share the *Vindication*’s one-sided view of law.<sup>28</sup> The realm of law may be subject to abuses and obfuscation, but the implication that “the thing itself” is the evil merely recapitulates the *reductio* in a related key. This is also apparent in the writer’s indictment of the broader injustices of “political” society and its “artificial law,” which compels the poor “to administer to the idleness, folly, and luxury of the rich.” The charge contains too much truth to dismiss off-hand, but too little to fully persuade. Only an insensible reader could smile at the *Vindication*’s vivid scenes of brutality, suffering, and injustice. But the noble writer’s insensibility toward *anything* but “the Bedlam of our system” belies the very sophistry Burke set out to satirize. Of the palpable *merits* of “artificial” society—the benefits of law, religion, commerce, and culture—we hear nothing. “Natural” reason, free from “the fancies and contrivances of artificial reason,” instructs that such “benefits” are more apparent than real. Even the rich and powerful are incapable of true enjoyment, for their self-indulgence and anxiety reduces them to “a far lower condition” than the masses they have ostensibly enslaved. Indeed, their “artificial method of life” brings “worse evils on themselves than their tyranny could possibly inflict on those below them.” That few among the rich *or* poor, mighty *or* weak would be disposed to share this view is wholly lost on the fearless writer.

The final touches of the *Vindication*’s damning portrait of “artificial” society aim to blot out the “arguments” made by its defenders: “that this unequal state is highly useful. That without dooming some part of mankind to extraordinary toil, the arts

which cultivate life could not be exercised"; "that civil society could not well exist without them." By way of rejecting this "circle" of "error and extravagance," the writer compresses all his earlier charges into one final indictment; that however perverse the causes and effects of "artificial" religion, the depredations of "artificial" society are worse still.

Here we arrive at the deeper purpose of the *Vindication's* satire. Bolingbroke had argued against "artificial" (revealed) religion, but did not foresee that similar thinking might undermine *all* religion, "natural" or otherwise. Nor did he anticipate that the "same engines" leveled at religion, might be directed at the foundations of "political" society itself.<sup>29</sup> Burke makes both points in one double-edged thrust, slyly tipping his hand to the reader: "If after all you should confess all these [terrible] things [about artificial society], yet plead the necessity of political institutions, weak and wicked as they are, I can argue with equal, perhaps superior force concerning the necessity of artificial religion; and every step you advance in your argument, you add a strength to mine."

It has been said that with this sentence, "Burke turned his irony completely around."<sup>30</sup> More accurately, Burke retains the ironic voice while "unconsciously" drawing the "unforeseen" implications of the attack on "artificial" society. The result is doubly ironic, as the writer is "unknowingly" hoisted on his own petard. Blind to the consequences of his logic, he calls upon readers to "renounce their dreams of [artificial] society, together with their visions of religion, and vindicate ourselves into perfect liberty."

In the Letter's final paragraph, the writer observes that he is near the end of life, while the young lord he is addressing is "just entering into the world." With a tone of philosophical resignation, he muses that with the approach of death "we begin to understand the true value of

our existence, and the real weight of our opinions." But what precisely *do* we understand? Namely, that we have gone through life in a state of illusion; that our most cherished opinions regarding religion and government cannot withstand "the cool light of reason"; that it is only "the passions which prop [up] these opinions," and our happier moments which gave them a "false splendor."<sup>31</sup> With these words, the irony of the *Vindication* reaches its terminus. The crusader of truth is now the satiated sage—freed from one set of "illusions" only to sink to the grave possessed of far greater.

It has been the aim of this essay to clarify the meaning and purpose of the *Vindication* as a work of political satire. On one hand, Burke turns the argument for "natural" society into a farce, and exposes the "dangerous" (and often unintended) social consequences of "natural" reason.<sup>32</sup> The assault on "artificial" society, however, is not without a degree of seriousness and weight. As Macpherson has written, "Burke shows himself fully aware of the case that can be made against the political, legal, economic and moral order of eighteenth-century advanced societies," and "was quite well aware... how much the prevailing order had to answer for."<sup>33</sup> Burke did not, therefore, believe his parody of "natural" society constituted a vindication of "political" society: this would be a by-product of the remaining forty years of his life.

The *Vindication* is fundamentally negative in its result; limited to exploding the faulty reasoning and absurd conclusions Burke associated with the "abstract" critique of established religion and existing governments. His constructive views on such matters—on law, human nature, civil society, church and state—were never put forward in a systematic manner. Burke was first and foremost a statesman and party leader who emphatically eschewed "abstract" theorizing in politics.<sup>34</sup> At one time or another, he did address these

subjects in a more or less general manner, though never in complete detachment from the issues at hand. Had the aim here been to prove that the *Vindication* was meant as a satire (an issue settled by the 1757 preface), it would have been necessary to draw upon relevant examples every step of the way. An attempt to *characterize* the Letter, however, does not call for such evidence, but rather assumes its presence. Still, a full understanding of the *Vindication* requires some familiarity with Burke's stated views, which were formed early and remained fundamentally consistent thereafter. While beyond the scope of this essay, I have attempted to convey something of the tenor of these views in the notes.

While minor in relation to his other writings, the *Vindication* remains worth reading, and not merely as an introduction to Burke's political thought, although it is certainly important in this regard.<sup>35</sup> The principal value of the *Vindication*—the source of its enduring relevance—resides in its unstated, but undeniable focus on the relation between how we *think* about society, religion, and politics, and the *status* of our religious, social, and political institutions. As such, the *Vindication* speaks to a series of questions long at the heart of politics: how to reconcile theory and practice, principle and prescription, rights and duties, liberty and order, reason and nature, the

desirable and the obtainable, equality and merit, justice and expediency. The teaching of the Letter, the teaching of Burke, is that there are no easy or settled answers to these perennial concerns; that the "science of government" is "a matter which requires experience, and even more experience than any person can gain in his whole life, however sagacious and observing he may be"; that "[t]he nature of man is intricate; that the objects of society are of the greatest complexity"; that "the constitution of a state and the due distribution of its powers [is] a matter of the most delicate and complicated skill"; that it "requires a deep knowledge of human nature and human necessities, and of the things which facilitate or obstruct the various ends which are to be pursued by the mechanism of civil institutions." Accordingly, "no simple disposition or direction of power can be suitable either to man's nature or to the quality of his affairs;" and so "it is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or on building it up again without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes."<sup>36</sup> Though written thirty-five years after the *Vindication*, these nuggets of Burke's mature thought are latent even in his earliest work.

1. The "philosophical" works of Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke were written mainly in the 1730s, but not published until the early 1750s after his death. Apparently "the primary target of Burke's satire" was the late Lord's *Letters on the Study and Use of History*. F. P. Lock, *Edmund Burke, Vol. 1, 1730-1784* (Oxford, 1998), 82. That not a few educated readers could mistake the *Vindication* for a work of Bolingbroke was owing to Burke's adroit imitation of the late Lord's style and tone, but also to the advertisement for the first edition, which dates the work at 1748 and accounts for its failure to appear in the author's collected works. Bolingbroke's writings were published three years

after his death in 1754, and Burke assumes the persona of an elderly "noble writer" approaching death's door. 2. *Critical Review*, 1 (June 1756), 420. 3. Edmund Burke, *A Vindication of Natural Society*, ed. Frank N. Pagano (Indianapolis, 1982), 6. Pagano reprints the second, revised edition of 1757. Capitalization, spelling, and punctuation have been modified in accordance with current usage. 4. Murray N. Rothbard, "A Note on Burke's *Vindication of Natural Society*," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 19 (1958), 117. For a devastating rejoinder see James C. Weston, Jr., "The Ironic Purpose of Burke's *Vindication Vindicated*," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 19 (1958), 435-441. 5. Isaac Kramnick,

*The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of An Ambivalent Conservative* (New York, 1977), 92. 6. "So much of the letter perplexes," writes Pagano, "that it is not surprising that in no obvious way does the noble writer vindicate natural society." *Vindication*, xix. 7. Quoted in *Edmund Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Peter Stanlis (Washington, D.C., 1963), 41. 8. A notable exception is Frank Pagano's "Burke's View of the Evils of Political Theory; or, A *Vindication of Natural Society*," *Polity*, 17 (1985), 446-462. Pagano's reading of the *Vindication* is broadly consistent with my own, although my focus differs considerably. 9. As Conor Cruise O'Brien notes, the *Vindication* "described the nature of the pre-revolutionary process, then at a very early stage," and is "therefore an outstanding example of Burke's capacity to foresee what is about to happen, out of the depths of his insight into what is already happening." *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke* (Chicago, 1992), 449. 10. Burke's attack on "rationalism" and "naturalism" was based on the *misapplication* of the one and *misconstrual* of the other in the realm of politics, not on reason and nature *per se*. "Reason" and "nature," particularly human nature, play a leading role in Burke's own political thinking. Indeed, a deep understanding of the place of reason and human nature in politics is among the most distinctive features of his thought. See Francis Canavan, *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke* (Durham, 1960) and Peter Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and Natural Law* (Ann Arbor, 1958). 11. *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791), in *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Daniel E. Ritchie (Indianapolis, 1992), 163. Conversely, it is "[c]ircumstances... [which] 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." *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Indianapolis, 1987), 7. 12. As C. P. Courtney observes, "it is fairly certain that by his attack on the notion of the superiority of natural to civil society, [Burke] was aiming also at Rousseau's *Discours sur l'inégalité*," published the year before the *Vindication*. Montesquieu and Burke (Oxford, 1963), 41. 13. C. B. Macpherson, *Burke* (Oxford, 1980), 18. 14. Ironically, it was just this observation that led Hobbes to conclude that only an absolute government could prevent "a war...of every man against every man," *viz.*, "a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death." *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakshott (New York, 1962), 100, 80. 15. Burke swept the natural-artificial dichotomy away in a single phrase ("Art is man's nature"), adding that political society is more consistent with man's true constitution than a "state of *rude* nature." Indeed,

the "state of civil society...is a state of nature; and much more truly so than a savage and incoherent mode of life." *Appeal*, 169, 163, 168. 16. For this reason it is misleading to claim (as Macpherson has) that Burke's "whole argument was intended ironically. He meant the opposite of what he said." *Burke*, 18. 17. Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* (New Rochelle, 1967), 31. 18. Burke was an inveterate foe of despotism in any form, which he once defined as "a mode of government bound by no written rules and coerced by no controlling magistrates or well settled orders in the state." He did not, however, equate monarchy with despotism, but made distinctions between its tyrannical, absolute, and constitutional forms. The first can never be legitimate and may with justice be overthrown by "downright revolt"; the second, if at all "defensible," requires the sustained application of "equity and moderation" on the part of the ruler; while the last (and preferred) form derives legitimacy from its lawful and limited nature. Hastings Trial, Feb. 16, 1788, in *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, 16 vols. (London, 1803-1827), XIII:169-170. In general, Burke values monarchy for its tendency to promote continuity in governance, lend support to the social order, and secure the rights of property. It is not monarchy *per se*, then, but rather "those principles of property, order, and regularity for which alone any rational man can wish monarchy to exist." In his famous attack on the French Revolution, Burke called for the restoration of the monarchy, albeit limited by a "free constitution" on the British pattern. As much as he despised the revolutionary French government, Burke "could not actively or with a good heart and clear conscience go to the reestablishment of a monarchical despotism...." To Richard Burke, Jr., Sept. 26, 1791, in *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. Thomas Copeland, 10 vols. (Chicago, 1958-1978), VI:413, 414. In short, Burke viewed monarchy as a means and not an end; a necessary ingredient to the well-being of the social and political order. For this reason (and for his support of *limited* monarchy) Burke considered himself a "reasonable" monarchist. As he explained to a French correspondent, "*Je suis Royaliste, mais Royaliste raisonné.*" To Monsieur de Sandouville, Oct. 13, 1792, *Correspondence*, VII:263. 19. Burke was a principled defender of aristocracy, particularly the English aristocracy which dominated the political life of eighteenth-century Britain. More generally, he viewed aristocracy as a counter-weight to absolute monarchy on one hand and democratic tyranny on the other. Without the "aristocratic principle," he informed his son, "every dominion must become a mere despotism of the prince or the brutal tyranny of a ferocious and atheistic populace." To Richard Burke, Jr., July 29, 1792, *Correspondence*, VII:160. Yet where aristocracy manifested itself as an



oppressive oligarchy unchecked by popular elements (*viz.*, the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland), Burke turned from a staunch defender to a determined opponent. 20. As with monarchy and aristocracy, Burke gave qualified support to the democratic principle in government. On one hand, he was utterly hostile to a "pure" or "direct" democracy, which he called "the most shameful thing in the world." He also opposed representative democracy, particularly when bereft of the moderating principles of heredity and property. On the other hand, he recognized the great importance of incorporating popular elements into the body politic. All men, high and low, had certain basic rights (though not to all things), and "in order to secure their freedom...[the low] must enjoy some determinate portion of power." *Reflections*, 82, 47. In the British constitution, this power resided in the popularly-elected House of Commons, which served as a check on the hereditary lords and monarch. Burke did not, therefore, reject the popular element in government, but considered it an essential component of a balanced polity, particularly as a brake on aristocratic arrogance. 21. The notion that "free governments" have really been nothing more than "tyrannies" is repeated near the end of the *Vindication*. Here the author asserts that from "the point of their space, and the moment of their duration, [they] have felt more confusion, and committed more flagrant acts of tyranny, than the most perfect despotic governments which we have ever known." (88) Such "unremitting pessimism," Pagano duly notes, is "[w]hat distinguishes the *Vindication* from its liberal antecedents...." "Burke's View," 451. 22. Even radicals like Thomas Paine accepted the state as a "necessary evil." Burke, however, viewed government in a much more positive vein. In addition to recognizing that "[a] certain quantum of power must always exist in the community in some hands and under some appellation," he viewed the state as the *raison d'être* for mankind's enhancement. At one point he even identifies the state as a manifestation of God's will: "He who gave our nature to be perfected by our virtue, willed also the necessary means of its perfection—He willed therefore the state." *Reflections*, 86. 23. Quoted in Stanlis, *Writings and Speeches*, 41. 24. Burke was among the greatest defenders of the British constitution and "the mixed and tempered government" it embodied. Along with England's "established church," he vowed to defend "an established monarchy, an established aristocracy, and an established democracy, each in the degree it exists, and in no greater." *Reflections*, 109, 80. 25. Burke continued this tradition, observing that "simple governments are fundamentally defective." *Reflections*, 54. Accordingly, he condemned the all-powerful, unicameral French Assembly, and prescribed a form of mixed government as a remedy for the political ills of the Revolution. 26. While

often identified as an implacable defender of status quo, Burke viewed himself, not unjustly, as a *cautious reformer*. Even in his so-called "revolutionary" phase, he fully understood that state without the means of some change is with the means of its conservation." *Reflections*, 19. At the same time, he counseled "those who would reform a state...to assume some actual constitution of government which is to be reformed." Letter to a Member of the National Assembly (1791), in *Further Reflections*, 61. 27. "The whole discussion of law," notes Pagano "seems to be an attack on Locke's solution to the inconvenience of the state of nature." *Vindication*, 72n. 28. The great necessity and value of law was self-evident to Burke and, as such, required no defense. In passing, however, he did refer to law as "one of the first and noblest of human sciences; a science which does more to quicken and invigorate the understanding than all the other kinds of learning put together...." Speech on American Taxation, April 19, 1777, in *Selected Writings of Edmund Burke*, ed. W. J. Bate (New York, 1960), 71. 29. For such reasons Burke opposed all abstract speculation regarding the origins of political society. Given its tendency to foster the belief that "all ancient institutions are the results of ignorance; and that all prescriptive government is in its nature usurpation," it is "always to be lamented when men are driven to search into the foundations of the commonwealth...." Accordingly, "[t]here is a sacred veil to be drawn over the beginnings of all governments." *Appeal*, 190; In the Commons, May 8, 1780, in *The Speeches of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, 4 vols. (London, 1816), II:160; Hastings Trail, Feb. 16, 1788, *Works*, XIII:95. 30. Carl B. Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics: The Age of the American Revolution* (Lexington, Ky., 1957), 23. 31. For Burke, writers who fostered despondency or agitation among the people were guilty of a grave crime. As he lectured his colleagues in the Commons, "a clamor made merely for the purpose of rendering the people discontented with their situation, without an endeavor to give them a remedy, is indeed one of the worst acts of sedition." March 7, 1771, *Speeches*, I:92. 32. On such grounds, Burke warned against "agitating those vexatious questions, which in truth rather belong to metaphysics than politics, and which can never be moved without shaking the foundations of the best governments that have ever been constituted by human wisdom." *Observations on the State of the Nation* (1769), *Works*, II:154. 33. Macpherson, *Burke*, 18, 19. 34. Burke did not "vilify theory and speculation" *per se*, but only "weak, erroneous, fallacious, unfounded, or imperfect theory"; that is, theory which failed to take account of practical realities and prudential considerations. "This is the touchstone of all theories which regard man and the affairs of men," he informed the Commons, "does



it suit his nature in general? Does it suit his nature as modified by habit?" May 7, 1782, *Speeches*, III:48. 35. As Cone observes, "[v]iewed in the light of Burke's life and thought, the *Vindication* ac-

quires added importance as the opening blast in his long campaign against the enemies of the traditional order of things in western Europe." *Burke and the Nature of Politics*, 24. 36. *Reflections*, 53-54.

### TWISTED ANKLE

People sit uncertain and silent,  
Tucking their grief and anger and worry  
Underneath them like luggage at the airport.  
Each nurse who comes to the door  
Draws every head in the room.  
Sorry, not your name. Maybe next time.

Angry heads return to magazines,  
To blithering talk shows, to cracks in the floor.  
Some heads, resting in hands weary with the weight,  
Don't move, but instead mutter and groan  
Like a house settling in winter.  
Another nurse—no luck. Another hour.

Her name is Claudia—she says this loudly several times—  
She is probably German and without her hearing aid.  
"Claudia," she says, pointing to herself. "Claudia Brooks."  
People smile and nod and shift their magazines.  
Claudia sits silently and stares at the floor.  
Another nurse—heads rise.

—Kevin Manus