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Edmund Burke's Conservatism

In the late eighteenth century there arose an Irishman named Edmund Burke. Today, he is considered the father of modern conservatism.

Seriously contending with *Age of Enlightenment* thinkers of the time, Burke raised many astute arguments that are worth noting. With clarity of thought and intuition, he championed the search for truth with as much integrity as his opponents did, but from an entirely different perspective. While Locke and the French philosophers idealized the potential of reason, human nature, and the possibility of creating a better world, Burke eloquently argued for the other side, challenging their ideals with a hefty dose of realism. These conservative challenges are as important to **Chivalry-Now** as all the rest, because they drag Enlightenment idealism back to earth. He did this by pointing out the limits of reason, while extolling the primacy of intuition, along with the wisdom of the ages, on which tradition is based. Here we find the original essence of conservatism, a counterbalance to the new idealistic firestorm that spread across Europe and inspired the founders of the United States.

Burke viewed colonialism as bad, radicalism as dangerous, and democracy as a threat to social stability. He considered governmental conventions as spiritually based and not to be tinkered with.

Some of his other thoughts:

- While he conceded human equality in the eyes of God, he felt no such compunction for equality here on earth.
- Respect for a higher power was essential to his philosophy, no matter what the religion. Church and State were inseparable, but in spiritual, not mechanical sense. Both were derived from God.
- Individual conscience was meant to be directed by "prescription, presumption and prejudice." (His use of the word "prejudice" had nothing to do with bigotry, but with having a sense of innate "pre-judgment.")
- It was not enough to be free. Life had to have meaning as well, and meaning can be found in tradition, folklore and myth.
- History was the unfolding of a design wrought by Heaven, of which today's consumerism would be antithetical.
- Government finds its authority not on a social contract, but on virtuous principles.
- There is a collective intellect, seeped in ancient wisdom, that people inherit and culture safeguards and transmits. We learn about principle through the understanding of nature and history.

Now, at first glance some of this runs contrary to modern sensibilities. Today we are taught to believe in and cherish democracy. This was not the case even for the founders of the United States, whose distrust of the masses produced a republican form of government instead. It was somewhat "democratic," but not a true democracy. This evolved over time, as people gained the right to vote in Senatorial and Presidential elections. Nevertheless, the electoral college remains as one of the early safeguards against democracy, designed to protect people from their own folly. So-called "super-delegates" are considered a safeguard as well.

How should we see democracy today? The sad truth is that most voters do not adequately educate themselves on the issues, are easily swayed by ideological strategists, and often cast their votes for reasons unrelated to the office. Elections have boiled down to popularity contests based on negative advertising. The damage to democracy this has caused is phenomenal. Edmund Burke was not afraid to point this out.

The project of democracy comes with immense responsibility. Those who vote only perform their duty well when they understand the ramifications of who and what they are voting for. They need to be open to both sides of various issues, rather than just the means for paying them. It is important that candidates and political parties then be held accountable for their actions. The media has to report what is going on with integrity, not by treating everyone the same. While "fair and balanced" may sound good, it enforces a level of competitive rules rather than responding to right and wrong. Think tanks have to be more concerned about truth, with all its nuances, rather than shaping people's thoughts.

If democracy is considered dangerous because of the faults and frailties of the masses, who should lead the nation? Burke, like many in his time, believed that the upper class should lead, those who are cultured, well educated, and wealthy enough to resist corruption. He trusted the aggregate opinion and good will of the aristocracy along with successful business people, rather than the people at large. Unfortunately, as we all too often witness today, this too has its dangers. Power and wealth are no safeguard against corruption. We see many powerful and wealthy people indulge in it without restraint. The lessons to be gleaned from this hearken back to Plato's Republic: only people of real virtue should be placed in control, so that virtue leads.

Is it possible to raise a "**virtuous democracy**?"

Why not? If a given culture so cherishes intelligence, virtue and personal responsibility that it makes them endemic, would that not bely the fears of Plato, Edmund Burke and the American founders? Once again, the answers that we seek come down to people and the choices that they make.

Burke's references to God, and that government is shaped by Providence, do not necessarily provide a stumbling block for those who believe in the separation of church and state. While their literal meanings contradict separation, they can be seen in a deeper context, pointing to something greater than a social contract of convenience. For example, the virtues and values we freely inculcate in **Chivalry-Now** must never be seen as rules of convenience, but as qualities we reverence - ideals expressing the very best in human nature. That's because goodness has intrinsic value of its own, for believers and non-believers alike. People of all faiths, or none at all, can join the unity of this vision. I think this would meet Edmund Burke's approval.

Does history support the unfolding of heavenly design that Burke suggests? Maybe so. Maybe not.

In a very real sense, it does not matter. From a sense of moral duty, what matters is that we have the power to contribute to a better world, whether we believe in heavenly design or not.

The conservatism of Edmund Burke raised good questions that not only challenged Enlightenment philosophers, but challenge us today, so that truth is better revealed. This is the way things should be. Rejecting things out of hand makes for a rejection of truths that are otherwise hidden. Digging deep enough, we find ideas that ultimately converge, even when, on the surface, they contradict each other. Hence the importance of an open mind.

Burke once said, "...**it is not permitted that we should trifle with our existence.**"

I can think of no better prologue to the **12 Trusts**, which starts with developing one's life for the greater good, so that we do not "trifle with our existence."

Twentieth century socialist, **Granville Hicks**, once commented on Burke's conservatism in these words: "The Tory has always insisted that, if men would cultivate the individual virtues, social problems would take care of themselves." **Chivalry-Now** suggests the very same conclusion. Social problems are people problems. If a thoughtful, virtuous people stop propagating them, they disappear.

When Burke told us that there is a collective intellect, steeped with ancient wisdom that people inherit, and culture safeguards and helps transmit, he predicted the psychological theory of the **collective unconscious**, from which **Carl Jung** delineated universal archetypes. **Chivalry-Now** points to similar conclusions as part of Nature's Law. We call it **conscience**.

When Burke takes issue with equality, he is arguing from what he feels is observable fact. People are not alike. How can they be equal? They do not enjoy the same personal attributes, including intellectual capacity, education, experience, self-discipline, talent, judgment, etc. This seemed especially true during eighteenth century England, when class distinctions were profoundly distinct, despite the rising middle class.

Today, we take measured care when dealing with the issue of **equality**, paying it lip service at state occasions, trying to be fair during adjudications, but otherwise ignoring it as a nice but unreachable ideal. Liberals try to support equality, even though their actions show contrary belief. Conservatives just disavow themselves of the entire concept - except, as liberals do, when convenient.

What lesson can we take from this?

Burke lived in a parliamentary monarchy not long wrested from the Middle Ages. Most western nations are very different today. Equality is something brought to the forefront of our civilization under the aegis of equal rights. It has been around long enough to serve as a "tradition" for conservatives to at least recognize, while liberals wrestle with it. It has become a serious ideal that we should strive for in this day and age.

Thomas Jefferson, a contemporary Enlightenment thinker, supported the idea of **small government** and limited regulation. His capitalist instincts did not wish to inhibit wealth acquisition in any way. But there is far more to his thought than this conclusion. The disparity of wealth in the United States that he saw was extremely limited compared to what he witnessed in Europe, where palaces and estates separated the aristocracy from impoverished peasants. He sharply criticized that, and never thought anything like it could ever happen in the New World. Class distinctions were limited to Europe.

Times change. The United States is now home to obscene wealth and privilege for the few, and general disregard for the rest. It has replicated the wealth disparity that horrified Jefferson, who believed that his own people were morally incapable of such greed. Virtue would protect them from that.

As an ideal, this sounds commendable. Unfortunately, Burke's observations ended up closer to fact. For Jefferson's ideals to work, People have to make them work. They have to be open and interested. Morality has to be more than a tagline. Enlightenment thinkers like Jefferson placed virtue at the forefront. Not greed and the lust for power.

Modern Western republics are closer to being democratic than the framers ever wanted. One person, one vote-not only for representatives, but also for propositions and referendums. Daily polling of popular opinion now exerts a powerful influence on politics. This makes equality an issue that needs to be reconsidered, if not as an obvious fact, then as a goal.

The conservative ideas of Edmund Burke confront dreamy eyed idealism with a healthy dose of reality. For idealism to work, it needs to face such challenges head on. Properly applied, idealism gains whatever viability it has through its relationship to realism. Their symbiosis completes them both.

Inasmuch as **Chivalry-Now** reveres and preserves what is best from the past, cultivates personal virtue as a viable answer to our social problems, and looks to conscience for innate expressions of Nature's Law, it is proudly and decidedly conservative. Inasmuch as it embraces the idea of freedom, equality, love of neighbor, rational thought and progress, it is decidedly and proudly liberal. We contend that conservatism and liberalism are not natural enemies. Partisanship, on the other hand, is everyone's enemy, reducing everything to purposeful and oftentimes meaningless opposition.

Because of this, both "ideologies" suffer from systemic hypocrisy. They work hard to keep truth divided along narrow, artificial lines, thus robbing it of its wholeness. Exaggerations, witch-hunting, scandal-mongering, spin, watered-down policies, unbending ideological stances (despite all evidence to the contrary), think-tanks serving as propaganda machines, and all kinds of corruption spring from this unnecessary tension.

These are "false ideologies," based not on virtues or well considered propositions, but on clichés and jingoism. One party feels that government "**of, by and for the people**" has a positive role to play in assuring equality and public health. The other feels that government is something bad, like a thief **picking our pockets** through taxes, and prefers the kind of freedom where the successful and privileged naturally excel. In reality, despite the rhetoric, they both support big government programs, deficit spending, and find ways of picking our pockets either publicly or privately for their friends. As "partisans" they are well adept in looking the other way when it comes to their own corruption.

In this respect, the advocate for **Chivalry-Now** should probably not align with either of these artificial extremes, and should actually reject them both. Why? Because truth is important to us. Open minds see quite plainly what is going on. Paid propagandists who make wealthy livings off of scandals and gossip do not deserve our respect. How is it that so many people surrender their integrity to radio and television personalities who decide for them what is right and wrong?

Freedom means that we discover truth for ourselves. If we relinquish that responsibility, I fear we relinquish freedom as well.

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