

A VINDICATION OF NATURAL SOCIETY

A LIBERTY CLASSICS EDITION



EDMUND BURKE

# A Vindication of Natural Society

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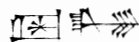
OR, A VIEW OF THE MISERIES  
AND EVILS ARISING TO MANKIND  
FROM EVERY SPECIES  
OF ARTIFICIAL SOCIETY

*In a Letter to Lord\*\*\*\*  
by a Late Noble Writer*

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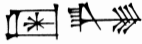
EDMUND BURKE

Edited and with an introduction by Frank N. Pagano



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This is a Liberty Classics Edition published by Liberty Fund, Inc., a foundation established to encourage study of the ideal of a society of free and responsible individuals.



The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo and as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word “freedom” (*amagi*), or “liberty.” It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

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This book was redesigned for the second printing.

Frontispiece courtesy of Prof. William F. Campbell.

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# CONTENTS

Note on the Text	ix
Introduction by Frank N. Pagano	xi
Title Page of the Second Edition	i
Preface	3
A Letter to Lord*****	ii
Textual Variants	93
Index	99

## NOTE ON THE TEXT

**I**n order that the *Vindication* may be read as Burke intended it, I have followed, as much as possible, the text of the second, revised edition of 1757. Burke's notes are indicated by an asterisk and appear at the bottom of the page.

My notes are indicated by a number and also appear at the bottom of the page. My notes have several purposes. They supply historical information on the persons and events mentioned in the text. They identify textual curiosities and allusions to other works, translate quotations, and indicate their original sources.

The variants are found in the back of the volume and are identified by a letter. All variants, with one exception, are from the 1756 first edition. The exception is from the 1757 edition and appears to be a printer's error which makes the text unintelligible and therefore was relegated to the variants. Included among the variants is the "Advertisement" to the first edition.

I am grateful to Harvard University for the opportu-

### *Note on the Text*

nity to consult from its rare book collection in Houghton Library the first, second, and third editions of the *Vindication*. The facsimile of the title page from the second edition is reproduced by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

I would like to thank J. Brian Benestad for translating several of the *Vindication's* Latin quotations and the following publishers for permission to reproduce passages from the works indicated: Random House, Inc., The Modern Library (trans. Christian E. Detmold, Machiavelli's *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*); Encyclopedia Britannica (trans. James Rhoades, Virgil's *Georgic* II); Elsevier-Dutton, Co., Inc., Everyman's Library (Hobbes's *Leviathan*); Harvard University Press (trans. M. Hutton, rev. R.M. Ogilivie, Tacitus' *Agricola*; trans. G.G. Ramsay, Juvenal's *Satire VI*; trans. W.A. Falconer, Cicero's *De amicitia*; and trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Plutarch's *Lives*); and St. Martin's Press (trans. Roger Masters and Judith Masters, Rousseau's *Second Discourse*).

FRANK N. PAGANO

# INTRODUCTION

## I

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Edmund Burke described the French Revolution as “the most astonishing [crisis] that has hitherto happened in the world.”<sup>1</sup> On nothing did it have a more astonishing effect than on his reputation. Because the French Revolution drew new political lines and fixed in its aftermath the political vocabulary even until the present, as its implacable foe, Burke has come down to us as the foremost conservative in the English-speaking world. Yet he called himself an Old Whig.

There were no conservatives and no liberals before the Revolution.<sup>2</sup> Burke, the late eighteenth-century Whig, certainly would have found himself more at home in the nineteenth-century Conservative Party, the party of the

1. *The Works of Edmund Burke*, 12 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1899), 3:243–44.

2. *Ibid.*, 4:68–69.



## *Introduction*

Tories, than in the nineteenth-century Whig Party, which eventually merged with the Liberal Party. There are two simple explanations of Burke's attitude toward the Revolution and its redesigning of the political map: 1. He changed his opinions with the appearance of the revolutionary tear in civilization. The French Revolution led him to become conservative contrary to his old principles; 2. The Revolution was utterly new. Consistent with his ancient principles, he opposed it, and his former allies, consistent or inconsistent with theirs, supported it.<sup>3</sup> At stake in this controversy is more than the consistency of Burke's political thought. Involved also are the intellectual respectabilities of those conservatives, who, following him, have resisted the revolutionary movements of modern history.

3. A complete list of even the major Burke scholarship would require a bibliography of considerable length. The predominant view of Burke runs in cycles. The last group of studies considered him inconsistent. See, for example, Michael Freeman, *Edmund Burke and the Critique of Political Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Frederick Dreyer, *Burke's Politics* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1979); and Isaac Kramnick, *The Rage of Edmund Burke* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). The previous group of studies, in contrast, contended that Burke was consistent. See Francis Canavan, *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1960); Peter Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and Natural Law* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1958); Charles Parkin, *The Moral Basis of Burke's Political Thought* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1956); and Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 294–323.

## II

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Burke's life was a weave of contraries. Born in 1729 of an Irish Protestant father and an Irish Catholic mother, he was educated to follow his father into law. During the expected culmination of that education at London's Middle Temple, he turned away from law and drifted into a temporary obscurity. The publication of his first work, *A Vindication of Natural Society*, in 1756, signaled his emergence from that period and the beginning of his literary career. Within two years, he published *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, revised the *Vindication*, and became the primary editor of the *Annual Register*, a review of the year's events, discoveries, and publications. In 1759 he acquired a political patron, William Hamilton, but after six years, he bitterly dissolved his ties to Hamilton because he wanted Burke to suspend his literary activities. Paradoxically, 1765 was the year in which Burke's literary career ended, except for the writing of practical tracts. He stopped his editing of the *Annual Register* and accepted the position as private secretary to the great Whig lord, the Marquis of Rockingham, whom the king had made Prime Minister. Burke entered the House of Commons, where he was a fixture for the next thirty years.

It was his parliamentary career and its associated writings on political affairs that won Burke his reputation. They provide, as well, the evidence of his apparent inconsistency. The unremitting enemy of the French Revolution from 1790 to his death, in 1797, supported the

## *Introduction*

American Revolution in the decade of the seventies. The author of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791), to some, seems to have argued against the author of the *Speech on American Taxation* (1774) and the *Speech on Conciliation with America* (1775). The statesman, who fashioned the Whig Party into the model of all modern political parties, tore his handiwork to bits when it threatened to be the instrument by which the French Revolution might be introduced into the domestic politics of Britain. The prosecutor for nine years (1786–1795) of Warren Hastings, whom Burke accused of conquering India by force and fraud, refused to accept the smallest dismantling of the so-called rotten boroughs by which the aristocracy controlled the membership and thence the votes in the House of Commons. The lonely advocate of the enfranchisement of the Irish Catholics fought the extension of the ballot in England. Upon retirement, in 1795, the champion of prescription, in defense of his own pension, wrote *a Letter to a Noble Lord*, a polemic against undeserved aristocratic privilege. Throughout Burke maintained that he was consistent and right.

## III

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Although the *Vindication* is the only purely theoretical consideration of politics that Burke ever wrote, the search for his principles has normally entailed the painstaking compilation of the opinions found in his diverse writings on the practical issues that he confronted in his parliamentary labors. Yet his practical works, espe-

## *Introduction*

cially the antirevolutionary tracts, which earned him his conservative reputation, may be a poor place to seek the grounds of his conservatism. In the antirevolutionary works, for example, he tried to confine to France not only the Revolution but also its source. He understood the Revolution to have originated in a literary cabal that included several significant French philosophers. He denied, during the Revolution, that either the French or the comparable British group had any lasting influence on British public affairs. He was surely right about the Britons he names in the *Reflections*. The single significant writer he could dismiss with the questions, "Who now reads Bolingbroke? Who ever read him through?"<sup>4</sup> The *Reflections* is silent about the two major British thinkers, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, who probably influenced both the French revolutionary philosophers and the Old Whigs. The *Vindication*, however, speaks of Hobbes and Locke and implicitly links them to Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, and his friend, Alexander Pope. It alludes to Charles Montesquieu and Jean Jacques Rousseau. Of all Burke's works, only his first considers directly the effects of the enlightenment thinkers on the British constitution.

The *Vindication* is not a straightforward work of political theory. Although Burke's political thought may appear only there in one compact formulation, it is not of easy access, for he puts between himself and his audience a fictional author. The work was published anonymously as a letter attributed by the title page to "a late noble writer."

4. *Works of Edmund Burke*, 3:349.