



Burke vs Chesterton: Mistaking a Friend for an Enemy

A Canadian Catholic who believes in the virtue of patriotism faces a similar problem to that of G. K. Chesterton, during the period in which he deliberated becoming Catholic. Chesterton's dilemma was whether he simultaneously could be a patriotic Englishman and a Catholic, given how closely tied British identity was to the Anglican Church. Yet Chesterton makes such a compelling case for the virtue of patriotism based on the need for a person to have something of his own to love. This is the animating spirit of his defense of widely distributing private property; it is what drove his case for a Jewish homeland; and it is the reason he stood opposed to British colonialism: both the colonizers and the colonized already had their own nations of which they could be proud.

The Canadian patriot, then, must look at the spirit which gave Canada birth, and some of the most insightful commentary on this was issued by a literary and philosophical movement once known as "Red Toryism". Though that expression has taken on different and even contrary connotations in political discourse, originally it referred to a movement which recognized that Canada was founded as a basically Conservative nation, a compromise between English Protestants and French Catholics who wanted to preserve a civilization based on "peace, order, and good government" rather than be assimilated into the republican individualism of the United States. This Tory tradition found voice in a thinker like John Farthing, whose posthumous apologetic for this experiment of transplanting British conservatism to the vast and forbidding regions of the frozen North, *Freedom Wears a Crown*, made an explicit appeal to the principles of Edmund Burke.

Burke and Chesterton are two writers who can be cited as proponents of "conservatism", and it is one of history's ironies that neither identified as a Tory: Chesterton always called himself a Liberal and a democrat (his prose slides past any reference to aristocracy with the icy chill of a dagger blade), and he defends tradition because it is "the democracy of the dead". Burke, meanwhile, was a Whig MP who wrote a letter to his fellow Whigs defending his apparent "conservatism" on Whiggish grounds. Perhaps this is why they continue to sound persuasive today: Liberalism largely won as a civilizational force, and thus any defence of conservatism that will gain any hearing must appeal on liberal grounds. Chesterton once said that Alexander Pope "lived in a world in which even Toryism was Whiggish"; so, it appears, do we, and in conjunction with each other, Chesterton and Burke can perhaps salve a Canadian Catholic conscience.

It is quite a dilemma, then, when one discovers that Chesterton critiqued Burke in *What's Wrong With the World*, and the problem becomes more painful when one realizes that an in-depth study might reveal that Chesterton was wrong about something. But Chesterton himself nearly always sneaks in some affectionate criticism, even when he speaks of any figure with appreciation, and one cannot imagine he would take any objection to the same approach being applied to himself—indeed, the imagination seems to insist that he would be delighted to laughter by it. Thus, the critique itself, found at the beginning of the chapter "The Empire of the Insect":

A cultivated Conservative friend of mine once exhibited great distress

because in a gay moment I once called Edmund Burke an atheist. . . . Burke was certainly not an atheist in his conscious cosmic theory, though he had not a special and flaming faith in God, like Robespierre. . . . I mean that in the quarrel over the French Revolution, Burke did stand for the atheistic attitude and mode of argument, as Robespierre stood for the theistic. The Revolution appealed to the idea of an abstract and eternal justice, beyond all local custom or convenience. If there are commands of God, then there must be rights of man. Here Burke made his brilliant diversion; he did not attack the Robespierre doctrine with the old mediaeval doctrine of *jus divinum* (which, like the Robespierre doctrine, was theistic), he attacked it with the modern argument of scientific relativity; in short, the argument of evolution. He suggested that humanity was everywhere molded by or fitted to its environment and institutions; in fact, that each people practically got, not only the tyrant it deserved, but the tyrant it ought to have. "I know nothing of the rights of men," he said, "but I know something of the rights of Englishmen." There you have the essential atheist. His argument is that we have got some protection by natural accident and growth; and why should we profess to think beyond it, for all the world as if we were the images of God!

Before we investigate the justice, or injustice, of this charge, it's important to note how Chesterton is positioning himself: He takes the stance as defender of natural law and divinely-given rights, in contrast to

Burke, whom he depicts as an apologist for merely human customs that happen to have piled up like so much debris. This is quintessential Chesterton, posing Christianity as the true guarantor of human dignity over against the uncertainties of society. But, interestingly, it is almost identical to the critique that the Canadian philosopher of religion George Grant made of Burke—from a Red Tory perspective—in *English-Speaking Justice*. Grant claims that Burke “was in practice a Rockingham Whig, and did not depart from Locke in fundamental matters, except to surround his liberalism with a touch of romanticism”. From two different perspectives, then, comes the same charge that Burke is essentially a cultural relativist who happens to have a long memory.

We can see Belloc’s influence in Chesterton’s sympathetic treatment of the French Revolution, but we can also see *why* he was sympathetic: The Revolutionaries appealed, as did Catholicism, to “an abstract and eternal justice”. He takes, as he so often does, the role of the resuscitator of long-lost medieval wisdom which speaks relevantly to the modern world. Finally, he alludes to the idea that rights are God-given; elsewhere, he would say that he did not believe so much in natural rights as he did “in supernatural rights (and Jefferson certainly states them as supernatural)”.

This last quote from him is noteworthy, because he seems to use the word “nature” differently than would have the Scholastics: In that tradition, what was “natural” pertained to our status as rational creatures, while “supernatural” described that which came from grace. Yet Chesterton is using these in a more distinctly modern way, using “supernatural” to denote divine origins in contrast to “natural”. Chesterton is talking like a modern, not a medieval, and, as we shall see, it was his failure to recognize that Burke talks the same way that led to his misunderstanding.

For now, the rest of his charge:

We are born under a House of Lords, as birds under a house of leaves; we live under a monarchy as niggers live under a tropical sun; it is not their fault if they

are slaves, and it is not ours if we are snobs. Thus, long before Darwin struck his great blow at democracy, the essential of the Darwinian argument had been already urged against the French Revolution. Man, said Burke in effect, must adapt himself to everything, like an animal; he must not try to alter everything, like an angel. The last weak cry of the pious, pretty, half-artificial optimism and deism of the eighteenth century came in the voice of Sterne, saying, “God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb.” And Burke, the iron evolutionist, essentially answered, “No; God tempers the shorn lamb to the wind.” It is the lamb that has to adapt himself. That is, he either dies or becomes a particular kind of lamb who likes standing in a draught.

Thus the prosecution, and an important point to note right away is that, if Chesterton is wrong, that is to Burke’s credit; it means that Burke has the distinguished status of agreeing with Chesterton. But before doing this, we ought to consider exactly what the Catholic teaching on the natural law and our natural rights truly is, so that we may speak precisely and fittingly about it.

In *Prima Secundae Partis* of the *Summa*, q. 94, a. 2, St. Thomas identifies the “ends” of human nature based on our three natural inclinations: Self-preservation, propagation and reproduction, and—the one that he explicitly says comes from man’s nature as rational—the “natural inclination to know the truth about God, and to live in society”. Society being therefore identified as proper to human nature, Aquinas elsewhere discusses the virtues which enable full human flourishing. The chief, or charioteer, of the natural or cardinal virtues is prudence: While speculative reason or wisdom has to do with understanding moral principles (*Secunda Secundae Partis*, q. 45, a. 1 and 3), prudence, or practical reason, applies right reason to action; like *conscientia* applying *synderesis*, though there is one eternal law which holds true in all situations, the specific application can vary from one circumstance to another. This is not relativism; it is

Aristotelian realism, acknowledging both universals and particulars, and this is what the *jus divinum* meant to communicate.

With Rousseau and with the Enlightenment, however, the baby is split in two: rather than society being part of human nature, Rousseau imaginatively strips the human being from all civilization, language, or history down to Mowglian innocence, which he calls man’s purely “natural” state, leaving society as an artifice other than nature. It is this “noble savage” who is possessed of rights from “nature”, which he must surrender in order to enter the social contract. Ever since that blow against the Scholastic and Thomistic idea of “nature”, equivocation surrounding that word has abounded. (In his essays on Shakespeare, Northrop Frye helpfully distinguishes “higher nature”—the sort of thing Aquinas was talking about—from “lower nature”, or the wordless, nameless barbarity to which King Lear is reduced.)

When Burke expresses his skepticism of the idea of rights coming from nature as opposed to society and history, it is this Rousseau concept of nature, not the Catholic medieval one, that he is combatting. This is the sort of “nature” he is referring to in the title of his satiric essay *A Vindication of Natural Society*, in which he likens this idea of a society without the supposedly artificial contrivances of government to the “natural religion” of the Deists. He does not intend the comparison as a compliment.

In fact, elsewhere, he acknowledges that it is more accurate to call civilized society “natural”: “The state of civil society... is a state of nature; and much more truly so than a savage and incoherent mode of life. For man is by nature reasonable; and he is never perfectly in his natural state, but when he is placed where reason may be best cultivated, and most predominates.” And, in a letter to an unknown recipient (perhaps this was Providential; was its ultimate audience, in the mind of God, supposed to be Chesterton?), he is unmistakably specific: “Man is a gregarious animal. He will by degrees provide some convenience suitable to this his natural disposition; and this strange thing may, some time or other,

assume a more habitable form. The fish will at length make a shell which will fit him." This last metaphor is so strikingly a refutation of Chesterton's image of the lamb adapting itself to the wind that one almost suspects a divine deliberateness about it.

Thus the question of natural rights as opposed to the rights of Englishmen. Burke's precise position must be understood carefully; he phrased his position thusly in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*:

Government is not made in virtue of natural rights, *which may and do exist in total independence of it*, and exist in much greater clearness and in a much greater degree of abstract perfection; but their abstract perfection is their practical defect. By having a right to everything they want everything. Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants. *Men have a right that these wants should be provided for by this wisdom* (emphasis added).

The argument is clear: Natural rights *do* exist, but in abstract, they are too vague and general to be useful to us; thus, society (which is natural to man, as we have seen) must contrive specific laws and customs to instantiate these rights: "What is the use of discussing a man's abstract right to food or medicine? The question is upon the method of procuring and administering them. In that deliberation I shall always advise to call in the aid of the farmer and the physician rather than the professor of metaphysics." In hearty eighteenth-century English prose, this is a clear paraphrase of Aquinas' ideas of prudence as application of wisdom, and it is this implicit philosophy which bolsters Burke's defense of "prejudice"—literally, the judgments that have been made before I came along. Where Chesterton used the image of democracy, Burke employed the language of economics: while each individual has "his own private stock of reason . . . [and] we suspect that this stock in each man is small", prejudices rep-

resent "the general bank and capital of nations and of ages".

There is a certain slipperiness in language here, in that Burke does speak of surrendering our natural rights of self-defense and self-governance in order for society to operate, but notice that he says men have a *right* to a government and society that can provide their wants. Men have a right to this, but the exact nature of how each individual will be able to exercise his rights, such as "the share of power, authority, and direction which each individual ought to have in the management of the state, that I must deny to be amongst the direct original rights of man".

This, surprisingly, is almost exactly what Chesterton held.

In *A Short History of England and Orthodoxy*, Chesterton speaks of ballot-box voting as a right with the odour of sanctity about it. Yet, in his 1902 essay "The Indian Nationalist Movement", he criticizes those proponents of "Indian nationalism" who want India to be free of British rule, but to retain British institutions, such as ballot-box democracy. He gently suggests to those who would say, "Give me a ballot box . . . I have a natural right to be Prime Minister", that, if this right "is so very certain and divine (which I am inclined rather to doubt myself)", they should venerate British imperialists as religious saviours for introducing it to them.

But he insists that he does believe in natural rights, such as "[t]he right of a people to express itself, to be itself in arts and action". "The test of a democracy", he explains, "is that the national tone and spirit of the typical citizen is apparent in the actions of the State." Thus, for Chesterton, an Indian who believes in "dynastic wars" and the "despotism" of a "king whom I hardly ever see" is a true Indian nationalist and a true Indian democratic. For Chesterton, this is not the same thing as being born "under a house of leaves" and being stuck with it; on the contrary, it is a question of natural rights and democracy—just as it was for Burke, who also opposed British interference in India.

The very fact that Burke was such a reformer in so many ways, not only criticizing British policy in India but also opposing the slave trade (and suggesting giving property to Negroes to fortify their freedom—a very Distributist idea) and even standing for Catholic emancipation, a stance which got him accused of crypto-Catholicism, puts the lie to Chesterton's notion of him as a reflexive proponent of the status quo.

But do the holes and inconsistencies in Chesterton's critique make it valueless? God forbid! Just because Chesterton sometimes portrayed his opponents wrongly does not mean his critiques are without value. Some people will say Nestorius was innocent of the heresy he was charged with. Perhaps he was, but we can still be glad that the error called "Nestorianism" was condemned, even if he did not deserve to be identified with it. Chesterton gets Poe wrong on chess (actually, Poe's views on chess are almost identical to Chesterton's), but his insight about madness in the erring passage is still a brilliant one.

The accurate insight in this passage does not refute Burke, whose thinking was shaped by the "Gothic and monkish education" and the "old ecclesiastical modes and fashions of institution" which he saw as the main vessel for preserving British culture since the fourteenth century, but it does respond to a kind of conservatism without transcendence which takes Burke as its patron. In Chesterton's day, fascist states claimed a kind of national conservatism, but also claimed to be the source of rights, and in so doing lost all right they may have had. In our day, Andrew Sullivan can make a "conservative" argument for same-sex marriage which explicitly claims the sanction of Burkean principles. Edmund Burke may have been appalled by this, but all that means is that, though Chesterton may have been wrong about Burke, Burke is perhaps best read as a Chestertonian.

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