The Case for
Edmund Burke's Metaphysics
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To claim a Burkean metaphysics is to dispute most of the secondary literature on Edmund Burke from John Morley to F.P. Lock and Iain Hampsher-Monk and others. There are striking exceptions in the scholarship to this assertion, exceptions which, in fact, strike a blow to the typical British utilitarian-empiricist reading of Burke. The blow, alas, appears to have been absorbed primarily by time, neglect, and only occasional glances at the natural law reading of Burke introduced by Peter Stanlis, Russell Kirk, and Charles Parkin, and deepened into its proper metaphysical basis by Father Francis Canavan, S.J., who recognized forthrightly Burke's "Christian metaphysics."

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My concern here is to support the position that Burke's political philosophy has a metaphysical foundation and to indicate what that foundation is. In this section I will show some of the complexities involved in discovering and securing this position. These complexities in Burke's thought are in large part due to the following elements. First, almost all of his writings, speeches, and letters deal with the occurrence of some political event or crisis. Second, since he writes in response to specific events, such as the Catholic problem in Ireland, or the American or the French Revolution, he generally engages in urging action or response to these crises. Consequently, the purpose of his writing is not that of composing a systematic political philosophy. His writing, although eloquent, is one of haste. Still, James T. Boulton, in a work of literary criticism, discovers a method in Burke's apparent haste: "Perhaps the dominant impression given by the Reflections is of a relentless pace in the writing: the imperative tone, the cumulative effect of image and illustration, the apparently inexhaustible fertility of Burke's mind, all combine to forbid effective reply except from the most incisive minds." Third, much of Burke's thought is couched in the philosophical and political parlance in vogue in the eighteenth century. In responding to a criticism of his writing style in the Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), he provides a response that applies nearly to all of his works: "But surely you forget, that I was throwing out reflections upon a political event, and not reading a lecture upon theorism and principles of Government.
How I should treat such a subject is not for me to say, for I never had that intention." Yet, while using the political language of his age, he infuses it with his own meaning that places his thought often at variance with the meanings given these terms by his contemporaries. He uses such terms as "utility," "expediency," and "natural rights" in a manner that neither eighteenth-century natural right theorists nor utilitarians and empiricists would employ. This lends to the apparent ambiguity of some of Burke's language. Fourth, the complexities surrounding the foundations of his philosophy are heightened by the varying interpretations in the secondary literature of his thought. Those most prominent in denying a metaphysical base to Burke's politics most commonly mark him a utilitarian.

Since Burke does not write in a systematic manner, one must read him very carefully in order to uncover the fundamentals of his philosophy. Even in his most profound political treatise, the Reflections, he purposely avoided, by his own account, a systematic mode. In a letter to Philip Francis, Burke writes: "I had no idea of digesting it in a Systematic order. The Style is open to correction, and wants it. My natural Style of writing is somewhat careless. . . ." Still, a careful reading of Burke will reveal a political philosophy that, far from disparaging reason, and far from being anti-metaphysical, reveals a firm metaphysical grounding that is orderly and contingent upon God's creative, conserving power.

It is necessary that any false expectations concerning Burke's metaphysics be laid to rest before proceeding with our inquiry. There is no systematic treatment of metaphysical principles in Burke. Nonetheless, evidence for a metaphysical basis of his political philosophy not only exists throughout his works, but also such metaphysics is a necessary condition for a correct comprehension of his political thought.

To seek a foundation for Burke's political philosophy in a metaphysical position is not to suggest that Burke philosophizes in a rationalistic, deductive fashion. Far from it. The philosophical underpinnings found in Burke are generally dogmatically stated, as if the force, clarity, and impact of the truth itself should be self-evident. There are, though, some few occasions when Burke engages in philosophical arguments in support of certain first principles of being. Certainly there are arguments for causality, sufficient reason, and God's existence, as well as a refutation of skepticism and relativism in his A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757—hereafter cited as Inquiry). Nevertheless, as a politician by profession, Burke speaks of himself as the "philosopher in action." His actions are predicated on principles primarily bequeathed to him through the wisdom of generations past, principles which are checked against the testimony of circumstances. So, although Burke typically avoids speculative thought, he does not always do so, having written one speculative treatise. Still, he does present a position which, far from being anti-metaphysical, is consonant with a kind of metaphysics which is most compatible with the traditional, classical realism of the Aristotelian-Thomistic school.

Remarks abound by Burke which appear to disclose an unswerving animus toward metaphysics. A sampling of these remarks may help bring home the wrath of Burke toward abstract theorizing, especially when it occurs in the realm of politics.

In his Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs (1791), Burke denounces the application of universals to the province of politics and morals, universals being the very stuff of speculative thought, whereas the realm of politics and morals reflects a world of contingency. Burke bluntly states that "pure metaphysical abstrac-
tion does not belong to these matters." Unlike mathematics, itself a most fertile field for abstract thought, morality lacks exactitude. Instead, morality admits of exceptions and modifications, and these exceptions are introduced through prudence, not logic. Furthermore, "Metaphysics cannot live without definition; but Prudence is cautious how she defines."

Elsewhere Burke appears to assail metaphysics as being nothing short of a pollutant of virtue itself. In his *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), he rebukes the French for the demoralization of their own young. He bemoans the loss of gallantry and refinement, where love is grafted to the virtues, and instead finds lewdness, bitterness, and all manner of corrupted dispositions, in part a result "of metaphysical speculation blended with the coarsest sensuality." Again, abstract metaphysical speculation seems to lead man far from his concrete nature as historically revealed and as blended with his situation. This flight from the concrete that Burke finds in the metaphysical speculator is echoed in the same Letter when he admonishes statesmen to attend the circumstances, and search out the fortunate moment "not in the conjunctions and oppositions of planets, but in the conjunctions and oppositions of men and things."

A general metaphysical impulse is at the bottom of all theorizing which ignores the concrete reality of politics while attempting to dictate by blueprint the behavior of government and peoples. This theme becomes most pointed in Burke's *Speech on Conciliation with America* (1775). Here he attacks "refined policy," that is, detached, removed analysis of what government should be doing without actual attention to the circumstances involved. In this instance, it fits the Parliament's conception of the colonies completely that they were under the suzerainty of the British Empire. And, as subjects, they were bound to contribute to the fiscal needs of the empire; and Parliament, as the rightful representative of said empire, was well within its prerogative to tax the colonies. Burke acknowledges this prerogative, the "right to tax," but he renounced the prudential application of this right when the result could be the revolt of the colonists. Burke concludes that refined policy is ever "the parent of confusion." Here he urges his fellow members of Parliament to rule according to the circumstances, neither by abstract ideas of right, nor by general theories of government.

As for himself, Burke prefers politics to be shaped consonant with tradition, not speculation. In this spirit he determines to distrust his own abilities and to denounce every speculation. By doing so, he is simply affirming the wisdom of generations over that of the single individual, however endowed with genius he may be. Tradition reveals the historical interest of man, and man, Burke notes, acts on interest, "and not on metaphysical speculation."

In his *Speech on the Petition of the Unitarians* (1792), Burke declares that "no rational man ever did govern himself by abstractions and universals." The same can be said of governments. The metaphysical realm of universals flies in the face of the factual sphere. Both the actions of men and governments are practical matters. They affect the lives of individuals. Burke claims that the doctrine of free government is not an abstract question concerning metaphysical liberty and necessity. In fact, "The extreme of liberty (which is its abstract perfection, but its real fault) obtains nowhere, nor ought to obtain anywhere; because extremes, as we all know, in every point which relates to either our duties or satisfactions in life, are destructive both to virtue and enjoyment." Burke appears to zero in on the act of theorizing as a flight from reality, a symp-
tom of an unhappy populace. While people are happy, they are unconcerned with theory.18

The scathing criticism Burke invokes against theorists and metaphysicians continues in his Reflections. He is particularly scornful of those who speculate upon a science of government in a priori fashion. The science of government is not a deductive science but an experimental science.15 By experimental science Burke continues to call us back to the circumstances that color and distinguish every system of government, rendering them all unique. Those who disregard the circumstances surrounding politics, yet in their theorizing devise a list of rights for individuals which governments are bound to honor, have ignored Burke’s admonition. Concerning the “rights” extolled by theorists, Burke maintains that insofar “as they are metaphysically true, they are morally and politically false.”20 We are not urged to ignore reason, but to attend to a special kind of reason called “political reason.” Burke denies that this is a metaphysical sort of reasoning: rather, “political reason is a computing principle: adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing, morally and not metaphysically, or mathematically, true moral denominations.”21

Metaphysical distinctions appear to evoke a brooding, loathing reaction from Burke, a sentiment which is also reflected in his Speech on American Taxation (1774). Burke writes that “I am not here going into the distinctions of rights, nor attempting to mark their boundaries; I do not enter into these metaphysical distinctions; I hate the very sound of them.”22 This apparent disdain for metaphysics, at least in application to politics, also appears to extend to the metaphysician: “Nothing can be conceived more hard than the heart of a thorough-bred metaphysician. It comes nearer to the cold malignity of a wicked spirit than to the frailty and passion of a man. It is like that of the Principle of Evil himself, incorporeal, pure, unmixed, dephlegmated, defecated evil.”23

By now the very term “metaphysics” appears to have an opprobrious ring for Burke. The thesis that Burke’s political philosophy has its basis in a metaphysical position seems severely tested by the weight of evidence presented thus far.

What Burke vilifies is not so much theory or metaphysics per se, but its application to the highly contingent realm of morals and politics, especially when theory ignores the circumstances of a nation, in the case of politics, about which it proceeds to theorize. “Burke’s pejorative use of the word ‘metaphysics’ or ‘metaphysical’”, R. R. Fennessy concludes, “is not therefore a rejection of philosophy or metaphysics itself, but a protest against what he considers to be the use of a false and dangerous method of reasoning in politics; the crude application of abstract ideas or abstract reasoning to complicated, delicate social situations, without due attention to circumstances.”24 A view of false theory begins to emerge when it is contrasted with a view of what should be required of theory. Burke warns that there is no theory apart from circumstances. Without seeing the circumstances, “without a concurrence and adaptation of these to the design, the very best speculative projects might become not only useless, but mischievous. Plans must be made for men.”25 Burke further notes that considering theories divorced from circumstances has led to much havoc, and that without tending to circumstances, “the medicine of today becomes the poison of tomorrow.”26 So it is not theory as such which is misguided, but an incomplete theory, untouched by the concrete, practical, less refined air of the mundane world.

Earlier, Burke’s Speech on the Petition of the Unitarians was cited to the effect that rational man acts without regard to
abstractions and universals. Burke goes on to say: "I do not put abstract ideas wholly out of any question; because I well know that under the name I should dismiss principles, and that without the guide and light of sound, well-understood principles, all reasonings in politics, as in everything else, would be only a confused jumble of particular facts and details, without the means of drawing out any sort of theoretical or practical conclusion." By implication, Burke here suggests a distinction between abstractions and universals, and principles. Obviously, the universal realm lacks all contact with the realm of practice, whereas Burke's use of the word "principle" suggests a fusing of the two, and the fusion, for Burke, takes place in prudence. In Aristotelian language, the realm of universals concerns sheer speculative wisdom, whereas the notion of principles concerns practical wisdom. The distinction is better brought forward by Burke when he speaks about political problems in the Appeal from the New Whigs to the Old (1791). The resolution of political problems does not concern truth or falsehood, but good or evil. Burke remarks that "what in the result is likely to produce evil is politically false; that which is productive of good, politically true."

Burke's position on theory now invites qualification. It is not so much theory or metaphysics but their false application, mindless of the infinite array of particulars brought to bear in the realm of morals and politics by the concrete world. In this world that which is true politically is that which is good. The good is not pronounced ex cathedra, as it were, and embraced without a view towards the extant political, social, economic, and historical circumstances. These and other details the statesman must consider as he shapes the laws and policies of a nation. As Burke states in his Speech on the Petition of the Unitarians: "Circumstances are infinite, are infinitely combined, are variable and transient; he who does not take them into consideration is not erroneous, but stark mad; dat operam ut cum ratione insaniat; he is metaphysically mad. A statesman, never losing sight of principles, is to be guided by circumstances; and judging contrary to the exigencies of the moment, he may ruin his country forever."

Burke recoils from a blueprint for society that fails to account for the peculiarities, the differences in customs and traditions in which each nation is steeped. Utopian designs are best left in the thin air of speculation. They are, quite literally, "nowhere." No ideally conceived plan of government or society could in any way account for the infinite diversity which obtains in concrete reality.

Burke the politician is suspicious of theory that fails to account for the circumstances in which a people find themselves. He does not relegate theory to some remote area where it can harmlessly spin its solitary thought as an Aristotelian "absconded God." He clarifies his position on theory thus: "I do not vilify theory and speculation—no, because that would be to vilify reason itself... No; whenever I speak against theory, I mean always a weak, erroneous, fallacious, unfounded, or imperfect theory; and one of the ways of discovering that it is a false theory is by comparing it with practice."

Burke serves warning that speculative theory, when it comes into the practical, contingent sphere of morals and politics, is inadequate to guide man. It must be tempered by political reason, a prudential guide to man's practical endeavors. The metaphysicians—Burke generally has in mind the French philosophes—can scheme and theorize to their hearts' content, but it is the circumstances that, as Burke claims, "render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind." It does not appear that Burke is any more ex-
treme in his limitation of the scope of reason than Aristotle or Aquinas. They qualify the use of speculative reason and urge its guarded application in the field of politics. They recognize a separate reason, a practical reason, separate in its application or function, not in the very unity of reason itself. For Aquinas, "The speculative intellect by extension becomes practical. But one power is not changed into another. Therefore the speculative and practical intellect are not distinct powers."32

At the outset it may be helpful to note that Burke disparages logical, abstract, discursive reason as applied to politics irrespective of circumstances. He is opposed to either the empirical inductive method, or the rationalist deductive reasonings of the Enlightenment philosophers. His own use of reason more nearly accords with what is typically referred to as practical, normative, or right reason. Burke himself, as noted previously, uses the term "political reason" in referring to the practical application of reason.33 In effect "political reason" is a prudential use of reason, reflecting on the moral law, as applied to the particular and contingent circumstances of social and political reality. Peter Stanlis holds that reason for Burke means "the complex, historical, corporate revelations of the whole human race, as embodied in historical continuity and prescriptive artificial institutions."34 Elsewhere Stanlis cites the "various conceptions and functions of 'reason' in ethics; discursive reasoning in science; individual private reason in contrast to the corporate reason of mankind contained in religious, political and legal institutions and traditions; the relationship between reason and religious revelation, scientific empiricism and the psychological basis of feeling or emotion."35

Nonetheless, while skeptical of abstract, speculative reason, and scornful of its application to politics, Burke acknowledges the worth of speculation in its proper realm, yet demands that "political reason," guided by principles, be applied instead of speculative reason in the realm of politics.36 It is clear in Burke's Inquiry, his youthful and well known philosophical treatise on aesthetics, that Burke affirms basic realist metaphysical principles of being and reason, for he assumes causality in the real order, and our capacity to know God through causality.37

Yet it cannot be denied that while Burke acknowledged the capacity of speculative reason to ascend causally to the affirmation of God's existence, he believed that the reliance upon the speculative use of reason is difficult,38 that its progress required the strictest attention to the principles governing its movement, and that those who rely exclusively on speculative reason as applied to politics will necessarily perish in the contingencies of particular circumstances.

The conclusion of Father Canavan that in Burke's "concern for the practical he tended at times to assimilate all reason to practical reason,"39 may be severe, but it does underscore the fact that, as the "philosopher in action," Burke was most concerned with reason in its practical or political use. He did not aim to achieve a speculative, theoretical foundation for politics independent of the prudential, practical use of reason in trying to comprehend the appropriate means to achieve what limited political good could be achieved in an imperfect world. Thus, typically, when Burke refers to "reason" he means, "practical reason", or, better, "political reason."

Burke, therefore, does not attempt to deny that characteristic or quality that distinguishes man in his very essence, namely, man's rationality. Burke's fear is an errant reasoning, a reasoning that attempts, for example, mathematical exactitude in the area of morality. It is, in short, to ask of reason the unreasonable.
But, again, this is not to foreclose a principled assessment of moral or political behavior. Rather, the principles fail to spell out in a precise way and for every occasion what is right and what is wrong. For this man has to develop and practice his practical reason. Is all this so far removed from Aristotle or Aquinas?

II

Before searching out the elements of a Burkean metaphysics it is necessary to ask, “What is metaphysics?” What is the province of metaphysics and the role of the metaphysician? And, what is Burke’s position on these issues?

The metaphysical tradition with which Burke’s philosophy is most compatible is that of the perennial philosophy of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition with its common sense realism. It is appropriate to underscore the word “compatible.” Burke is not a systematic philosopher, and certainly not a speculative philosopher. Yet he recognizes the legitimate role of the metaphysician and relies upon and makes use of fundamental metaphysical principles throughout his works. He writes that “it is the business of the speculative philosopher to mark the proper ends of government. It is the business of the politician, who is the philosopher in action, to find out proper means towards those ends, and to employ them with effect.” Despite his objections to certain kinds of metaphysics, this statement affirms Burke’s appreciation of the legitimate province of the metaphysician.

Although Burke is not a systematic philosopher such as Aristotle, it is important to call attention to the life-giving principles of Burke’s thought and to note their points of compatibility with realist metaphysics. Hence, in what follows some of the concerns and interests of realist metaphysics will be stated, enabling a favorable comparison with Burke’s own metaphysical orientation.

Aristotle begins his *Metaphysics*, as we know, with the statement that “All men by nature desire to know.” Burke similarly considers the improvement of one’s own rational nature so vital in principle that he declares the prevention “of the means of improving our rational nature to be the worst species of tyranny that the insouciance and perverseness of mankind ever dared to exercise.” Man is in the possession of a reason whose natural inclination is toward gaining wisdom.

What is the relationship between wisdom and metaphysics? Writing on Aristotle, Frederick Copleston, S. J., states, “Metaphysics is . . . Wisdom par excellence, and the philosopher or lover of Wisdom is he who desires knowledge about the ultimate cause and nature of Reality, and desires that knowledge for its own sake.” Burke affirms that speculative knowledge concerning the ultimate cause of reality is possible and that this ultimate cause is God, although such knowledge comes only with great labor: “It is by a long deduction, and much study, that we discover the adorable wisdom of God in his works.” Wisdom is knowing reality as it most essentially is, which means knowing the causes of reality. Burke refers to “That great chain of causes . . . linking one to another, even to the throne of God Himself . . .” Also, “The more accurately we search into the human mind, the stronger traces we everywhere find of His wisdom who made it.” Wisdom attains its speculative purpose when it attains the loftiest of causal heights, which is knowledge for its own sake. Does this further suggest, either for Aristotle or Burke, that pure, undefiled wisdom is to be put to no further use? It does not. Knowledge of reality as it most essentially is should provide valuable insight into how one conducts oneself. Knowledge of one’s nature should provide some guide to life. But the knowledge or insight wisdom brings is not initially knowledge for human con-
duct. Instead, it is knowledge fulfilling one's desire to know for the sake of knowing. This allows knowledge to reveal reality for no further purpose than that of the disclosure of being. Surely the kind of knowledge thereby obtained would more nearly approach the truth of reality, that is as reality is in itself, than the knowledge of reality obtained for an end beyond itself. Therefore, in its speculative capacity, wisdom, for both Aristotle and Burke, is initially to be sought for its own sake. To obstruct reason and its natural bent toward wisdom is to deform man. And yet the search for ultimate principles, when done from a motive lacking in piety or reverence toward the mystery and awesomeness of being, can prove subversive to the very wisdom that is our heritage.

The ancestral wisdom upon which succeeding generations may rely in conducting their affairs in society is a wisdom that is cumulative and practical. "We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason," argues Burke, "because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages." This "general bank and capital" of wisdom is removed from pure metaphysics and constitutes the realm in which principles seek a practical application, namely, prudence. For the individual to disregard the cumulative wisdom of mankind is to err through pride. Our recognition of the infinity of reality and the finitude of any single individual's capacity to know the same should induce and increase man's humility.

There is no prescribed definition of metaphysics in Burke's writings. There is, though, a warning against too much inquiry into the ultimate foundations of reality, and of society in particular. "The foundations on which obedience to governments is founded," Burke records, "are not to be constantly discussed. That we are here, supposes the discussion already made and the dispute settled." Those who constantly set about to inquire into ultimate principles too often serve to undermine what those principles help to secure. Our allegiance to our domicile, to our community and our nation are not to be obtained by a rational assent to a philosophically extolled principle, but through our natural feelings and sentiments. But this is not to denigrate wisdom, or man's love of the same. For Burke there was never a "jar or discord between genuine sentiment and sound policy. Never, no never, did Nature say one thing and Wisdom say another." Instead, Burke is incensed by the prying intellect that seeks to elevate an individual's reason against the ancestral wisdom of generations, especially if that individual prides himself in discovering previously undiscovered principles. The assumption here is not that knowledge fails to develop and deepen its grasp upon reality, but that the principles which guide reason have already been discovered and defended. "We know that we have made no discoveries," Burke concludes in the Reflections, "and we think that no discoveries are to be made, in morality, nor many in the great principles of government, nor in the ideas of liberty, which were understood long before we were born. . . ." Later, in the same work, Burke reasons: "Those whose principle it is to despise the ancient, permanent sense of mankind and to set up a scheme of society on new principles must naturally expect that such of us who think better of the judgement of the human race than of theirs should consider both them and their devices as men and schemes upon their To presume the discovery of new principles governing reason is to presume previous ignorance over the basic principles upon which all reason and societies rest. Man's humility is increased through
the recognition that wisdom brings to him, namely, that reality in its infinity transcends the limits of the human mind. This recognition is not to terminate the increase of knowledge; rather, it is to evoke a fundamental awe and a sense of piety over the limitless range of reality. "We fear God; we look up with awe to kings, with affection to parliaments, with duty to magistrates, with reverence to priests, and with respect to nobility. Why? Because, when such ideas are brought before our minds, it is natural to be so affected." It is this reason, not an anti-intellectualism on Burke's part, that leads him to warn against searching for new foundations or principles of government. The search for wisdom should inspire a reverential awe.

Burke's love for wisdom is obvious. Many saw in him one of the outstanding intellects of England for his time. Johnson remarks: "Yes; Burke is an extraordinary man. His stream of mind is perpetual." Yet Burke resents an investigative type of search for knowledge, as one who seeks to solve a problem. There is a sense of mystery that surrounds Burke's own inquiry concerning the ultimate principles of reality disclosed to reason, a sense that tells him that as he searches for knowledge he draws most near not only to the sustaining principles of society but also to Deity itself. Concerning human society, Burke calls attention in the Reflections to "the disposition of a stupendous wisdom, moulding together the great mysterious incorporation of the human race..." Writing of Providence in the Inquiry he claims that God's "wisdom is not our wisdom, nor our ways his ways." He also refers to "the dispensations of a mysterious wisdom." Obviously, God's providence exceeds our comprehension, and is shrouded in mystery, hence evoking faith and "faith is not contrary to reason, but above it," Burke remarks.

This appreciation of the ultimate mystery surrounding one's inquiry is certainly part of the Thomistic tradition. Jacques Maritain draws the distinction between mystery and problem in terms of philosophical inquiry. For Maritain a problem is something for the intellect to solve, such as finding the solution to a mathematical problem. This is the attitude of modern philosophy, Maritain maintains, an attitude which reveals a loss of reverence for the ultimate mystery of being. For Maritain, and for Burke as well, so overwhelming is the object of our metaphysical inquiry that it must be a science in which mystery predominates. This gives a good insight into what to many appears to be Burke's antirationalism. Although he is highly skeptical of the fruits of speculative inquiry, especially those which bear on the existing social conditions of man, he gives little doubt concerning the steady and august principles that sustain reality, however cloaked they may be in the depths of God's being. Burke even links physical causes with moral duties: "The instincts which give rise to this mysterious process of Nature are not of our making. But out of physical causes, unknown to us, perhaps unknowable, arise moral duties, which, as we are able perfectly to comprehend, we are bound indispensably to perform..." Burke would find agreement with Maritain's statement that a "philosophy unaware of mystery would not be a philosophy."

As we have seen in the Inquiry, Burke does not lack a concern with the "ultimate cause and nature of Reality." Aristotle sees metaphysics as dealing with the first principles of all reality and Burke's thought consistently embraces and reflects the use and knowledge of certain of these principles. These principles or causes for the realistic philosopher are obtained, Copleston notes, through an interpretation and understanding of the data of experience. "The metaphysician," continues Copleston,
"first considers the intelligible structure of things . . . and the fundamental relationships between them." He considers the "categorical structure of empirical reality." The metaphysician seeks to "isolate and analyse abstractly the most general principles and categories" which inform man's practical life, whether or not man is aware of them. This is not due to the determination of "purely subjective forms or categories;" rather, these categories are apprehended implicitly in experience.

Several points are noteworthy in Copleston's depiction of the metaphysician's task. Restated, the task of the metaphysician is to abstract from the data of experience the intelligible, categorical structure of empirical reality; to analyze these resultant principles and categories of reality as revealed through experience; and to note their interrelationships with one another and with the realm of reality, seeking an adequate explanation of the latter consonant with the metaphysical principles already revealed.

What are these intelligible structures of reality for Burke? If any intelligible aspect of reality reveals itself to Burke it is that of change and stability, so interwoven as to display an invariable order in reality. That there is a structure to reality, a structure which accommodates change, in itself a metaphysical principle, allows the intelligibility and the reasonableness of things manifesting themselves to the human intellect. The unfolding or development of reality within structures of the universe demonstrates a constancy of design and purpose. Change and development are not the result of caprice or chance. This would be unreasonable, as reason reveals itself for Burke through order. Consequently, he can say that "whatever has its origin in caprice is sure not to improve in its progress, nor to end in reason." This statement has ready application to the order and structure of all reality, although it occurs within the context of what he sees to be the mindlessness of the French Revolution. Order does not imply a static order, but structured change, in which certain principles and realities retain their essential sameness, yet accommodate and order the necessary changes of reality. This structure discloses a divine order, prompting Burke to claim: "I know that there is an order that keeps things fast in their place: it is made to us, and we are made to it." This order is not without purpose or design.

This Burkean emphasis upon order is not the refuge of an antiquarian conservative. The old is not to be preserved simply for its own sake. The appellation "pure conservative" as Whitehead applies it in the Adventure of Ideas—"The conservative is fighting against the essence of the universe"—cannot be assigned to Burke. Taking Whitehead to mean that the essence of the universe is process, the conclusion follows that the conservative is one who resists change and who resists process. This is clearly not the case with Burke, who affirms change without embracing it as coterminous with reality. Burke holds that "We must all obey the great law of change. It is the most powerful law of Nature, and the means perhaps of its conservation." Burke accentuates change, yet grounds it in the enduring essence of things. And, of course, the concepts of essence and substance refer to the abiding, stable feature of the universe.

Burke's philosophy both in its application to the universe in general and politics specifically demonstrates a balanced view of change moderated by stability. In referring to the theories of Parliament, he lauds the principle of renovation that attends to the "union of permanence and change," declaring "that in all our changes we are never wholly new." Yet there is to be "enough of the new to invigorate us," that we "may have the
advantage of change without the imputation of inconstancy."

Most of Burke’s utilization of the concepts of change and stability are to be drawn from his political concerns. Yet he makes it clear that political reality “is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world, and with the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts.” In this vein he writes of “a condition of unchangeable constancy,” which, “by preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state, in what we improve, we are never wholly new; in what we retain, we are never wholly obsolete.” Thus, the metaphysical elements of change and stability or permanence are to be found on both the physical and the political realm of the universe for Burke. The interplay of change and stability results in an orderly universe.

Change, with the aid of human wisdom, must be orderly and almost imperceptible. Slow change avoids what Burke considers the inconveniences of mutation. Yet this governance of change, this attempt to moderate its speed and impact, is not to bridle an otherwise fast flow of nature; rather, it is to temper change according to nature’s way. This position is confirmed by Burke in the following statement: “It would be wise to attend upon the order of things, and not to attempt to outrun the slow, but smooth and even course of Nature.”

Change is not to be radical or annihilating. It is to be ordered. The term “development” helps clarify the use of the word “change” in this instance. Development implies that there is or should be an orderliness to change, not a random or dissociated series of events succeeding one another in a chaotic or annihilating fashion. Burke’s “law of change” suggests the development of possibilities through expansion and growth. Change should improve and preserve. That which exists, whether it be man, society, the nation, or social institution, should be altered and developed if a static, atrophied world is to be avoided, but without violence to essential structures. For example, each man should seek to improve through knowledge and virtue, but without violence to his rational human nature. Yet, throughout these changes, something remains abiding, substantially and essentially unchanged.

Of course, Burke himself was involved in changes as he pushed through the “economical reform” of 1782. But even this reform took place in the context of order or stability: “Whatever I did at that time, so far as it regarded order and economy, is stable and eternal; as all principles must be. A particular order of things may be altered; order itself cannot lose it value.”

Burke’s thought is replete with many concepts utilized in traditional metaphysics. He often speaks of “essences” and “substances” and “natures.” For our purposes these terms will be used, for the most part, interchangeably as they appear to be used by Burke. Substance, of course, is more likely to refer to the concrete unit of existence itself, which essence or nature defines. Burke also writes of categories, quantity, change, habit, and alteration in addition to his use of Aristotelian-Thomistic concepts used in ethical works, such as cardinal virtues, moderation, temperance, et al. But more than that, he gives these terms the same sense as that given in a realist metaphysics. He recoils from any theory of evolution, process, or historicism which might suggest the inevitability of progress. If such theories also call for the rejection of essences or natures as something static and recalcitrant to change, Burke refuses this point as well. It is this emphasis upon change analogously applied to the social realm that the revolutionary philosophes see as written into the very nature of things, as law born to bear fruit generated from the corruptible
ruins of monarchy. It is, as Burke interprets the thought of the radical French ideologues, as if the active principle of reality is to assert itself in society and politics through force, enterprise, and talent without the tempering restraint of a passive principle. This is change incarnate without restraint; for Burke such change spells chaos, rather than order.

Burke’s sensitivity to the proper use of a conceptual framework is apparent. In formulating a principle of change, or, as applied to the political realm, a principle of reformation, he writes, “I would not exclude alteration neither, but even when I changed, it should be to preserve.”\textsuperscript{74} The use of the term “alteration” suggests a qualitative change, whereby the substance of a thing is modified, perfected, or further determined. Burke continues, “I would make the reparation as nearly as possible in the style of the buildings.”\textsuperscript{75} That is, the abiding essence is to be sustained, but not without the qualitative improvement thereof.

The problem of change and stability relates to the notion of substances, essences, and natures. It is necessary to deepen our understanding of the metaphysics of change and stability through a review of Burke’s use of these terms which suggest an intelligible structure of reality. This review will better be served by a contrast with the empiricist tradition which informed the intellectual milieu of Burke’s time and impressed the philosophes of the French Enlightenment, such as Voltaire, Condillac, Diderot, d’Holbach, and d’Alembert.

In light of the growth of empiricist philosophy, especially in England after Locke, one might expect Locke’s meaning of substance to infuse that of Burke’s. This is not the case. When Locke uses the term “substance,” it carries with it the idea of a substratum, foundation, or support for qualities. This use of the term brings to mind the idea of substance as pincushion.\textsuperscript{76} The idea of substance as a support for accidents or qualities is not that of Aristotle, Aquinas, or Burke. Rather than standing under, evoking the spatial imagery that it does, substance in the realist tradition is more a permeation of the entire entity. Substance for Aquinas “means the ultimate subject which is not predicated of any other thing,” but which is capable of being modified through individual, accidental perfections. The subject referred to here “is the particular individual in the genus of substance. In another usage,” Aquinas continues, “substance means the form or nature of the subject.”\textsuperscript{77} Whereas for Locke the substance lies beyond experience as an unknown substratum, for Aquinas substance is a distinction made within the total datum of experience. For Hume there is no idea, properly, of substance. Hume says “the idea of substance... is nothing but a collection of simple ideas that are united by the imagination and have a particular name assigned them.”\textsuperscript{78} How does this compare with Burke?

For philosophers in the empiricist tradition the language of metaphysical substances becomes superfluous and lacking in the kind of empirical evidence their epistemology demands. Burke, on the other hand, while constantly and everywhere asking us to consult our experience, and wary of an a priori deductionistic metaphysics, does not discount as unreal essences or substances due to their abstract, metaphysical character. It is not simply the abstract character of speculative thought which Burke discounts, for, as the following statement on abstract ideas indicates, to ignore in a priori fashion abstract thought is to remove the light of reason: “I do not put abstract ideas wholly out of any question; because I well know that under that name I should dismiss principles, and that without the guide and light of sound, well-understood principles, all reasonings in politics, as in everything else, would be a confused jumble.
of particular facts and details, without the means of drawing out any sort of theoretical or practical conclusion.\(^{79}\)

Burke's use of the concepts substance, essence, and nature, along with the realist school of metaphysics, shows that something may be altered or modified without being substantially changed. Regarding the state, Burke discovers its basic moral purpose: "The state, in its essence, must be moral and just . . ." Innumerable aspects concerning the state may change or vary according to time, circumstance, and place, but to be a state it must embody morality and justice even though it should be ruled by a tyrant.\(^{80}\) Commenting on the essence of a nation he notes the substantial and enduring presence of a commonwealth amid the passage of generations: "Individuals pass like shadows; but the commonwealth is fixed and stable. The difference, therefore, of today and tomorrow, which to private people is immense, to the state is nothing."\(^{81}\) The essence of a commonwealth includes the people, yet it is more. It includes the people as morally linked to one another through various associations, groupings, and incorporations. In a passage from his *First Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1796) Burke seeks to identify the essence of the French nation. It is not mere locality. It includes the "majesty of [the] throne . . . [the] dignity of [the] nobility . . . the honor of [the] gentry . . . the sanctity of [the] clergy and various other associations and "the respect due to [the] movable substance represented by the corporations of the kingdom. All these particular *moleculae* united form the great mass of what is truly the body politic in all countries."\(^{82}\) The essence of a nation is more than the several identifiable parts separately open for inspection. There is a unity that permeates and grafts the parts together, that remains intact beyond the separate existence of the several parts themselves. For Burke, the "nation is a moral essence, not a geographical arrangement, or a denomination of the nomenclature,"\(^{83}\) France, for instance, transceeds simple space and time. He declares that "France is out of her bounds, but the kingdom is the same."\(^{84}\) Still, the essence of a nation is not different from but includes all the duties, stations, property, social classes, and beliefs that comprise it.

Burke's use of the concept *essence* brings forth the following conclusions: first, essence is that which identifies and renders distinct an entity; second, essence endures specifically unchanged throughout time; third, it is not separate from nor identifiable with any of its particular parts, yet it permeates and unifies these parts into a substantial whole. This places Burke's notion of essence firmly within the realist tradition.

As we have seen, Burke's metaphysics indicates the inclusion of two fundamental principles: change and stability or permanence. In the tradition of realism the principles accounting for change and stability, according to whether the change is partial or substantial, include the following: partial change entails the principles or components of substance and accidents, and substantial change entails those of substantial form and prime matter. No such combination of principles is developed by Burke. Yet Burke's recognition and respect for the lawfulness of reality, its ordered dimensions, and the principles that fix our nature and guide our actions indicates his concern with principles of change and stability. And his recommendations of the Aristotelian list of categories to the *philosophes* would suggest some familiarity with the metaphysics of the Stagyrite: "The troll of their categorical table might have informed them that there was something else besides substance and quantity. They might learn from the catechism of metaphysics that there were eight heads more in every
complex deliberation which they have never thought of. . ."85 This passage, it ought to be fully noted, is a clear instance of a straightforward endorsement of classical realist metaphysics by Burke, which, therefore, implies that, in his disparaging comments on metaphysics, a different dimension from realism is intended—namely, rationalism. Burke’s recognition that there are principles permeating the very substance of our being is evident when, in the context of writing about the principles of morality and politics, he states: “The principles that guide us in public and private, as they are not of our devising, but moulded into the nature and essence of things, will endure with the sun and the moon.”86 The principles of change and stability, as well as substance, essence, and nature, vitalize Burke’s political philosophy, even though he generally does not attempt to develop a metaphysical analysis of these principles, typically accepting them as premises of his thought. There are some few exceptions to this generality, such as those occurring in the Inquiry. While not generally subjecting his metaphysical principles to analysis, he does show the result of incorrectly held principles, especially for society.

The points made thus far about Burke’s metaphysics and the conceptual framework employed are not simply noteworthy but pivotal to an understanding of his philosophy. Burke’s universe is not a static, ossified universe of sheer permanence. It is a changing, yet orderly universe and the metaphysical elements of his thought reflect this order and change. His metaphysics is developmental, assimilating change, allowing for the actualization or realization of the essential structures of reality, such as the improvement of man’s essential rationality through increased wisdom, or the directing of the commonwealth toward increased good or virtue. Burke’s framework of order is not meant to inhibit change, but rather to found it upon the timeless principles that govern nature, and when applied to nations, to the political system.

This is important for an understanding of his metaphysics and also for seeing its value in Burke’s critique of the philosophes. Generally opposed to both the religious and political institutions of their times, the thought of the philosophes is seen to be at least partly responsible for the turning from monarchy to bourgeois democracy, advocating the natural rights of the people. Burke believed that their atheistic principles destroyed above all the morality of the young: “But I have observed that the Philosophers in order to insinuate their polluted Atheism into young minds, systematically flatter all their passions natural and unnatural.”87 For them, surely no realist philosophy, saturated with substances and essence at the heart of things, could capture the dynamic, constant change and flow of reality. Among the philosophes, Denis Diderot is instructive on this point. Diderot maintains that nature is not static but is ever being born anew. In raising certain “Questions” in his work On the Interpretation of Nature (1754) he writes that if phenomena are not linked there can be no philosophy. “But if the state of this world of phenomena is one of perpetual change, if nature is still at work on it, then despite the chain that links all phenomena, there can still be no philosophy.”88 Immediately the false dichotomy rises up as one between seeing nature to be static or to be in change, with no middle ground. Diderot’s thought denies philosophy the power to provide a categorical interpretation of nature. He rejects any interpretation which admits permanence and stability, while acknowledging development. Diderot’s concept of nature is one of flux and change, ever new and never old. Surely for him no realist philosophy would accommodate such horizons, enmeshed as it appears.
to be in a static conception of the world as governed and stagnated by a transcendent realm of fixed, immutable essences.

The view of a metaphysical realism that places essences snugly away in a transcendent realm is more consonant with what may be termed the radical essentialism of Plato than the realism of the Aristotle-Aquinas lineage. Aquinas notes "the opinion of Plato, who asserted that the species of things subsisted separately from singular things." For Aristotle and Aquinas the species informed the actual material substance, so denying any metaphysical gulf between the concrete entity and its form. For Plato the sensible world of change and flux is the shadow world of unreality, a faint glimmer of the immutable realm of essences or forms. As discussed earlier, this type of transcendent essentialism is typically and wrongfully seen as most representative of realist philosophy, which invariably gives rise to a static, changeless conception of reality. If anything should emerge through our study of Burke to this point, it should be that he accommodates both change and stability. His metaphysics does provide a framework for change, a change which does not overthrow the timeless and eternal principles of reality or the essences of actual existents, but a change that seeks to improve, to renew, and to perfect these existents.

In referring to Burke's conception of essences we have so far generally employed examples from the social order. Thus, Burke's understanding of essences has occurred primarily in the context of discussions on nations and commonwealths. The use of analogy is in operation here because of the difference between the essence of an actual, material existent and that of a commonwealth. Burke notes this difference as when he writes that "commonwealths are not physical, but moral essences. They are artificial combinations, and, in their proximate efficient cause, the arbitrary productions of the human mind." This artificiality does violence neither to the commonwealth nor to human nature, since it is a tenet of Burke's philosophy that "art is man's nature." So, in producing the commonwealth, man helps realize his social nature. And in seeking to understand Burke's metaphysics I am not being misleading to use examples from the social and political order as this is the focal point of Burke's thought—as he finds reality and its principles analogous between the natural and social order; between the order of the universe, decreed by God, and man.

Reality is neither a ceaseless, ever new and changing flux, nor timeless with a realm of essences aloof from mutability. Things of this world do not gain their reality through some mysterious participation in Platonic forms. Essences inform and saturate the material realm before us. Yet they do not so determine things as to preclude change within the material existent itself, or, by analogy, with the physical and the social order within a commonwealth. Room for realization of what one essentially is and potentially can be allows for improvement, as well as degeneration. The fabric of Burke's metaphysics is so suffused with the elements of change and stability as to ensure that "in what we improve we are never wholly new; in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete." Here surfaces another principle of improvement, further securing the developmental aspect of Burke's metaphysics. This principle is mentioned by Burke in the context of his discussion of the idea of inheritance as including a principle of improvement. In considering inheritance he notes that it secures what it acquires while leaving acquisition free. He refers to this and other principles, such as the one of conservation and trans-
mission, as being maxims upon which the state may proceed. These principles are not those of politics solely, somehow divorced from nature. The state’s following of these principles makes its actions analogous to the “pattern of nature.” And here emerges still another component of Burke’s metaphysics, his principle of analogy. Together these principles further clarify the more fundamental ones of change and stability. Just as nature struggles, falls, and improves, so does society. Neither man nor nature starts each day and age de novo. Both build on what has gone before, and in building sustain, and in sustaining renew.

Burke speaks of “the spirit of philosophic analogy” in the context of the idea of inheritance as a factor of social stability. Although he does not specifically discuss “philosophic analogy,” he brings this concept forward in the midst of a passage replete with analogies drawn between the “order of the world” and the “method of nature.” It is important to note these analogies in order to see that Burke’s metaphysics bears directly on his political philosophy. It should further our conviction that the language of substance, essence, and nature used in a social or political context by Burke is not removed from but is the outgrowth of his understanding of reality. These concepts reflect a coherent picture of reality, a reality not speculatively bifurcated from the lived-world of politics, but a reality that is fundamentally consistent.

In the short space of slightly over one page Burke draws parallels with the political scheme of things and nature in four separate references. In succession he refers to the political and social policy of entailed inheritance as the “happy effect of following nature, which is wisdom without reflection, and above it”; to “a constitutional policy working after the pattern of nature...”; to “the institutions of policy... [and] the gifts of providence” as being handed down “in the same course and order of the world”; and finally, to “a conformity to nature in our artificial institutions.” There is no explication of the meaning of analogy as used here by Burke, yet it is apparent that the natural realm and the political realm are analogous to each other in that each reveals a method or design that is orderly yet alterable. Decay, fall, renovation, and progression are the possible alterations that occur in nature and in the state. This discussion is useful in that metaphysical principles such as those of change and stability, substance and essence, which are grounded in reality, find a ready application to politics for Burke.

Individual existents, for Burke, have an essential nature which accounts for the intelligibility of their reality. Yet in recognizing the substantial and essential character of reality Burke did not slight change as the most basic law of nature. This emphasis on change gives a primacy to existence as dynamic activity in Burke’s thought. This is not to say that reality is change or process, and nothing more. It is not to deny that things have essences reflecting a stable presence in beings. As John Wild notes, “Action and existence are never found without structure and essence.” The effect of Burke’s position that the “law of nature is change” is to place a primacy on existence as opposed to an essentialism which focuses upon the fixed and static properties of being, to the detriment of its active and dynamic character. To emphasize either extreme, that of existence or of essence, to the exclusion of either principle is to misrepresent and arbitrarily divide being against itself. This is why the recognition of the primacy of existence in Burke’s thought is so crucial. To do otherwise is to fall prey to a view of Burke as either a reactionary or status quo conservative. For this to be the case would be entirely to contradict the thrust of Burke’s metaphysics. As change is the
dynamic and active aspect of being, and as this aspect received first place in Burke’s assessment of reality, Burke could concur with Wild who holds that “The act of existing is dynamic and temporal.”

Why is this so crucial to our understanding of Burke? It is crucial in that, with a lack of sustained philosophical argumentation on Burke’s part, one is forced to isolate those principles which emerge from a patient reading of his works. Nowhere, obviously, is there to be found in Burke an explicit anticipation of philosophical existentialism. Yet, in part, through the prism of existentialism and from the vantage point of our century, one can better note the emphasis upon actual, concrete existence by Burke. His very hesitancy over all philosophizing and metaphysics in particular is a hesitancy over losing one’s intellect in a swirl of abstractions and universals which are peculiar to essentialism. One cannot ignore theory, to be sure; but one must shun a theory that separates man from existence. This is a recurring theme in Burke. It is this understanding of existence that makes Burke’s conservatism different from conservatism too enthralled with the structures of reality. Although Burke emphasizes order and structures, it is to preserve and ensure the smooth and even flow of change and the directionality of the same rather than to praise order for order’s sake.

Exercising a certain license, and speaking of Burke’s “existentialism,” it is of course quite unlike a Sartrean view of which existence precedes and determines essence through a freely chosen project. For Burke, in a manner that Maritain would find compatible with his view of existentialism, existence is not independent of essence, nor essence of existence, just as no change exists without stability, nor stability apart from change. Beyond this it is almost impossible to go with Burke without beginning to force a philosophical mould upon him foreign to his thought. This understanding of Burke’s metaphysics is pivotal to a comprehension of his political philosophy and conservatism. Burke’s is a conserving conservatism, not a status quo or reactionary conservatism. His metaphysics reveals an existentialist thrust in that change and activity receive preeminent consideration and that man is considered in his concrete and historical condition. Burke extolls “that wonderful structure, Man; whose prerogative it is, to be in a great degree a creature of his own making. . . .” Burke continues, maintaining that when man is “made as he ought to be made, [he] is destined to hold no trivial place in the creation.” The term “ought” implies an ideal or essence which man is to realize, although, still, he is, “in a great degree a creature of his own making.” This confirms again for Burke that existing things have a determinate characteristic about them, a “whatness” that marks things off from one another. Essences render things intelligible yet—Burke notes this danger well—and their very intelligibility easily leads the intellect not firmly grounded in existence into a world of abstractions. Thus, Burke claims that “Abstract liberty, like other mere abstractions, is not to be found.”

This brings us near to the heart of Burke’s metaphysical argument for freedom and liberty. One realizes one’s existence in the fullness of freedom by becoming what one most essentially is. Here the elements of the metaphysics of change and stability are drawn together in a unified manner. The freedom of an individual, or analogously, a nation, is obtained through activity in accord with one’s nature. Burke’s philosophy consistently sustains this position, echoing the realist precept that “action follows nature.” This is the matrix of a Burkean metaphysics with an emphasis upon the primacy of change in the context of order.

A radical spirit of freedom is often
conjoined with a rejection of essences, and this radical spirit Burke found in the French radicals. Against the French philosophes Burke held that "the spirit of freedom leads in itself to misuse and excess."99 Burke's philosophy is so metaphysically grounded as to reject this spirit as excess, a spirit which in the political scheme of reality elevates the individual's rights above the good of the commonwealth. Burke maintains that there is a hierarchy of existence that unveils not only to man his true interest, but also his place in the universe itself. And this place is not above or outside of society, in a pre-social state of nature, possessing hypothetical freedom. His place is essentially an integral part of the commonwealth in which the individual neither reigns supreme nor is swallowed up by Leviathan, by the commonwealth, or by the leveling spirit of the philosophes. Here Burke's metaphysics clearly vitalizes his political philosophy.

The evidence from Burke bears out the conclusion that his political thought is based on a firm, classical realist metaphysics. Burke's metaphysics affirms an ordered yet changing reality. Change takes place in conformity with the structuring principles of reality reflecting a fundamental predominance of order over chaos. In short, reality is intelligible, giving evidence of the governance of reason. Furthermore, such metaphysical concepts as essence, substance, and nature, as they structure change and stability are applied and revealed by Burke in a consistent fashion. All of this serves to sustain the thesis that Burke's political thought is grounded in a realist metaphysical conception of reality. The failure to realize this conclusion remains to this day the greatest barrier to understanding the authentic nature of Burke's political philosophy.

1. John Plamenatz writes of Burke's style: "I can think of no one who can argue a case at such unnecessary length without wearying the reader." Man and Society: Political and Social Theory, vol. 1: Machiavelli through Rousseau (New York, 1963), 332-33.

