



**Review: [Untitled]**

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*Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics, and Aesthetics.* by Stephen K. White  
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this type of community possible is a key concern. Our freedom to create a community in which people are treated as ends evolves only when we possess an intelligible understanding of experience, an understanding that describes the possibilities and limits presented by experience. This type of understanding presumes that whereas we cannot know directly the things that exist in the world, we can know them indirectly through our perceptions. The rational intelligence provides the concepts, such as time and space and cause and effect, that organize our perceptions, so we can have an intelligible understanding of experience. Without these concepts, our understanding of the world would be reduced to random and unintelligible perceptions. A major theme of this book, then, is to show how, in Kant, the rational intelligence creates an understanding of the world that enables humankind to become nature's final end.

The view of the relationship between the rational intelligence and perception rejects an uncontrolled imagination, which Kant shows, in his discussions of hypochondria, can be used to depict ways of life that are contrary to the real conditions of experience explained by our rationally grounded perceptions. In this regard, Kant discusses Swedenborg, who claims to communicate with the souls of deceased people. Shell says that, for Kant, Swedenborg is a "dreamer" whose "world is in principle one that cannot be shared by others" (p. 126). The dreamer's private world, because it disregards the place of the rational intelligence, would not provide the living with a basis for a community that embodies the moral law.

In this type of community, each person is accorded dignity and thus lives only by the moral norms that rational people accept. A community practically embodies this objective as a civil society with a republican form of government, which secures private property, the rule of law, and the rights of each person. Kant's ethics, then, as Shell rightly points out, is not the "empty formalism" Hegel attributed to it (p. 146). Indeed, Kant's view of history supports the argument that nature is designed, as it pertains to the human species, to realize a "community of moral beings" (p. 175). Here, human beings become the ultimate end and the highest good of nature.

A problem remains, however. As Shell demonstrates, in Kant, to uphold humankind as the final end of nature, it is necessary to envision nature "as if" it were designed to achieve this objective. But by doing so, the unity between the rational intelligence and nature is based upon the assertion that humankind is the final end, an assertion which, while reasonable and beyond dispute, cannot be derived from our experience with nature. This experience, which suggests that nature is filled with "boundless heterogeneity" marked by cycles of life and death (p. 206), does not support the view that humankind is nature's final end. Still, by associating nature with the idea of humankind as the final end, it is possible to show how nature's heterogeneity can be useful in achieving this great objective. Thus, Kant argues for a culture of rational beliefs, a culture characterized by faith in reason's (or the rational intelligence's) idea of humankind as the final end of nature and as a species capable of living in a society governed by the moral law. Indeed, Kant turns to belief in the existence of God, "an intelligent first cause," to maintain humankind's status as the highest good and the final end of nature, within a community which makes this objective supreme (p. 198). Shell is skeptical of the success of this endeavor, however, and she says, "in the end, Kant blinks, unable (without recourse to God) to disabuse himself of the disabling thought that the idea of the highest good . . . is a chimera" (p. 261).

Shell, in discussing the possibilities of Kantian community for bridging nature and humankind, omits an important element. Kant's world view can be seen as containing an approach to communication that allows individuals to form the communal setting that secures respect for the moral law. As Onora O'Neill argues ("The Public Use of Reason," *Political Theory* (November 1986): 533-4; 543-5), Kantian morality protects the dignity of each person by making possible a type of communication which uses commonly accepted standards of reasoning in order to encourage mutual respect for difference, while securing autonomy of thought and judgment. Shell's account of Kant's definition of the world, in this important contribution to Kant studies, needs to build upon this insight to provide a complete definition of Kant's world view.

**Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics, and Aesthetics.** By Stephen K. White. *Modernity and Political Thought*, vol. 5. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994. 107p. \$42.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

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Edmund Burke. The name seems strangely out of place in our "post-cold war" times. Indeed, with the collapse of communism, says Stephen White, this enemy of "political rationalism and radicalism" would appear to have little to say on "the issues that animate us at the close of the twentieth century" (p. 1). Complicating the question of Burke's relevance for contemporary readers is his notoriously rambling, affect-laden prose and the absence of a "major philosophical treatise" (p. 2) in his wide-ranging oeuvre. In light of these difficulties, we may well wonder whether a return to Burke can provide any insight into the problems of (post)modernity.

Opening with this question, White offers, if not a definitive yes, a strongly argued case for the rewards of rethinking Burke free of the ideological antinomies that structured cold-war political debate. Resisting a more current trend of interpretation, White also shows the difficulties faced by neoconservatives who find in Burke's writings theoretical ammunition for their stance in the current "culture wars." White interrupts this and similar appropriations of Burke, reminding us of the pieces that do not fit into the traditional interpretive frame, for example, the fact that this so-called father of conservatism "went out of his way to plead leniency in the criminal punishment of homosexuals" (p. 2).

Notwithstanding the dominant image of Burke as the irrepressible spokesman of tradition and the Old Regime, Burkean interpretation, as White shows, has been fraught by contradictory accounts of the "real Burke." For eighteenth-century critics, like Thomas Paine, Burke was an ally of the landed aristocracy; for nineteenth-century critics, like John Morley, Burke was a liberal constitutionalist; for twentieth-century critics, like C. B. Macpherson, Burke was a defender of capitalist accumulation. White does not try to adjudicate the case of Burkean interpretation but, rather, considers the possibility that each reading has a measure of legitimacy inasmuch as Burke's "arguments are often couched in more than one idiom or language game" (p. 2). Although White is attentive to this linguistic plurality, he rightly insists that certain themes and concerns persist throughout Burke's writings and that these converge in his complex critique of what White calls "political modernity."

For Burke, political modernity entailed a "systematic explosion of willfulness in politics that had a world historical significance" (p. 5). Culminating in the French Revolution,

the sheer force of political modernity, says White, was evident to Burke as early as 1780 in the form of the Gordon Riots. More backward than forward looking—a violent popular response to parliamentary moves for increased toleration of Catholics in England—the riots were nevertheless an example of something new in politics: a volatile mixture of increased popular agitation and a diminished sense of human limits. Attending to Burke's less well-known writings and the political events that provoked them, such as the Gordon Riots, White enables us to see the complexity of Burke's thought, which tends to get lost in interpretations that focus exclusively on his response to the French Revolution.

Central to White's thoughtful rereading of Burke is a fascinating account of Burke's 1757 essay on aesthetics, *Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. This text, says White, offers an interpretive angle from which to consider the range of Burke's political reflections, allowing us to "separate the wisdom in Burke's work from its reactionary excesses and blindnesses" (p. 83). What White finds and applauds in the *Enquiry* is the articulation of an "aesthetic-affective dynamic," which emphasizes the importance of feeling or sentiment in political judgment. Crucial to this dynamic is Burke's account of the sublime. According to White, the Burkean sublime's "deepest significance as a category of human experience resides in the way that it confronts us with human finitude" (p. 30). White argues that it is this sense of limits which unravels in the French Revolution. But he is equally concerned to show—in stark contrast to those critics who would demonstrate a direct link between the *Enquiry* and the *Reflections*—that the "interplay between [Burke's] aesthetic and political ideas" (p. 41) has a less direct and more complex genealogy. By attending to the development of Burke's aesthetic-affective dynamic in his "middle period," White enriches our understanding of how aesthetics came to structure the whole of Burke's critique of political modernity.

Through careful readings of Burke's writings both before 1780 and between 1780 and 1790, White develops an acute analysis of the place of the social affections in Burke's thought. As Burke came increasingly to see the importance of the sentiments in nourishing human sociability, he altered his 1757 account both of the sublime, as that which inspires awe and dread in subjects, as well as the beautiful, as that which is of significantly less momentous concern for political society. On the altered account, the authentic sublime comes to figure, not the exercise of limitless power, but the power of limits; the beautiful comes to figure, not the window-dressing of sociability, but the glue of social affection. Although White is not the first critic to notice this shift in Burke's political aesthetics, his reading is especially valuable for its attentiveness to Burke's gradual reformulation of the aesthetic-affective dynamic as he responded to a variety of historical and political events (such as the American Revolution, the Gordon Riots, and the crisis of British India under Warren Hastings). What becomes visible in White's account, in other words, is the extent to which abstract theoretical categories, like the beautiful and the sublime, take on different meanings for Burke in the context of shifting political practices.

Tracing this change in Burke's thinking over the course of three decades, White better prepares us for understanding the place of aesthetics in Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, that is, for making political sense of the aesthetic concepts of the sublime and the beautiful that organize Burke's attack on Jacobinism. This is a valuable and important contribution that both builds on and departs from the

existing literature in its insistence that a series of political events, and not just the French Revolution, shaped Burke's aesthetic-affective dynamic.

Where White is somewhat less successful is in helping us to think politically about the excesses of Burke's prose, especially those places in the *Reflections* where language both exceeds its ostensible empirical referent and threatens to collapse under the weight of authorial affect. In some sense, this less satisfying aspect of White's reading is the other face of the real strengths of his interpretive strategy. Every reader of Burke inevitably comes up against his almost hysterical flights of rhetoric, most notably the dramatic account of the Jacobin assault on Marie Antoinette. Because White wants to elaborate a Burke who is both more consistent in his critique of political modernity and more relevant for late-twentieth-century readers, he understandably chooses to emphasize those aspects of Burke's thought that lend themselves to a more prudent assessment of his legacy.

One example of how this choice may limit our understanding of the politics of Burkean rhetoric is White's interesting account of Burke's response to a 1789 letter written by Madame Parisot, a prominent Frenchwoman with whose family the Burkes were well acquainted. The letter, which describes in vivid detail the family's "plight during the 'Great Fear'" (p. 64), says White, "was not, for Burke, just one more piece of political news, but rather an aesthetic-affective jolt, on the basis of which he could thenceforth speak definitively about France" (p. 65). White cleverly uses this letter to establish a context in which to make sense of what Paine called Burke's "horrid pictures," suggesting that it was this earlier (and for Burke more personal) scene of the humiliation of women that elicited the author's fury and inspired his chivalric defense of the queen. "When one focuses instead, as is usually the case, on the more famous scene of Marie Antoinette's distress," White remarks, "this continuity becomes overshadowed by the hyperbole and histrionics of Burke's description of that event" (p. 66). Stated somewhat differently, as White acknowledges, Burke's critique of political modernity is compromised by the reader's sense that the author has simply lost his mind.

Perhaps there are other means for thinking politically about Burke's rhetoric, and especially his figuration of women as the helpless victims (and active agents) of what White calls the "false sublime," the transgression of human limits and the sense of "human infinitude" (p. 84). White himself provides us with these means when he argues that Burke's central and enduring contribution to political thought lies in his trenchant critique of politics without limits. Following White's lead, we might push farther to ask: How do certain conceptions of the *feminine* work to sustain our sense of the authentic sublime or a sense of limits? What happens when those conceptions are put into question? If we reject, as White says we must, both Burke's oppressive understanding of gender and his notion of a natural hierarchy to provide such limits, can we refigure the sense of human finitude that White persuasively argues is crucial to the future of democratic cultures? Suggesting that a micropolitics of the self, rooted in an aesthetic sensibility, may frustrate the "modern imperatives of rationalization, especially the unlimited drive for mastery" (p. 84), White modifies Burke in order to recover from him an important lesson. What we make of this lesson may depend on hearing the (sexual) difference in the question that White puts to us in his concluding chapter: "How does *any* individual cultivate *for herself* an authentic sense of the sublime (p. 85)?"