



Teaching Modern Political Philosophy

with Joshua Gibbs

Lesson 8 & 9:
Reflections of the
Revolution in France
by Edmund Burke, Pt.
3 & 4

Outline:

Burke's specific criticism of the French Revolution as it is unfolding

- First estate was the aristocracy, the second estate was the clergy, and the third estate was the shopkeepers and lawyers. They met at Versailles and the third estate began a revolution to take over the government.
- Burke is unimpressed with the caliber of men who are claiming to be the government.
- Have a conversation with your students about an aristocracy and what is an aristocracy.
 - A liberal arts education is an aristocratic education. Liberal arts are what free men engage in.

What is Burke hoping to see in those who are governing?

- They should be respectably composed, in point of condition in life, of permanent property, of education, and of such habits as enlarge and liberalize the understanding.
- What kind of people is he referring to? Who should be in charge of the government?
- Petty provincial lawyers are now in charge of the government. These are men with very little to lose. Burke does not trust governors who have very little to lose.
- We want men who have been habituated to self-respect. If you put people who have nothing to lose in charge of the government, what incentive do they have to behave moderately?
- If he has a lot to lose he will use his authority with a great fear of misrule. Those men will behave with moderation if you give them great power.
- Win falls of power and money tend to not work out will for the people who are given them. What do young celebrities use their wealth for? Consider Johnny Depp and what he spent his money on.
- Why is it ridiculous to give each member of the family an equal vote? A teacher has more responsibility than a student.
- If it all goes horribly wrong, nobody will be terribly surprised and you will go back to your job having lost very little.



- Who is fit for government?
 - Burke wants men who have a lot to lose – money, reputation, family lines, and prestige. He wants men who have been closely observed for many years to be in positions of power.
- What does Burke view as qualifications for governing versus what Rousseau views as qualifications:
 - If you view rights and responsibilities as being metaphysical principles then they one who discovers those principles is fit to govern.
 - If rights come down a family line as an inheritance then the one who understands most deeply what can be lost in cashing in the heirlooms is the one that you want in charge (English aristocrats, men who have been taught to be custodians of very ancient things that are very valuable).
 - An aristocrat is a highly public person. Their actions, dress, and tastes were closely observed. If they were not moral they could tarnish the family image such that no one would marry into the family and the fortune could be lost.
 - Aristocrats were the adults of English society. These were the people that Burke thought were more fitted to govern.
- Common people do matter too. The English government is not set up such that common people do not enter into it.
- In Burke's mind there are two kinds of virtue:
 - Assumed virtue – common sense, it means that you tend to trust people who present themselves in a way that suggests that they are successful in what they do. The ability to judge a person according to the way they present themselves and what they stand to lose.
 - Actual virtue – is moral and tactical competence.
 - Scenario where you need to hand your child over in a shopping mall when you will have a seizure: What stranger would you hand your infant child to? What store would you like to be in? Who would Burke give the child to? In a pinch, who do you trust?
 - Burke does not trust people with great ideas. You want to hand responsibility over to someone with experience.
 - Burke would place them next to an old store to hand the child to someone who is at their job rather than someone who is not at their job. They are a more publicly recognized person.
 - The employee will act as a representative of the store, a corporation that has a lot on the line.
 - You would want to go to a store large enough to have a choice of employees. Hand the child to someone who has experience with children.
 - Choose someone who is personally and professionally invested with responsibility and culpability for what they do.
 - This is what is assumed virtue.



- For Rousseau, the progressive wants to ask for an absolute law, “Is it possible that handing the child to a grandmother at the make-up counter at Nordstrom is a bumbling idiot?” “Is it possible that the kindest and most responsible person in the mall is a heavily tattooed person of the age of 19 at Hot Topic?” It is possible, but it is not likely.
- When we see signs of competence there must be actual competence that backs up these signs. We must behave according to appearances on most occasions.
 - There is a testimony by way of popularity that commends the institution to us not the individual.
 - It is necessary that people in a position power to represent something bigger than themselves.
 - It is necessary for the individual who comes to power to stake his identity in institutions mystical or earthly that have some command of his loyalty and action.
 - When the rogue individual is put in the position of power he is not afraid to reflect poorly on the institutions that grant him his identity.
 - **What Burke demands is that they have an identity that they are afraid to embarrass.**
 - We have to trust the appearances of things. We cannot help judging things according to their appearances. Appearances will sometimes deceive you.
 - Burke is willing to admit that there are special cases, and yet nature usually works in a particular way.
 - **Burke is content to live according to appearances, nature, which is to say he is content to live according to common sense. This is really vexing to modern progressives who do not like living according to nature and appearances, which are not absolute laws.**

Burke restates that responsibility for the government must be handed over to those who have experience with responsibility and who have made mistakes before on a lower level.

- If men have not been taught that their profession is respectable then they have no reason to fear disgracing their profession.

Philosophy of the self

- Burke
 - Primarily interested in a philosophy of the self that connects the self to as many transcendent institutions as possible.
 - He wants people in charge.
 - He views human greatness according to a man’s connection with transcendent identities.



- Human identity is derived from looking outward.
- Genuine human greatness is found in what in yourself is submitted to knowable transcendent institutions (church, spouse, and children)
- Rousseau
 - Rousseau's position has proven dominant on the subject of the self.
 - We view the self as an untouchable ghost that lives within us that has the power dictate our actions but is not responsible to any governing authority outside of us (be true to yourself).
 - We prefer conceptions of the self that alleviate moral responsibility (no set of commands that come with them).
 - Personality types do not have moral responsibility attached to them.
- The conservative position is one which tends to trust institutions.

The Point of teaching Burke and Rousseau

- The purpose is not to persuade students to vote one way or another.
- It has to do with the soul of one who learns it (how you govern your soul and govern your family).
- Any ancient discussion of politics is about governing the individual (Plato's Republic).
- If a work of political philosophy is of value it should change a student's life from the moment they believe the arguments in it.