

Burke on rationalism, prudence and reason of state

Ferenc Hörcher

“Il faut... tout détruire; oui, tout détruire; puisque tout est à recréer.”¹

1.

One of the most sophisticated minds of 20th century political philosophy seems to have completely misunderstood Edmund Burke's frame of mind. In his magisterial work, Leo Strauss presented Burke as a historicist–relativist–particularist, almost a post-modern thinker, who did not have any long-term values, but used political rhetoric for his own purposes. He argued for the complete lack of natural law in Burke.² In fact, he found him lacking in rationality. He claimed that Burke “parts company with the Aristotelian tradition by disparaging theory and especially metaphysics. He uses ‘metaphysics’ and ‘metaphysician’ frequently in a derogatory sense.” His “opposition to modern ‘rationalism’ shifts almost insensibly into an opposition to ‘rationalism’ as such”.³ Here we have Burke presented as the prophet of irrationalism.

There is another possible, even characteristic, opposite misunderstanding of Burke by those, who – starting out from his fierce opposition to the ideas, and even more the practice of the French Revolution – thought that he was a dogmatic thinker.⁴ It is argued that he is an old-fashioned religious reactionary. An advocate of religious superstition and an unsubstantiated Natural Law, he is claimed to be determined to fight against social justice and progress. This is Edmund Burke, the dogmatic ideologist of religious reaction and doctrinaire natural law thinking.

This paper would like to show that neither of these interpretations is correct. Neither was Burke a scholastic crypto-Catholic, nor a thinker of almost postmodern irrationalism who did not trust reason at all, and therefore urged his readers to set free irrational political passions.⁵ Rather he was both convinced of the use of a constrained activity of reason in politics, and did

¹ Rabaud de St. Etienne, quoted by Edmund Burke: *Revolutionary Writings. Reflections on the Revolution in France and the first Letter on a Regicide Peace*, ed. Iain Hampsher-Monk, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014, 171. (All further quotations of the *Reflections* are from this edition.)

² Leo Strauss: *Natural Right and History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1953, 300–314.

³ *Ibid.*, 311, 313.

⁴ For this position see for example: Albert O. Hirschman: *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1991.; Corey Robin: *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011.

⁵ As for his relationship to Catholicism, Pocock reminds us that “it is probable that the families of both /of his parents/ had only recently converted from Catholicism.” He also adds, however that “he was a baptized member of the Church of Ireland and a vehement defender of the Church of England”. Both of these quotes in: J.G.A. Pocock: ‘Introduction’, in: Edmund Burke: *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. with intr. and notes by J.G.A. Pocock, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1987, vii–xlvi, ix.

himself believe that practical wisdom could – on the long run – lead us to recognize those truths, which are generally labelled as the precepts of natural law. I will argue that this Burkean approach to politics is genuinely conservative (even if he himself was a Whig), or not to become anachronistic, that it is in harmony with a sceptical, British type conservatism. I will also argue, that this sort of pessimistic, practical rationality is derived from the Aristotelian account of *phronesis*, which was transformed into the Roman and later Christian virtue of prudence. Finally, I will show the parallel between the prudence attributed to the successful individual human political agent, and the reason of state attributed to the early modern state.

To prove these claims I will rely on Burke's reaction on the French Revolution, famously elaborated in the *Reflections*, his most influential political work, and will concentrate on his use of the term reason and rationality. As it will be seen, I was influenced by two classics of Burke scholarship, most importantly by the relevant works of J.G.A. Pocock, and of Francis P. Canavan, S.J., to whose positions my own is perhaps the closest.⁶

2.

In his fierce political pamphlet, written in the form of long letters, published under the title *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in 1790, Edmund Burke tried to make sense of the fresh news about the revolution in France. Or to put it in a more precise way: he was shocked by the news of the events over the channel, and felt obliged to reflect on the possibility whether the strange French disease can put its head up in his own country. By giving his thoughts expression, the British Whig politician was able to stir up a huge public debate about the situation, and about the necessary measures to react upon the urgent challenges. What he was doing was not much more than comparing the rhetoric of the French revolutionaries with their own deeds, in order to show how much they were misleading not only themselves and their own population but also the international community. His strategy was a kind of dissection of revolutionary communication, a rhetorical deconstruction, in order to reveal the actual political stakes involved.

Perhaps the most important linguistic struggle in the *Reflections* went around the notion of rationality. The revolutionaries claimed that the political structure of the *Ancien Régime* had become anachronistic by their day, and therefore it was irrational to sustain it any longer. Their argumentation was based on the enlightened ideas of rationality recently promulgated by people

⁶ Pocock's position was first formulated in his book on *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (1957). Its more elaborate version is to be found in his own edition of the *Reflections*, for details see above. Canavan's relevant piece is: Francis P. Canavan S.J.: *Edmund Burke's Conception of the Role of Reason in Politics*, *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 21., No. 1, Febr. 1959, 60–79.

like Kant, who famously claimed that the Enlightenment is not much more than the ability to “Sapere aude!” (appr. Dare to know!, or Dare to think for yourself!). This trust in the potential of human reason gave the name to the age: enlightenment, meaning a kind of secular revelation induced by reason, or simply the Age of Reason. This latter term was popularized by Thomas Paine, in his *The Age of Reason; Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology*, published in 1794. Paine’s work, undoubtedly the most influential attack on Burke’s *Reflections*, was a defence of Deism, an intellectual movement believing in a passive God, influenced by early 18th century British Deism. Burke’s work was attacked by Paine partly because Burke himself criticized with strong words such famous contemporary dissenters as Richard Price and Joseph Priestley for the political theology they preached.

One should certainly ask, on what grounds Burke attacked these firm, and most of the time worthy believers of human reason? Well, to be sure, not on the grounds of irrationality, either in the sense of a religious mysticism or of a Romantic form of it. I would argue Burke himself is to be construed as an enlightened thinker, not an obscure believer of secret dogmas. His doubts in the power of reason in politics are not rooted in religious or other forms of irrationalism. His anti-rationalist argument is limited in the *Reflections* to social and political issues. As he sees it, contrary to what is propagated by the “new conquering empire of light and reason” the reason of an individual human being is not necessarily reliable when it comes to the creation of new social or political systems.⁷ He proposes that we should not rely solely on its power; on the contrary, we need “to fortify the fallible and feeble contrivances of our reason” in these spheres.⁸ As it turns out he thinks that in social and political matters individuals lack the experience required to collect the empirical data which can help to build up general principles of politics. “The science of government... (is) a matter which requires experience, and even more experience than any person can gain in his whole life, however sagacious and observing he may be...”⁹

3.

Burke seems to have learnt a lot from his contemporary, the Scottish-born British philosopher and historian, David Hume. It was Hume, who in his essay *Of the Perfect Commonwealth* argued that “the bulk of mankind” is “governed by authority, not reason”, and therefore it is

⁷ Burke: *Reflections*, 79.

⁸ Burke: *Reflections*, 35. See also his statement: “There is, by the essential fundamental constitution of things, a radical infirmity in all human contrivances.” *The Correspondence of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (4 vols., London, 1844), III., 117.

⁹ Burke: *Reflections*, 62.

better to rely on a power that is established, than on experimenting with new solutions.¹⁰ He was criticising Plato's *Republic*, More's *Utopia*, works, which aimed at great political transformations, but whose plans – when more closely inspected – proved to be nothing more than plainly imaginary. Philosophers should avoid, so argued Hume, to get directly involved in the affairs of the state, as their theories might have very negative side effects (the famous unintended consequences of the Scottish Enlightenment) which they cannot control from the far distance.¹¹ Philosophers should also take into account, warned Hume, that in human nature “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions”.¹² And it was Hume who famously left his cell when he felt that his “reason is incapable of dispelling” his “philosophical melancholy and delirium”, and let nature solve the problem left unsolved by philosophical reason: “I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends, and when... I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous...”¹³

I would like to argue, that Burke shares this scepticism concerning the intrusion of philosophy into common life, and it might have been actually influenced by Hume – but this is less important for us here. The more important fact is that Burke distinguished his own position from that of a metaphysically inclined philosopher: while the latter had a role “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.”¹⁴ The important thing for us here is that after his own early efforts to write philosophy Burke lost his illusions about philosophy's practical use. To put it more precisely: he seems to have lost his belief in the capacity of philosophy to transform (to make better) politics and society. An important part of this disillusionment must have been his decision to become an active politician. The decision to become one was in a way a necessary one. As it is argued, “Need for a secure income led him into political service”.¹⁵ But interestingly as well as importantly, the

¹⁰ David Hume: ‘Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth’, in his: *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, Liberty Fund, Minneapolis, 1985, 512.

¹¹ Craig Smith: *The Scottish Enlightenment, Unintended Consequences and the Science of Man*, *Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, vol. 7., No. 1, March 2009, 9–28

¹² David Hume: *A Treatise of Human Nature* - Reprinted from the original edition in three volumes and edited, with an analytical index, by L. A. Selby-Bigge, Revised by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978, 415.

¹³ Hume: *Treatise*, 269. In this interpretation of Hume's scepticism of solving metaphysical dilemmas, I rely on Donald Livingston's works on Hume, most importantly on his *Hume's Philosophy of Common Sense*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1984, and his *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium. Hume's Pathology of Philosophy*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1998.

¹⁴ Edmund Burke: *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents (1770)*, *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, 16 vols., the Rivington edition, London, 1803–1827, II. 335.

¹⁵ Iain Hampshire-Monk: ‘Editor's introduction’, in: Edmund Burke: *Reflections*, xi-xxxvi., xi.

way to politics led him first to become a writer of works of philosophical interest (*Vindication* (1756), *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757)) and a public figure.¹⁶ The young Burke became the editor of the brand new, but soon influential *Annual Register*, an annually published organ both cultural and political, originally bearing the subtitle “A View of the History, Politicks and Literature of the Year...”, and published by his earlier publishers. Due to the fact of receiving a well-founded education at Trinity College Dublin first, and then a legal apprenticeship at the Middle Temple in London, he had no problem in joining public debates in Doctor Johnson’s London.¹⁷ As a result of his public recognition and his success as editor he became an MP in 1765 and remained in the Westminster in that position – except for a short interval – for almost 30 years, until he withdrew from politics in 1794. Although he was an intellectually minded person who was unable to achieve political success as a political leader, he soon became a distinctive voice in the Parliament, arguing for a number of rather different cases with a rhetorical skill hardly paralleled in his time. His success depended on a personal combination of his intellectual inspirations: on his belief in God and the responsibility of the educated, on his earlier philosophical interests both in Berkeley-like scepticism and in Lockean empiricism, and his political experience in the British Parliament, as well as his familiarity with the great Aristotelian–Ciceronian tradition of political and moral philosophy. It is his remarkable achievement to create from this colourful intellectual baggage his very characteristic political convictions and his particular Burkean manners.

As far as the conceptual distinction between rationality versus rationalism is concerned, Burke’s main intention in the *Reflections* is to show that both the French revolutionaries and their British advocates have a specific understanding of the relationship between reason and politics, and this understanding is based on a misconception of the nature of politics, and of the possibility of philosophical ideals to get realized. As he sees it, the *philosophes* – he often uses the term sophisters, comparing them to the sophists of ancient Greece – think that their philosophical ideals can directly be planted into the practical field of politics. In other words, they do not recognize the difficulties, indeed the risks of efforts to change the social and political

¹⁶ For a short account of his life, see: Ian Harris: *Edmund Burke*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/burke/>>.

¹⁷ For Burke’s early education in Dublin, we have by now Lock’s and Bourke’s detailed biographical monographs. See F. P. Lock: *Edmund Burke. Volume I: 1730–1784*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999. and F. P. Lock: *Edmund Burke. Volume II: 1784–1797*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2006. Richard Bourke: *Empire and revolution: the political life of Edmund Burke*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2015. For an early effort to take Burke’s educational background into account, see Francis P. Canavan: S.J.: *Edmund Burke’s College Study of Philosophy*, Notes and Queries, N.S. IV (1957), 538–543. Both Johnson and Burke were founding members of The Club proposed by Sir Joshua Reynolds in 1764. Yet their political positions were much of the time antagonistic, as they were the spokespersons of the Tory and the Whig cause, respectively.

machinery, and the difference in nature of the terrain of philosophy, often identified by Burke as metaphysics, and that of practical politics. This is, in fact, a philosophical mistake on their part, a conceptual confusion of the two realms. Burke in a famous quote sharply criticizes this confusion of reality and the ideal world of philosophical concepts: “The pretended rights of these theorists are all extremes; and in proportion as they are metaphysically true, they are morally and politically false. The rights of men are in a sort of middle, incapable of definition, but not impossible to be discerned.(...) Political reason is a computing principle: adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing, morally, and not metaphysically or mathematically, true moral denominations.”¹⁸ The extremity Burke refers to, here, is, of course, philosophical extremism: pushing your point too far. In certain cases, this strategy pays well in philosophy. But in politics it is by definition dangerous. Apparently, Burke finds similarity between such radical thought and religious enthusiasm. His criticism of Priestly and Price is formulated in the British enlightenment discourse on enthusiasm, as it was analysed most prominently by Pocock. This discourse had the Glorious Revolution as its political background, based on a compromise between opposing camps both in theology and in politics, which is only possible if moderation (both in religion and in politics) is taken seriously. The revolution settlement which covered the whole 18th century until the time of the French Revolution “had come about without civil war, without a dissolution of the government, and without any interlude of rule by plebeian religious fanatics”.¹⁹ Pocock went so far as to argue that in the age “English and Scottish political thought was deeply antirevolutionary”, which is quite close to his further conceptual innovation of a Conservative Enlightenment. As Pocock points out the motivation behind the characteristic language of political theology used by Burke is not primarily motivated by religion or even by a reactionary attitude. Rather, it is the result of sensing an attack on the terms of the revolution settlement of the Glorious Revolution by the radical dissenters. The point is illustrated by a reference to the similarity of the argumentation of Burke’s and Gibbon’s respective criticism of Priestley: “Both the pious Burke and the sceptic Gibbon pointed to this passage from Priestley’s writings as evidence that the wild fanaticism (or ‘enthusiasm’) of the seventeenth-century sectarians was not extinct.”²⁰

4.

One point still needs clarification. Burke did not discount passions from political and social affairs, as a radical Stoic would do. Rather, what he suggests is in fact a balance between the

¹⁸ Burke: *Reflections*, 63.

¹⁹ Pocock: *Introduction*, xi.

²⁰ Pocock: *Introduction*, xviii.

passions and reason: a rational control of passions, and (natural) passions controlling the dogmatism of reason. “It is true indeed that enthusiasm often misleads us. So does reason too. Such is the Condition of our Nature... But we act most when we act with all the Powers of the Soul; when we use Enthusiasm to elevate and expand our Reasoning; and our Reasoning to check the Roving of our Enthusiasm.”²¹

This demand for an equilibrium between passions and reason (as opposed to Hume’s hierarchy between the two) is fairly easy to understand even today for those who are familiar with the specific development of the *ancien régime* in Britain. The possibility of the birth of a commercial society in Britain was created by finding a *modus vivendi* between the opposing social camps of the higher nobility and the middle classes, and it was something the Whig oligarchy had to defend, and could defend successfully only, if religious debates were not opened fully in political contexts, even if it was a rather shaky compromise, as pointed out by Jonathan Clark in his influential account of the *ancien régime*.²² But one should question what exactly has this to do with the French affair. After all, British deists did not share the radical sceptical epistemology of the French *philosophes*. Priestley’s sermon of 1789 made Burke recognize that there were parallel tendencies in both societies to deconstruct the political edifice of Church and State which guaranteed the success of 18th century British politics. Pocock underlines this parallelism the following way “In England, there was now a militant (and anti-Trinitarian) movement with goals extending as far as a separation of church and state; in France, there was a revolutionary movement, attacking monarchy and aristocracy, aiming at the reduction of the Church to a branch of the national government, and employing the rhetoric of an anti-Christian philosophical deism.”²³ When Burke, therefore, mentions French sophistry and metaphysics, he is in fact attacking this effort on the French side, built on a politically radicalized philosophical vocabulary, as one could see in the writings of people like Voltaire to Rousseau, but influencing people, like Priestley and Price, in Britain, too.

5.

If rationalism in the French Enlightenment style is dangerous for the political equilibrium of late 18th century Britain, what has Burke on offer as an alternative. There are interpreters who suggest that in fact he has no alternative but either reactionary slogans, or empty rhetoric which

²¹ Edmund Burke: *Religion of No Efficacy Considered as a State Engine*, Notebook, 68–69. Quoted in: Richard Bourke: *Empire*, 102.

²² Jonathan Clark: *English Society, 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure, and Political Practice During the Ancien Regime*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985. 2nd (revised) ed. *English Society 1660–1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics During the Ancien Regime*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.

²³ Pocock: ‘Introduction’, 27.

has nothing to help a Britain on its way through industrial revolution in industry to global commerce in business and to global power in international relations.

In fact there are two interrelated answers to the above seemingly difficult question I would like to refer to. One is that, against the philosophical radicalism of the French Enlightenment intent on working out an apolitical idea of *a priori* reason which can radicalize the whole Europe, Burke is dedicated to work out a discourse of “reason of state”. This interpretation of Burke is by now well developed, as we can see from the publications of people like Armitage, Whelan and Richard Bourke. The argument here is that in fact Burke belongs to that European trend of political thought, which appeared on the scene in the late 16th century, and tried to provide ideological support for the newly emerging centralized, territorial or national state before, and, even more, after the birth of the Westphalian system. In accounts like those of Richard Tuck and Maurizio Viroli we have sweeping narratives of this development in political theory. Although they present the new vocabulary as an alternative to the traditional discourse of political virtue, I would like to underline the continuity between the two, at least in Burke’s understanding of the term.

But there is an alternative answer to the question of Burke’s alternative. This is provided by those theorists who regard Burke as a late Aristotelian–Ciceronian thinker, who keeps moving within the rhetorical orbit of a discourse of prudence or practical reason. In what follows, I will do two things. First, I will show that this second interpretative strategy has a very strong and convincing potential. Secondly, I will try to prove that in fact the central concept of practical reason understood as a virtue is in fact closely connected to the reason of state discourse mentioned before. In other words, I will argue that the two answers are connected because Burke indeed was an advocate of the virtue of prudence understood as practical political reason, and that his references to reason of state in fact belong to this very discourse. That Burke could connect the discourse of prudence and the discourse of reason of state, I will argue, is a great achievement not only of his rhetorical skills, but even more importantly of his political vision of post-Westphalian Europe. As I see his *Reflections*, it is the result of his recognition that the novelty of the French Revolution endangers that vision. The main aim of Burke in this situation is nothing less but to defend the Westphalian system of national sovereignty against the discourse of universal political rights, which radicalizes European societies, and threatens the European equilibrium. To achieve this, however, he in fact introduces the basic elements of a new ideology in the *Reflections*: that of modern Conservatism.

To prove this thesis, I will rely on Canavan. He shows how political reason in general, and prudence in particular is presented in Burke's *Reflections*. Burkean political reason, he claims, does not look for universal truths. Rather, it is interested in policy formation and decision making.²⁴ First of all, the aim of political action should be "the good of the commonwealth".²⁵ But this is a good which is concrete, practicable, complex, and imperfect good. Canavan convincingly showed that indeed Burke's focus is on this non-ideal components of the political good. He quotes Burke claiming that "The nature of man is intricate; the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity."²⁶ Canavan's Burke does not believe that philosophers or metaphysicians can simplify this complex, on the contrary, as he sees it, if they try to do so, they can cause even more serious problems: "Indeed, all that wise men even aim at is to keep things from coming to the worst. Those who expect perfect reformatations, either deceive or are deceived miserably."²⁷

This minimalist account by Canavan of the chances of pure reason in Burke's account of politics does not mean, however, giving up the human capacity to reason. It is only a recognition by Burke that human rationality is seriously limited in this realm. But there is a chance to learn, and to acquire skills which might help to make decisions which will help to draw rational conclusions that would avoid the worst scenarios. Burke's downscaled political reason is, therefore, not radical scepticism; neither is it nihilism or a form of post-modern anything goes. When it is acquired through experience and through learning from earlier examples, Burkean political reason can in fact come close to Aristotelian–Ciceronian prudence. Canavan, as we saw, identifies the practical concerns of Burke's political thought with the traditional idea of prudence. Instead of affirming *a priori* reason in human affairs, the wise statesman acquires prudential skills. Burke's prudence is the result of a certain self-fashioning on the part of the political agent – to learn to live together with the infirmities of human social and political life. It means to give up the hope to solve political problems, even more to solve them universally – prudence cannot help to find generally valid rules and norms: "The rules and definitions of prudence can rarely be exact; never universal."²⁸ Rather they can lead – but only imperfectly – to practical solutions in given hard cases. Burke imagines prudence along the lines of the moral sense of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and the Scottish school: political wisdom is an ability to find the proper (or the least improper) judgement in a given case – but not by deducting it *a priori*,

²⁴ See Canavan: *Edmund Burke*, 62.

²⁵ Canavan: *Edmund Burke*, 63, quoting: Burke: *Letter to Sir Hercules Langriske*, 3 Jan. 1792, Works, VI, 318.

²⁶ Canavan: *Edmund Burke*, 64, quoting: Burke: *Reflections*, 62.

²⁷ Canavan: *Edmund Burke*, 65, quoting: *Burke to Shackleton*, 15 Aug 1770, Correspondence, I, 231.

²⁸ Canavan: *Edmund Burke*, 68, quoting *First Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1796), Works, VIII, 87.

not even by building it up inductively from empirical data. Rather, it is found by something like a skill, which is the result of practice, like the ability of swimming or riding the bicycle, habituated, but most often not reflected. “No lines can be laid down for civil or political wisdom. They are a matter incapable of exact definition...” the British thinker cautions his readers already in 1770, but, he adds, they will help “a prince to find out such a mode of government, and such persons to administer it, as will give a great degree of content to his people; without any curious and anxious research for that abstract, universal, perfect harmony, which while he is seeking, he abandons those means of ordinary tranquillity which are in his power without any research at all.”²⁹

Canavan’s point about Burkean prudence as a practical skill is backed by the fact that since the Glorious Revolution the British political elite has accumulated a reservoir of political experience on which individual players could build their own strategies. This experience had the ideas of balance and compromise in its centre. This striving for compromise, argued Burke, enforced by human selfishness as well as by the nature of political reason, has been the great lesson which is neglected by political Platonists, Kantians and other universalists, like dissenter British or philosophical French Deists. “For you know, that the decisions of prudence (contrary to the system of the insane reasoners) differ from those of judicature; and that almost all the former are determined on the more or the less, the earlier or the later, and on a balance of advantage and inconvenience, of good and evil.”³⁰ It is here, that we can search for Burke, the founding father of modern British conservatism. After all, what he claimed was that the tradition of British politics, built up in the revolution settlement and afterwards in the 18th century and covered by the term of the ancient constitution, is worthy to preserve. And this preservation can be a maxim of politics, which, however, does not exclude, in fact encourages smooth, step by step reformation.

But Canavan has a larger point as well. He wants to point out that the British form of cautious compromise, favoured by Burke, is not simply advocating unprincipled, or even sometimes immoral political dealing. Rather, the prudence which is referred here, is in fact the traditional Christian virtue of *prudentia*. Through it, Burke connects his theory of compromise, balance and other prudential considerations to the Christian natural law doctrine. According to Canavan, Burke’s theory this way is grounded not only in traditional Christian moral theory, but also in its metaphysical basis, that of a created universe of order. It is this created order

²⁹ Canavan: *Edmund Burke*, 68-69, quoting *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770), Works, II, 269.

³⁰ Canavan: *Edmund Burke*, 68, quoting *Letter to Sir Hercules Langriske* (1792), Works, VI, 309.

which ensures that prudence rightly conceived will never lead us against the basic moral values. In other words, Burke seems to claim that there is an order between the principles of external order and the demands of our human conscience, such that “acting in accordance with the natural law, man obeys God, but is at the same time most true to himself.”³¹ As Canavan presents it, Burke’s use of the concept of prudence was meant to bridge the distance between invariable general principles, which cannot be expected to purely prevail in political life, and the constantly varying circumstances which threaten us with moral relativism in a Machievallian sense. “Circumstances perpetually variable, directing a moral prudence and discretion, the general principles of which never vary, must alone prescribe a conduct fitting on such occasions.”³² In this mediating function, Burke’s prudence, which always has the right aims, cannot adhere to the unconditionality of logic, as a guide of human action: “The lines of morality are not like the ideal lines of mathematicks. They are broad as deep as well as long. They admit of exceptions; they demand modifications. These exceptions and modifications are not made by the process of logick, but by the rules of prudence.”³³

6.

If Canavan is on the whole right in his appreciation of Burke’s concept of political reason or prudence, there is one more step one can make in this direction. One should realize that the Christian understanding of the cardinal virtue of *prudentia* belongs, in fact, to the great Aristotelian–Ciceronian tradition of political thought.³⁴ In this tradition, prudence is not a Machiavellian skill, or a source of moral relativism. Rather, it is a key virtue for the human being, who is understood as a *zoon politikon*, a political being. To understand the full relevance of what this tradition teaches about the proper prudential action in the political community, one should look at the definition of *phronesis* in the 6th book of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Or better to say, one should realize the significance that Aristotle distinguishes between practical wisdom (*phronesis*), craft knowledge (*technê*), scientific knowledge (*epistemê*) and theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) or understanding (*nous*). But the relevant point of Aristotle here with the distinction is not that these forms of knowledge should be interpreted along a hierarchy from the one whose share of reason is the smallest proportion to the one which is fully immersed into it. Rather, these are all different forms of knowledge – in other words even practical wisdom is also fully reasonable. The difference lies partly in what is known by the given sort

³¹ Canavan: *Edmund Burke*, 74.

³² Burke: *Remarks on the Policy of the Allies* (1793), Works, VII, 197-8. quoted by Canavan: *Edmund Burke*, 76.

³³ Canavan: *Edmund Burke*, 77., quoting Burke: *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791), Works, VI, 97.

³⁴ For a full blown elaboration of this argument see my *A Political Philosophy of Conservatism. Prudence, Moderation and Tradition*, in print with Bloomsbury, expected to get published in early 2020.

of knowledge, and what function (sort of activity) is expected as a result of it. Without going into finer details let us recall how he defines practical wisdom. It is knowledge of human things, in order to prepare deliberation to act properly. In other words, it is “a true state involving reason, a practical one, concerned with what is good or bad for a human being”.³⁵ It is very telling that after this definition, he offers Pericles and people like him as examples of those people who are practically wise “because they have a theoretical grasp of what is good for themselves and for human beings, and we think household managers and politicians are like that.”³⁶ If practical knowledge is about human beings, whose action can be otherwise, this knowledge cannot be universalized in the way scientific knowledge, for example, is universalizable. Scientific knowledge is about the parts of nature whose starting-points do not admit of being otherwise. Practical knowledge, however, is only probable, as we would say today, according to Aristotle.

The point to be made here is that Burke’s criticism of rationality is not a criticism of the use of reason as such. Rather, it analysis those typical sorts of mistaken uses of reason which can cause more problem than what they actually solve. His fierce judgement of metaphysicians and sophistry is a criticism of those who think that what they claim is true metaphysically should be realized in practice, and possibly right now. Burke’s criticism is a rational criticism of rationalism, in the sense of Aristotle’s concept of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), claiming that in politics this is the form of knowledge one should rely on.

7.

By now I take it to be established that Burke’s prudence is to be interpreted as belonging to the Aristotelian–Ciceronian account of virtues, also taken over by Christianity. I also claim that Burke’s reference to reason of state should be understood in this Aristotelian–Ciceronian and Christian context. If Canavan is right, and order (*ordo*) is a key principle of the created universe, then it seems that his views of reason of state should be interpreted in the context of an international order. This supposition, which we do not have time here to fully verify, is supported by the insight that balance was a key notion for Burke in internal affairs, and the concept of “balance of power” is well known to be his guiding principle in international affairs.³⁷ And as balance and compromise did not mean in his views of internal British affairs a denial of conflict and competition, his balance of power and reason of state are only two poles

³⁵ Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. by C.D.C. Reeve, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, Cambridge, 2014, 1140b1, 102.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Burke wrote: “The balance of power had been ever assumed as the common law of Europe at all times, and by all powers.” Burke: *Third Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1796), Works, IX, 338.

of the same equilibrium, and not a means to universal peace *à la* Kant. A state in the international arena is subject to the same sorts of constraints as the individual human agent or the statesman in the internal affairs of the political community. If prudence explains the rationale of the individual political agent, something similar should be expected from the state as well, as a political agency. Prudence in the internal context is, therefore, something similar to reason of state in the international one. If prudence does not conclude in moral relativism, neither should a reliance on reason of state mean simply the affirmation of the common place that might is right. As compromise and order are the most important values in internal affairs, so a balance of power is required in the international arena to keep order. This is why it seems Armitage is right, when he claims in connection with Burke's understanding of reason of state: "The opponent of 'Machiavellian' expediency could equally well be the proponent of Ciceronian 'necessity'".³⁸ Armitage also points out convincingly that Burke's recognition of a French threat to European peace was based on notions of prudence, reason of state, and international order. "As Burke showed with an appendix of extracts from Vattel, intervention against France would be a 'prudent precaution' for all European states precisely because the French republic presented an unprecedented threat to their natural reasons of state – their interests, their security, and above all their shared political maxims as partners in the commonwealth of Europe."³⁹

8.

To conclude: in this paper I argued that by his full blown and sometimes rather violent attacks on French "sophistry" and "metaphysics" Burke did not become a prophet of irrationality or a moral relativist. Rather, I claimed, he criticized the radical use of universal metaphysical claims (like those of the new human rights of the French philosophes and of their British dissenter sympathizers) in the realm of politics as a form of enthusiasm, which reminded him of earlier British debates of political theology which lead to long-lasting conflicts and political disorder in the 17th century. His offer, instead of such sophistry and metaphysics, was to rely on the practical knowledge of practising politicians which had been accumulated by generations of the British political elite by his time, and which he describes as a form of practical virtue or prudence. Prudence, as he understood it, aimed to preserve what proved its usefulness, but not

³⁸ David Armitage: *Edmund Burke and reason of state*. Journal of the History of Ideas vol. 61., No. 4, 2000, 617–634., 620.

³⁹ Armitage: *Edmund Burke*, 631. Armitage's reference is to this work by Burke: *Edmund Burke, Remarks on the Policy of the Allies* (1793), in Writings and Speeches, ed. Mitchell, VIII, 474; the "Appendix" of extracts from Vattel is inexplicably omitted from this edition. For a fragment of Burke's working notes on Vattel see Sheffield City Libraries Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments, 10/27, (passage transcribed from Vattel, Droit des Gens, II. 12. 196–97, printed in Burke, Remarks on the Policy of the Allies [London, 1793], 207–9.

in an unprincipled way. Rather, prudential action aims to preserve order, and it was for this purpose that it was ready to accept compromises and even reforms, when really necessary.

While prudence described the rationale of the action of the individual human agent, the term reason of state describes the same sort of principled, yet flexible sort of rationality on the level of the state. It does not exclude exceptional measures when necessity requires it, as it was accepted also in the prudential paradigm of the Aristotelian–Ciceronian tradition. By relying on this acclaimed reason of state, states did not behave irrationally or immorally. On the contrary, their aim was to serve the common interest of their own community and the international community. In both of these realms, the rational aim was to preserve order, which was made possible in those contexts not by realising universal truths, but by accepting the balance of powers and conserving the compromised results of political experience.