

interpretation

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Selected Letters of Edmund Burke. Edited and with an Introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984. 497 pp.: \$27.50.)

FRANCIS CANAVAN
Fordham University

This volume, handsomely bound and printed in clear, easily legible type, makes a fine introduction to Edmund Burke's correspondence. All of the examples of Burke's writing contained in it are taken from the ten-volume *Correspondence of Edmund Burke* published from 1958 to 1978 by the University of Chicago and Cambridge University Presses under the general editorship of the late Thomas W. Copeland. That set will remain the definitive edition of Burke's correspondence.

The present volume, therefore, is not one that the research scholar will use. It is meant, rather, for the general reader who is interested enough in Burke and his thought to want to read a good sample of his letters. It serves that purpose well.

Professor Mansfield has not followed the chronological order in which Burke's letters are printed in the ten-volume *Correspondence*. Instead, and wisely for his purpose, he has arranged his selected letters under several themes. They are private and public life; literary friends and philosophical concerns; toleration and religion; reform and revolution; counterrevolution; and Burke's relations with America, India, and Ireland. In addition, there are two selections of letters on the theme of Burke and party politics. The first is from the years 1766–1780, when he was both the theoretician and the manager of the Rockingham Whigs. The other is from the period between 1789 and 1797, in which he broke with Charles James Fox and the Whigs over the French Revolution and became a lone Cassandra trying to awaken the politicians to the gravity of the revolutionary threat. All of the selections are on the whole good ones and give the reader a taste of Burke's thought on the major themes of his life.

Mansfield has prefaced the volume with an introduction and a brief sketch of Burke's life. The Introduction, subtitled "Burke's Theory of Political Practice," manages to deal concisely with that subject in 27 pages. How successfully it does so is a matter of opinion. This reviewer would want to discuss at length Mansfield's interpretation of Burke on the relation of theory to practice in politics, the nature and role of prudence, the relationship between actual and presumptive virtue, and the meaning of prescription, natural law, and prejudice.

Manfield's belief that "Burke does not consider that democracy is a possible regime" seems questionable in view of Burke's own statement in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*: "There may be situations in which the purely democratic form will become necessary. There may be some (very few, and very particularly circumstanced) where it would be clearly desirable."

One might also question Mansfield's opinion that in Burke's thought the au-

thority of the past and the claims of the future “substitute for divine law to ensure that present governments govern with a sense of shame.” Burke’s appeals to divine law were too explicit and too frequent to admit of that interpretation.

Similarly, one might argue with Mansfield when he says that “Burke does not say in the manner of Thomism that we have natural inclinations in our souls that are fulfilled in politics; the soul is not a theme of his.” Whether or not Burke says anything in the manner of Thomism, it seems a bit extreme to assert that the soul is not a theme of his. It is true that he seldom talks about the soul, but it is hard to see what else he means by his constant references to nature, feeling, reason, and virtue.

These may be only the nits that scholars love to pick and which are half the fun of academic life. They do not, in any case, seriously detract from the value of this well-edited selection of Burke’s letters.

American Conservatism and the American Founding. By Harry V. Jaffa. (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1984. xiv + 278 pp.: \$19.95.)

DENNIS TETI

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Professor Jaffa’s Judaism lies near the heart of his impassioned yet meticulously reasoned commitment to American conservatism, a conservatism based on the principles of equality and liberty. Consider this exchange with Willmoore Kendall: “Harry, what have you got against slavery? You wouldn’t be one of the slaves,” said Kendall. “Did you ever hear of Moses?” Jaffa replied, “We Jews tried it once, and now we settle for constitutional government.” America’s moral commitment to equality is the fundamental principle to which Jews may appeal with confidence in order to protect their faith and way of life.

Jaffa’s project is to explicate and defend those twin pillars of Western civilization, reason and revelation. However their respective origins might differ, they have much more in common than either does with radical modernity, which attempts to undermine and replace them both. Yet by pointing to the tensions in thought between antiquity and modernity, reason and revelation, philosophy and the city, Jaffa’s works, with their dialectical or polemical style, are easily misunderstood by those who would rather express righteous indignation than take the pains to consider his central intention. Jaffa describes his intention movingly:

I believe the enterprise of western civilization is consummated each time a soul is saved from the dark night of fanatical obscurantism. It is consummated whenever one soul is released from the pessimism that truth is unobtainable, or not worth the trouble to obtain. It is consummated whenever a single soul is disabused of the proposition that the subjective intensity of one’s convictions matters more than their objective validity. Eternity is indeed the theme of philosophy; but it becomes such when the indi-