

# Catharine Macaulay and Edmund Burke

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## Chapter guide

This chapter examines the rival and contrasting political philosophies of Catharine Macaulay and Edmund Burke. The two were almost exact contemporaries in the eighteenth centuries and clashed on their understandings of the fundamental nature of political society and the correct the approach to take on reform. Macaulay and Burke were opposites in many ways. As a woman, Macaulay was a political outsider while Burke was a successful politician. Macaulay was a radical and revolutionary republican who based her ideas on a few clear, immutable philosophical truths, while Burke was a cautious and conservative thinker who valued stability and continuity, appealing to tradition rather than speculative principle. In the first section, I introduce Macaulay's philosophy based around the core ideal of freedom as independence from arbitrary control. In the second section, I present Burke's contrasting organic, contextual and pragmatic approach. In the final section, I consider some of the weaknesses in each philosopher's work, particularly from the perspective of securing the equal citizenship rights of women and the members of minority social groups.

## Introduction

In this chapter, we look at two of the most prominent political thinkers of the eighteenth century in Catharine Macaulay and Edmund Burke. It may seem surprising to many readers to see Macaulay and Burke mentioned in the same bracket in this way, since while Burke remains one of the most well-known figures in the history of political ideas, Macaulay is largely unknown today outside of a small cluster of eighteenth-century scholars and historians. Nevertheless, in the middle of the eighteenth century, Macaulay was one of the most celebrated public intellectuals in England, and someone whom Burke himself regarded as one of his most formidable political opponents. That her thought has been neglected over the last two centuries and more is a reflection of the contingencies of the history of ideas rather than of the quality of Macaulay's thought, and in our own time, her philosophy is undergoing a sustained scholarly revival. Burke, by contrast, is one of the most recognisable, influential and quotable figures in the history of political thought.

I shall place Macaulay and Burke in dialogue on the questions of freedom, social stability and tradition, and revolution, as indeed they were during their careers. The two represented opposing positions on the political spectrum of their time, with Macaulay putting forward a radical republican challenge to Burke's monarchist politics. Macaulay answered Burke twice in writing, in her *Observations on a Pamphlet entitled "Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents"* (1770) and her *Observations on the Reflections of the Right Hon.*

*Edmund Burke* (1790), which proved to be her final work. Nevertheless, we should be cautious in how we translate their eighteenth-century differences into today's political distinctions. Burke is probably best known today as a foundational figure in conservative thought. However, while his influence on modern conservatism is not in dispute, whether this best characterises his political philosophy is not so clear. Certainly, Burke has not always been regarded as a conservative. He was, for example, routinely regarded as a liberal during the nineteenth century. Indeed, Burke's influence has been such that he has continued to fascinate thinkers on the left and while being regularly appropriated by those on the right through to our own time (Kramnik 1983). The labels 'conservative' and 'liberal', however, are slippery designations, with their roots in nineteenth century political discourse and having taken on a variety of forms through to our present time (Bourke 2018). Indeed, whether it makes sense to speak of a timeless core of liberal or conservative positions and ideals is itself highly questionable. More often than not, one's decision to apply these terms is reflects either current concerns or particular contexts.

Macaulay and Burke are not only opposites in their substantive views, but also in their style of philosophical thinking. Macaulay's position is straightforward, if intricate and often subtle. It was worked out systematically and consistently over almost thirty years, most famously in her eight-volume *History of England* (1763-83) which presents a unified republican interpretation of English history from the accession of the Stuarts to the so-called Glorious Revolution (1688). Macaulay builds her analysis of English political history around the core republican principle of freedom as independence from arbitrary control (or non-domination as it is more often known today) (Coffee 2017, 2019). Although described as a conception of freedom, independence represents a composite ideal that brings together the notions of equality, virtue, community and the rule of law, held together within a tight framework that republicans use to diagnose cases of political legitimacy or failings. Macaulay places this republican ideal at the centre of her political analysis, applying it with unflinching consistency across both history and political context, so much so that even friendly critics in her own time noted that she was apt to reduce all social and political matters to the single question of freedom.

### **The Glorious Revolution (1688)**

The peaceful process by which England's King James II was replaced by his daughter, Mary II, and William of Orange (William III) has long been described as 'glorious', though both Macaulay and Burke simply refer to it as 'the Revolution'. Burke viewed the revolution very positively, regarding it as preserving the nation's ancient indisputable laws and liberties" (2004, 31). Macaulay was more ambivalent, believing the revolution to have been an unstable compromise that ceded too much power to the monarch to bypass parliament.

Burke, by contrast with Macaulay, is an elusive thinker whose work is notoriously difficult to distil and codify. This has given rise to what has sometimes been described as 'the Burke Problem', in which scholars have attempted to reconcile his 'liberal' ideas on natural rights, individual liberty and commercial society with his 'conservative' stance on tradition, social stability and political authority (e.g. Winch 1985, see also O'Neill who casts this question

in terms of Burke's support for or opposition to empire, 2016: 10). In particular, scholars often identify an early, more 'liberal' Burke who, amongst other things, supported the cause of the American Revolution, and a later Burke whose opposition to the French Revolution serves as a canonical text for many modern conservatives. This disjunction was not lost on Burke's contemporaries such as Macaulay herself, as well as Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine and Joseph Priestley (e.g. Priestley 1791: iv-xii). There is considerable critical debate over the extent to which Burke should be considered a consistent or systematic thinker, and how far his position may have shifted over his life. Richard Bourke, for example, describes Burke as "not a systematic thinker but an engaged polemicist" who had "no occasion to reveal the 'foundations' of his thought" (2015: 18), while O'Neill argues for understanding Burke as "a consistently conservative political thinker" (2016: 1). To some extent, this issue of interpretation is broader than just being about Burke, and arises for many writers whose output straddles the latter half of the eighteenth century as a result of the social, economic, intellectual and political changes that took place during this period. David Miller, for example, sees the French Revolution as a particular watershed event in which the "incompatibility between liberal demands for personal freedom, the rule of law, careers open to talents etc., and conservative commitments to institutional continuity, authority, social hierarchy, and so forth" were crystallised (1981: 200).

In this chapter I concentrate on the 'conservative' interpretation of Burke as most fully articulated in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). I do this for several reasons. In part, given the considerable range of interpretations of his work, a selective reading will allow greater depth and coherence. The conservative reading is also the most influential and widely known outside of specialists on Burke, and while it may not represent the biographically-definitive portrayal of his complex thinking, it does represent a recognisable and important position in the history of political thought. Finally, the conservative reading captures well the Burke that Macaulay and other republicans and radicals saw themselves as debating, and so it will give context to their exchange and serve the themes of this chapter.

## **Catharine Macaulay**

Catharine Macaulay (1731-91) was one of the most prominent and prolific political philosophers of the eighteenth century. She was most widely known for her monumental *History of England* which was written over a twenty-year period, rivalling and serving as a radical and republican counterpoint to, David Hume's series of volumes on the same subject which had been begun a decade earlier, and which took a Tory, pro-monarchical perspective. Today, however, Macaulay is more likely to be known for her *Letters on Education*, written shortly before her death, which had a profound influence on Mary Wollstonecraft. Macaulay was active in radical and revolutionary politics, not only a supporter of the American and French Revolutions but a sought-after correspondent by many of the intellectual and political leaders of those movements, including Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, and Jacques-Pierre Brissot. She carried out an intellectual correspondence for two decades with Mercy Otis Warren discussing subjects such as the build up to American independence, the early difficulties encountered by the fledgling republic, international politics and the

French Revolution. In France, Marie-Jeanne Phlipon Roland expressed her desire to become the “Macaulay of my country” (Bergès 2016: 108).

Macaulay mixed in the same circles of dissenters and republicans as activists such as Richard Price, Joseph Priestley and Thomas Paine. From the end of the eighteenth century, and well into the nineteenth, republican political ideals fell almost completely out of favour in Britain which contributed to the scholarly neglect of not only Macaulay but of Price and Priestley as well. However, as a result of the gendered way that philosophical canons are created, though republican political ideals would once again be appreciated, particularly in our own time, it was to be with her male contemporaries, rather than with Macaulay, that they would come to be associated. This was unfortunate not only for her legacy but for the discipline, too, as Macaulay developed a body of theoretical republican thought that matches, and possibly exceeds, any of her rivals (Coffee 2017, 2021). Though Macaulay was an outstanding example, she was by no means the only woman writing prominently in the republican tradition during this period. Others included Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), Mary Hays (1759–1843) and Mary Shelley (1797- 1851) in Britain, Olympe de Gouges (1748-93), Marie-Jeanne Phlipon Roland (1754–93), Sophie de Grouchy (1764–1822) in France, and Sarah Moore Grimké (1792 –1873), Frances Wright (1795 –1852) and Margaret Fuller (1810 –1850) in the United States.

### **The Whigs**

In spite of their intellectual and political differences, both Macaulay and Burke are identified with the Whig tradition. Historically, the Whigs were the successors to the English Civil War faction of the seventeenth-century that had opposed both the monarchy and Catholic rule. By the late eighteenth-century, the tradition had broadened and diversified, with several distinct groups claiming the Whig mantle. Macaulay was an ideological purist who drew on the values and arguments of the seventeenth-century republicans or Commonwealthmen, such as James Harrington, John Milton, Algernon Sidney, and John Locke, while Burke represented a more pragmatic and politically active wing, forming part of the Rockingham group led by the Marquess of Rockingham both as Prime Minister and in opposition. Whigs of whatever brand are united by their support for freedom and constitutional protections on the power of parliament over the monarch.

### **Accountable Government**

Government, according to Macaulay, is something that human beings have created for their own collective benefit, namely their security and the protection of their natural rights (1783, vol. 4, 415-6). The form that a government takes is not set in stone but can and should be changed as reason and experience dictate that the current form either no longer fulfils its objectives or could be improved. Certainly, government must not serve the interests of a faction or subsection of the population but must deliver its benefits – to “secure the virtue, liberty, and happiness of society” – to the whole population in equal measure (1769, 29). The government’s three goals of securing liberty, happiness and virtue are all connected on Macaulay’s account, with liberty as the primary value, virtue as a constitutive element

necessary for liberty, and happiness as the consequence of the other two values being fulfilled. These values can only be delivered where the state is organised in the right way. Accordingly, Macaulay argues for what she calls a “democratical system, rightly balanced” (not a full democracy with universal enfranchisement, but nevertheless a representative government with frequent elections that is wholly accountable to the people).

Macaulay’s model for government is built on, and so echoes, her conception of the human being. So, just as liberty and virtue are necessary for the happiness of society, so are they for the individual, too. Macaulay makes this clear in the opening paragraph of the very first volume of her enormous *History*. Liberty, she says, “lies latent in the breast of every rational being, till it is nipped by the frost of prejudice or blasted by the influence of vice” (1763, vii). Human beings are rational and moral agents. Freedom, then, is conditioned. We are not to follow our impulses or whims but rather we must govern our conduct according to both reason (rather than ‘prejudice’) and the moral law (rather than ‘vice’). This is what Macaulay means by ‘virtue’. Since it is in our best interests to follow reason, then so we can be sure that this will lead to our eventual happiness. This also is why the model for government so closely reflects Macaulay’s understanding of the person. If human beings are to live freely and virtuously, following the requirements of reason, then it follows that the laws under which they live must also be virtuous, embodying reason and the moral law.

### **Three Connected Values: Independence, Virtue, Equality**

Freedom, or liberty, for Macaulay is understood as a certain sort of independence. Free persons should be able to both decide on what to do for themselves, and they must be able to act upon those decisions. Independence, then, is both a property of the mind and of civil society. This entails both adequate education to equip people with the substantial mental skills that they will need to think and decide for themselves, and suitable social and political conditions. Freedom, then, contains both positive and negative elements. Independence is the first value. But there are two others that are intricately related to it, each of which is necessary for a free person, and for a free society: virtue and equality.

Virtue is necessary for individual independence because free agents should not be led by the ideas of others, being guided by the opinions and prejudices that they have imbibed from their social surroundings, but instead should be in a position to stand back and critically reflect on their beliefs and actions rationally. Independence is not only a protection against external forces. The virtuous agent is also able to use rational conviction to overcome the internal distortions that come from our passions and emotions, which were also regarded as being alien to the ‘true’ self and contrary to our genuine interests and happiness. Collectively, a virtuous population is also necessary for a free society. If we are to have rational and effective laws and public policies, then we must have the requisite moral and empirical knowledge. This requires a population with both the intellectual qualities and the willingness to engage in the collaborative pursuit of truth and scientific enquiry. It also requires that the population has sufficient independence not to be biased by either prejudice or the need to serve the interests of the socially powerful rather than to follow the evidence. Macaulay makes clear that there is a pressing need for society to develop a reliable and improved science of politics, morals and rational interests along the lines of the natural sciences, deeply

regretting that while the physical sciences had made great progress of late, the same could not be said of politics and morals (1790a: 169-70).

The third constitutive value of freedom is equality. In part, the necessity for equality follows from the remit of government, which is that it should be “a fair and equal representation of the whole people”, accountable to them and managing the state in their collective interests (1790b, 48). Macaulay also refers to the “natural equality of men” and “equal rights in men”, giving a moral underpinning to the equality of the citizens (1790a: 160; 1783, vol. 4: 409). (Karen Green identifies Macaulay as the earliest known source of the phrase, the “equal rights of men” in English, ahead of the more celebrated use by men such as Paine [Macaulay vol. 3: 78; Green 2016]). Macaulay also has a pragmatic reason for including equality as a part of the broader ideal of freedom, which is that inequality has the effect of undermining the civic virtue that’s necessary for a free society (Coffee 2019). By ‘equality’, Macaulay has in mind principally the standing of each individual as a citizen. However, since the role of government is to ensure the equal independence of all citizens (“governments are formed on principles which promise the equal distribution of power and liberty”, 1783, vol. 5, 19), this standing must translate into an equal opportunity and empowerment to act independently, including protection by law, representation in politics and social legitimation. Macaulay also anticipates substantial economic equality, believing that disparities in income and wealth are “incompatible with a wise and just government” (1790a: 190).

These three values – independence, virtue, and equality – are entwined not just conceptually, but also causally. Where any one component is missing, this has the effect of undermining the other two. This process can take place at an individual level. Very poor people, for example, may find themselves dependent on others for their material survival. This makes it difficult for them to act virtuously, in the sense of acting on conscience or for the common good. Instead, they are compelled rationally to put their own needs first, for example by placating their patrons or engaging in deceit or flattery. The poor also come to develop unvirtuous dispositions and characters: “as envy and covetousness are two passions which act powerfully on the peace and harmony of the mind, the virtue of citizens will be in a greater security where the wholesome restraint of sumptuary laws, or taxes properly imposed banish those objects from society, which are adapted to inflame cupidity, and excite a vicious emulation” (1790a, 190-1). The very rich are similarly compromised for their part. Not only are they in a position to circumvent many of the checks and balances in society through their wealth, but in having so much to lose they are typically motivated to protect their advantage rather than to further the collective interests of society. Moreover, given the human tendency to judge things from one’s own position, the rich are likely to come to believe that their dominance is deserved, thereby undermining their ability to reason impartially (virtuously). While these effects take place within individuals, their effects spread. As in the case of rich and poor, there is a reciprocal effect whereby both dominator and dominated are implicated in the loss of virtue. However, since the moral character of the parties is affected, these come to infect their other relationships – in this connection, Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, describes how a dominated wife comes in turn to dominate her children and servants (1787, 63). Where patterns of inequality and dependence are systemic

and substantial, they have the potential to undermine the virtue – and therefore the freedom – of the entire population.

### **1.1 Key Concept: Republicanism**

Philosophically, Macaulay wrote in the neo-roman strand of republican political philosophy that has been articulated most clearly by Quentin Skinner (1998) and Philip Pettit (1997) (see also Coffee 2017). The central ideal is a concept of freedom which ties the freedom of the individual with the freedom of the state as a whole. Freedom itself is understood as ‘independence’ or ‘non-domination’ and represents a complex idea that embodies several components, including equality, the rule of law, the common good, social standing, civic virtue and public reason, held together in a delicate balance. Freedom is a socially and politically demanding condition in that it must be guaranteed by an effective law. A free republic is governed in the interests of the citizens, who have a voice in determining their own laws. Unfree, or arbitrary, rule is illegitimate and constitutes grounds for rebellion by those subject to it.

### **Government and Education**

To mitigate against this process of undermining (or ‘corrupting’) virtue, Macaulay offers two main kinds of protection. First, there is the institutional design of the state which should have frequent elections, strict term limits, the rotation of offices and a separation of powers. She favours a bicameral system of government divided between an advisory senate comprised of experts and an elected executive chamber of representatives (1769, 34). Macaulay has both a negative and a positive purpose in this design. She aims, first, to limit the potential for abuse by the leaders of the nation. However, in so doing she believes this will enable the population to harness the restless energies, as well as the talents, of the ambitious and so focus these towards serving the common, rather than their private or factional, interests. The second protection comes through education. Education, here, is a broad term that includes both formal teaching and the effects of an improved environment. Macaulay is optimistic about the human potential for virtue. The decadence, tyranny and vices that she records in her history have come about through our inattention to the importance of safeguarding our political and social environment. The ruthlessly ambitious were able to usurp power through weak institutional protections. However, just as our environment not only has the potential to corrupt our virtue, so it can improve it.

Macaulay is, nevertheless, under no illusions about the scale of the undertaking involved in educating the population: “every error thrown out in conversation, every sentiment which does not correspond with the true principles of virtue, is received by the mind, and like a drop of venomous poison”, 1790a, 103). The foundation of her recommendation is to educate people rationally, according to what she describes as “immutable moral truths” (1783b; 1790a). However, while formal education is necessary, it is not enough since we learn far more from the example of others around us than we do from books and schoolteachers, particularly with regard to developing in people the necessary

moral feelings and sympathies that will guide their abstract thinking (1790a 72; Coffee 2017, 851-2). So Macaulay places a great deal of emphasis on public example, setting high standards from above by our leaders as well as in the sorts of activities that are encouraged or sponsored by the government. Gardening and cooking, for example, are to be encouraged while an interest in women's fashion is not.

### Key Points

- The purpose of government is to serve the virtue, liberty and happiness of society.
- Independence entails equality and civic virtue. Dependence and inequality serve to undermine or 'corrupt' the virtue necessary for a free republic.
- Corruption negates people's willingness to promote or support the common good. Once this attitude takes hold, false and pernicious ideas become established in the public consciousness, undermining the quality of public deliberation.
- Rational education based on the principles of 'immutable truths' is the surest means to protect the republic against arbitrary rule and so to preserve the republic.

## Edmund Burke

Edmund Burke (1729-97) was a prominent politician, renowned for his skills as an orator and as a writer. He has had a profound influence in the history of political thought and the history of ideas, as well as in fields such as international relations where he is often regarded as source of inspiration for what became the English School (Bourke 2009). For all this, it is significant that he has not had anything like the same influence amongst political philosophers. Sustained analytical treatments of his positions are comparatively few, especially when compared to other political writers of his stature, such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, or Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Harris 2020 provides an excellent philosophical introduction). A key reason for this is, as we noted in the introduction, that Burke does not write in a systematic way by setting out foundational principles and building upon these in a consistent and coherent manner. Burke was first and foremost a statesman, a politician and party loyalist. It is in the nature of political action that one works with the world as it is, reacting to the problems that present themselves, and marshals the arguments that will be most effective, adapting principle to reality where necessary. This is not to say his work is devoid of principle nor that systematic positions cannot be identified, though it does perhaps help explain why Burke's work has been understood, or at least appropriated, in contradictory ways over the last two centuries. Neither is it to say that Burke is philosophically naïve or unaware. His *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), for example, is a classic text on aesthetics that engages with the philosophy of mind, language and morals. It is, perhaps, closer to the truth to suggest that a lack of overt system was itself part of Burke's political philosophy.

As a politician, Burke owed his position and influence to his relationship to the Marquis of Rockingham, for whom he served as private secretary from 1765. Rockingham was an



important Whig leader who became Prime Minister briefly from 1765-76, and again for a few months in 1782 until his untimely death from influenza. Having earlier failed to breakthrough into politics, through Rockingham Burke gained a safe parliamentary seat in a rotten borough, launching a career that would last almost three decades until his retirement. Burke's relationship with Rockingham's group was significant. After their brief spell in power, Burke had other offers to serve with other factions but elected to remain under the patronage of Rockingham. While later commentators would elevate Burke's standing within the Rockinghams, the reality was that in spite of his reputation as an orator, there was never any question of his becoming party leader. Instead, Burke was a "follower not a leader" who understood and accepted the nature of his personal dependence on Rockingham (O'Gorman 2004: 22). Seen through Macaulay's lens of independence, Burke's reliance on maintaining his standing with his sponsors is instructive: while Macaulay was fortunate enough to be financially independent whereas Burke was required to tailor his arguments to suit party and patron.

Though I present Burke and Macaulay as opposing terms, it is important to reiterate that they were both Whigs and so, superficially at least, they share a commitment to a range of normative political values, such as to liberty, an idea of natural rights, and the sovereignty of parliament and its ultimate accountability to the people it governs. It is, after all, on account of these that the 'liberal' Burke of the nineteenth century, and its resurgence in the twenty-first, is able to be sustained. But how these ideas are conceived and the framework in which they are housed differs radically between Burke and Macaulay.

### **Conservation and Correction**

The destructive violence and excesses that unfolded in the months and years following French Revolution horrified observers from Britain across the political spectrum. Much of this was anticipated by Burke in his *Reflections*. Nevertheless, Burke's criticism of this rebellion in contrast with his earlier support for that of the Americans baffled and angered many British radicals. Though Macaulay herself does not frame her reply to Burke in these terms, Priestley opens his response expressing regret "that an avowed friend of the American revolution should be an enemy to that of the French, which arose from the same general principles, and in a great measure sprung from it, is to me unaccountable" (1791: iii). Burke's answer was straightforward enough: the two revolutions did not spring from the same principles (Burke 1791). The earlier revolution, he maintained, represented an internal correction within a civilisation and political tradition that rebalanced the necessary compromise between liberty and stability, whereas the later destroyed its civilisation and tradition, not only obliterating its people's own prospects for freedom or peace but threatening the foundations of the civilisations around it.

At the heart of the difference between the radicals and Burke is a difference in philosophical approach. Whereas Macaulay, like Priestley, begins with abstract principles, or immutable truths, such as the natural right to liberty, and reason towards a conclusion about how to govern society, Burke regards this as a very foolish – and dangerous – endeavour. Human society is far too complicated a matter to reduce to a simple, or even a complex, system based on a few bare axioms. "The nature of man is intricate" Burke reasons, "the

objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity; and, therefore, no simple disposition or direction of power can be suitable either to man's nature or to the quality of his affairs", adding pointedly that "when I hear the simplicity of contrivance aimed at and boasted of in any new political constitutions, I am at no loss to decide that the artificers are grossly ignorant of their trade or totally negligent of their duty" (2004: 62). Rather, society has emerged from a centuries-long process of accumulating experience which has become distilled in its particular traditions and institutions. We tamper with this inherited wisdom at our peril. It has come to serve us well by balancing the competing values and interests with the tendencies of human nature as these have come to us through our history. The result is a fine and intricate balance. This is not to say that change or reform is not possible. "A state without the means of some change", Burke accepts, "is without the means of its conservation" (21). The vicissitudes of history that have bequeathed our traditions and institutions are part of an on-going process without any ideal end-state. The Restoration and subsequent Glorious Revolution, he argues, shows the "two principles of conservation and correction" in operation whereby what was deficient in the old constitution was regenerated "through the parts which were not impaired". There had been no wholesale revolution in these cases, as there was in France. Instead a process of slow, cautious reform was adopted within the current arrangements. Within this spirit, Burke regarded himself, rightly, as a reformer.

In condemning the French Revolution, Burke did not mean to suggest that all was right with the way that the country was run. The failure of its leaders was undeniable. Burke's view, however, was that its institutions, perhaps with suitable reforms, were capable of correcting its errors. This would have allowed a gradual, sustainable change as the country adapted whilst maintaining the overarching framework of civilisation that had long sustained it. This contrasts with Burke's view of the American situation. The American colonies had developed into a distinct society, albeit one within the same overarching civilisation. The British government's policy to "tax [the colonists] without their consent" amounted to a violation of its mandate as it had been embodied in England's long tradition of freedom (1791, 26). Great Britain's freedom was, in effect, bought at the price of America's servitude, and so their revolution was made on a "defensive footing", and, crucially, left its basic civilisation and institutional structure in place.

### **Rights as Convention**

Burke accepts Macaulay's starting point that "government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants" and that ultimately it must be constituted for the benefit of all (Burke 2004: 60, compared with Macaulay 1769: 29). Within this basic proviso, Burke also has room for the core Whig values of freedom, equality, rights and representation, with those of virtue and stability, just as Macaulay does. The key difference between them is that for Burke, these values are not abstract, foundational principles, the products of speculative reasoning to be universalised and applied indiscriminately but are instead the practical solutions developed over time and passed on "as an entailed inheritance derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to posterity – as an estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom, without any reference whatever to any other more general or prior right"

(2004: 33). This history gives rights and freedoms a particular character that is limited by competing considerations within society as a whole. It is not that Burke sets limits on our basic rights that distinguishes him from Macaulay, but the tone in which he expresses those limits, and the basis upon which he does so.

So, regarding freedom, Burke accepts the premise that “everything ought to be open”, but adds the rider “but not indifferently, to every man” (50). Likewise, with equality, Burke acknowledges, as Macaulay does, that “all men have equal rights, but not to equal things” (59). However, when Burke goes on in this passage to discuss the rights to share in government, his conclusion is instructive: “and as to the share of power, authority, and direction which each individual ought to have in the management of the state, that I must deny to be amongst the direct original rights of man in civil society; for I have in my contemplation the civil social man, and no other. It is a thing to be settled by convention”. Rights are not prior to, but the outcome of, a social convention. “Government”, Burke insists in contrast to Macaulay, “is not made in virtue of natural rights, which may and do exist in total independence of it” (60). It is convention that dictates the use and scope of our civil and political rights, rather than the other way around. We do not alter convention in light of our fundamental freedoms, we understand the freedoms we have through the lens of convention: “if civil society be the offspring of convention, that convention must be its law. That convention must limit and modify all the descriptions of constitution which are formed under it” (59).

### **The Spirit of a Gentleman and the Spirit of Religion**

The convention that the British had received, via a long tradition stretching from the Magna Carta to the Glorious Revolution, was “an inheritable crown, an inheritable peerage, and a House of Commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties from a long line of ancestors” (33). Each of these, working together, “preserves a unity in so great a diversity of its parts”. Any one part, unchecked, would come not only to dominate the others but thereafter to unravel the ties and values that held the nation together. In fostering a sense of patriotism and social cohesion amongst the people, Burke lays particular emphasis on two ingredients, religion and the nobility (“the spirit of a gentleman”, 79). Religion is important for Macaulay, too, of course, as it was for the radical non-conformist republicans with whom she was linked (in spite of her being an Anglican), though hers was a rational religion that served as the basis for the immutable truths that were the source of both government and personal virtue. Burke’s emphasis, by contrast, was on revealed religion as not only the source and driver of moral behaviour but as the preserver of culture.

Within that culture, the nobility played a distinctive role, in cementing and stabilising what was a naturally hierarchical society. They have acquired considerable swathes of property, and with it a great stake in society, through which they have learned the art of maintaining the system of which they are part. “Long possession of Government; vast property; obligations of favours given and received; connexion of office; ties of blood, of alliance, of friendship”, Burke argues, have taught the aristocracy the delicate and subtle skills required to maintain the complex balance and harmony of society (1770, 21). This is exemplified in the way that the nobility serve as public benefactors, coming to understand

this as an indispensable part of their role. “Why”, for example, Burke asks, “should the expenditure of a great landed property, which is a dispersion of the surplus product of the soil, appear intolerable to you or to me, when it takes its course through the accumulation of vast libraries... through great collections of ancient records, medals, and coins... through paintings and statues... through grand monuments of the dead, which continue the regards and connections of life beyond the grave” (2002).

### **Key Points**

- The principles and processes governing society are highly varied and complex. Political society, therefore, should not be based on systems grounded in a few identifiable rational principles.
- Instead, societies develop over the course of generations the institutions and modes of organisation that embody their accumulated experience and wisdom about what is viable and stable.
- Societies must and do reform themselves over time, but do so cautiously and incrementally in a spirit of correcting what we must in order to conserve what we have.
- Rights are not abstract, pre-political ideals to be discovered by speculation but social creations inherited from previous generations and passed on to the future.
- Society is hierarchically arranged whereby the nobility learn the skills necessary to preserve the rights and prosperity of the whole.

### **Criticisms and Relevance**

Having set out the respective positions of Macaulay and Burke, how should we now view their work in the light of contemporary social, moral and political perspectives? The considerable differences in social context between the eighteenth century and our own time clearly raises both interpretive questions and issues about how, and whether, we can make use of their philosophy in our own time.

### **Can Macaulay Reconcile Universal Principles with Social Context?**

Macaulay was an exemplary representative of the systematic or speculative approach to political philosophy that Burke objected to so vehemently (2004: 57). She grounded her system in immutable truths discoverable by reason. The most significant ideal politically was freedom, which was itself a product of a universal capacity for human reason through which human beings could discover the principles of both moral virtue and of good social organisation. The principles of moral virtue are not only binding but should also be motivating as the people come to understand that their individual interests are inextricably bound together with the interests of others (1790a: 169-70).

Expressed in these terms, Macaulay produced a cosmopolitan and inclusive political theory in which all human beings are in principle protected against arbitrary forms of intrusion and control in virtue of their status as rational agents. Although her work predates modern

ideas about democracy, it is democratic in nature, grounded in the belief that only collectively could people reliably come to converge on the optimal principles for government, in rather the same way that science is best done deliberatively by a community designed to identify efficient and true principles and discard weak or biased ones. Macaulay's is also an emancipatory philosophy in which arbitrary, non-representative, non-democratic, inegalitarian rule is considered unjust and illegitimate, and where the oppressed are licenced and exhorted to rise up in revolution. England's seventeenth-century revolutions were, therefore, justified – though that of 1688 she argued did not go far enough in constraining arbitrary power and securing freedoms – as were the eighteenth-century American and French revolutions. Though Macaulay did not live to see the bloodshed, chaos and devastation of the Reign of Terror in France, others writing in the same tradition would identify this as an inevitable, if deeply concerning, consequence of the corrupting nature of arbitrary power that depraves both dominator and oppressed in equal measure. This was the view taken by Wollstonecraft, for example, who accepted that a gradual revolution conducted on rational principles would have been preferable but nevertheless reaffirmed the people's right to overthrow their tyrants (1794: vii, 68-72, 341-359).

Nevertheless, Macaulay's approach suffers from several potential weaknesses. Not least among these are whether her ideological principles are empirically sound, and whether their theological grounding hinders the acceptance of her ideals today. Karen Green, for example, raises both objections simultaneously. Green regards Macaulay's political philosophy as being intimately tied to a religious commitment to a form of human moral perfectibility – the belief that with rational application human beings can become ever more virtuous, not only individually but as a society under rational and virtuous laws – that is no longer widely held, even amongst religious believers today (2020b: 217-224). Detached from these theological moorings, Green believes that Macaulay gives us an empirical theory “concerning how it is best, overall, for social, reasoning, self-conscious creatures to represent themselves to themselves” (218). This is an important consideration when evaluating Macaulay's continuing relevance. My own view is that, while her religious commitments are substantively part of Macaulay's political system, they are not necessary for a contemporary rendering of a normative ideal of a non-dominating and inclusive social and political organisation in which all in members are not only recognised and treated as equals, but where each has a voice in deliberating about what the common good consists of. On this score, then, anyone who already accepts something of the liberal-democratic or neo-republican approaches should find still her work both significant and relevant for our times, while those not convinced by republicanism will likely remain unmoved.

A potentially more troubling objection to Macaulay's approach is epistemological. While Macaulay is confident that she has identified immutable moral truths which she then applies using the power of reason, modern readers may find some of her substantive beliefs or assumptions more troubling. More generally, Macaulay faces a problem that confronts any philosopher arguing in abstract and universal terms, that their claims will embody tacit and implicit biases inherited from their culture that they cannot perceive. Feminists have, for example, have noted that in Macaulay's long career in which she continually advocated for the singular importance for independence as an ideal, she nowhere makes an explicit

argument for women's independence specifically, in the form of equal rights or citizenship. Indeed, it is not until her final work, the *Letters on Education*, that Macaulay even gives a sustained treatment of women's condition as dependent. On this feminist objection, I believe that she can plausibly be exonerated. Philip Hicks, for example, demonstrates that Macaulay accords women a much more prominent role as agents and political actors in her *Histories* than, for example Hume, foregrounding and analysing their interventions which others had "unjustly ridiculed, omitted, praised for the wrong reasons, or not praised highly enough" (2002: 187-8). Wendy Gunther-Canada also shows how Macaulay in fact develops a sustained critique of patriarchy throughout her *Histories*, drawing a parallel between the arbitrariness of the monarch and the husband (2020). "With each volume of the *History*", Gunther-Canada argues, "her consideration of women's condition occupied a larger portion of the pages, underscoring how patriarchy was encoded in the social contract, and elements of monarchical rule reflected in the marriage contract" (35, see also Coffee 2022).

Another potential blind spot for Macaulay might be her apparent Orientalism, using terms that further stereotype and caricature Asian society even where her target is to critique the treatment of women in Europe. She contrasts, for example, the relative subjection of European women with "the abject slavery in which they have always been held in the east" (133), alleging that the unjustifiable suppressing of the female understanding in Europe was more in keeping with "regions of the east, because it accords with the state of slavery to which female nature in that part of the world has ever been subjected, and can only suit with the notion of a positive inferiority in the intellectual powers of the female mind" (31). She also variously refers to "the selfishness of Asiatic luxury" (135) and argues in response to Rousseau that his prescriptions for French women fit them rather more "for the harem of an eastern Bashaw" than to be a wife as a man's companion (133). Against this, however, Macaulay fares better from a modern perspective in emphasising that the "natural equality of men" covers all races (1790a: 160). She reminds her reader that "persons even of deep reflection have pretended to discover an apparent difference in the mental qualities of the inhabitants of the east and the north, and have given to the effect of climate those virtues which alone depend on moral causes... [giving] to their own colour only, the quality of external beauty, and they persuade themselves, that the swarthy inhabitants of India and Africa, are a degree below them in the scale of intelligent Nature" (160-161).

There is a fundamental tension in Macaulay's writing. For all her commitment to the concept of immutable truths discoverable by reason, she is also highly, and perceptively, aware of the subtle but almost irresistible power of our social environment to shape what people actually believe. She also understands how easily false ideas can become established as accepted social narratives and received wisdom. "Every part of morals" she observes, "becomes fluctuation; and customs, manners, sentiments change according to the notions of those in power" (1790a: 96). This sets up a difficult dilemma for her. It is the very elites who set the cultural and educational policies to educate the people on rational grounds whose own vested interests and implicit biases come to shape the public consciousness. This is a tremendous power to place unchecked in the hands of any social group. While she believes that her institutional design will prevent it from being abused, the danger remains that were the elite, consciously or unconsciously, to shape the social and cultural norms and beliefs to

suit their own interests rather than those of the public interest, they would go a long way towards cementing their own dominance for a considerable period. While Macaulay is aware of this risk, she is optimistic that reason and immutable principles will prevail over prejudice and error.

Whether Macaulay's optimism is warranted is a matter for debate. Her ideas, however, were a great influence on Wollstonecraft who would develop and nuance them to outline a potentially more robust republican position that places more emphasis on the need for participation by all sections of society – across gender, class, racial and religious lines – to create a social background of beliefs, norms, practices and values that is truly reflective of the perspectives of the entire community, inclusively defined (Coffee 2013). Others in the African-American tradition of republican thought such as Frederick Douglass would develop similar arguments (Coffee 2020).

### **Does Burke have Sufficient Safeguards Against the Abuse of Power?**

Macaulay's concern that social and political elites will be able to set the normative agenda in favour of their own partisan interests can be raised against Burke's philosophy. Burke clearly vests considerable cultural and, thereby, political power in elite sections of society. It is their task, after all, to safeguard the stability and prosperity that we have all inherited. Burke's emphasis on preserving norms and institutions puts groups that have traditionally been excluded from political influence, such as women and religious and ethnic minorities, at a considerable disadvantage in raising their concerns and pressing for reform.

Burke was suspicious of, and hostile to, the idea of democracy which he regarded as either a misnomer or a fraud. Both monarchy and popular sovereignty, Burke acknowledged, brought risks – tyranny and anarchy respectively. Accordingly, he looked to the gentry and nobility to provide a moderating and mediating role that would mitigate these two opposing dangers. By framing things this way, Burke opened himself up to the charge of being a mere dupe of the aristocracy, a fawning sycophant seeking to curry favour. Indeed, Macaulay opens her *Observations* on his *Thoughts* with this very jibe (1770, 5-6. See Bourke 2007, 430 for a more charitable view). Cynicism aside, however, we must still ask ourselves whether Burke provides sufficient safeguards against the potential abuse of power.

One context in which questions concerning the justifiable exercise of power arise is that of empire. In recent years, some commentators have come to regard Burke as an opponent rather than supporter of empire, or at least aspects of his philosophy have been interpreted as containing the seeds for such a rejection. The reasons for this can be found in Burke's very rejection of the systematic, universal, abstract and rational principles that we have ascribed to Macaulay, and which ultimately trace back to Locke. Uday Singh Mehta gives one such account. Although Mehta directs his arguments towards liberalism with its universal pretensions rather than to republicanism, the ultimate foundation in abstract rationalism is the same (1999). On the surface, he argues, such universalist and rationalist approaches may appear to be cosmopolitan and egalitarian by appealing to a shared capacity for human reason. But, Mehta goes on, this capacity is not seen as having been developed to the same extent everywhere, thereby opening up the possibility that more developed societies could

legitimately exercise colonial rule over other nations still in their infancy (like Britain over India in Mehta's analysis). On Mehta's account, then, Burke's rejection of reason and universal rights and principles, therefore, are not identified as a weakness but represent his great strength. By viewing India as a distinct and particular society living under its own social institutions and practices that embody their own accumulated practical wisdom, rather than as inferior versions of ourselves, Burke is said to be able to treat it as a self-governing society in its own right, thereby undercutting the normative basis for imperial rule. This is a powerful argument, and seen through the lens of twentieth century phenomenological and post-colonial thinking, has much to commend it. Whether it accurately represents Burke's philosophy is another matter, which we do not have space to discuss here (for a direct response, see O'Neill 2016, and for a balanced and comprehensive examination, see Bourke 2015).

Mehta's arguments must, however, be set alongside Burke's deeper logic of not only of empire but of power. A state can come legitimately to rule over the people of another territory through the 'right of conquest' (see Bourke 2007 in relation to Quebec). However, while Burke considers that victors in battle have the right to rule as they please, not all methods are expedient. The basic principles of enlightened rule apply to empires just as they do the state, even if the precise form that this takes may differ across an empire's territories (for example, Burke accepted and supported to some degree the American colonists' complaints that the British government had abandoned the principles and obligations of good government). In general, Burke believed that a vanquished people would come to accept their new rulers where this benefits them. So, where the pre-conquest style of government had enjoyed local support, this would count in favour of its being retained, though other factors such as the acceptability of this to the central government and the overall stability and prosperity of the empire as a whole may count against it. In the end, the solution will be pragmatic taking into account both the rights of the conquerors as well as the prosperity of the whole. In his analysis of Burke's arguments concerning the rights of conquest and empire, Bourke emphasises the role that Burke's understanding of human nature plays (2007). At root, political subjection is a function of how humans behave rather than of abstract right or principle. Defeated peoples can be brought to acquiesce willingly, Burke believes, if they come to admire their new rulers.

The role that judgement, politics, psychology and hierarchy play in Burke's philosophy mean that there is an ever-present danger of supposedly enlightened rule lapsing into domination and oppression. Unlike Macaulay who saw arbitrary rule as the single cause of despotism, Burke accepts that each of the several competing factors that need to be balanced in society can come to exert a dominating influence. In the 1770s, for example, the monarch's overreach both at home (*Thoughts*) and in America was said to represent the greatest danger, whereas in the build-up to the French Revolution the very spirit of freedom becomes the new threat. As we have seen, the American and French situations yielded different results concerning whether the population had a right to revolt. In general, Burke did not consider that subject populations had the right to rise up in revolution.



The social contract, according to Burke, is not made with our contemporaries but across time, with our ancestors and with our descendants. The nature of our relations with our countrymen and women are not merely transactional. “The state” Burke argues, “ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other such low concern to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties”. It should, instead, be viewed with “reverence because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature: it is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection” (2004, 96). Since the ends of a partnership of this kind, cannot be obtained even over many generations, he concludes that “each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place” (97).

## **Conclusion**

Reading Macaulay and Burke in opposition to each other is, I believe, a fruitful exercise, with each shedding light on the weaknesses of the other. Burke provides a subtle and sophisticated appreciation of the complexity and range of social considerations and human motivations that contribute to a viable and productive state, while Macaulay develops a tightly worked out framework around the fundamental political values of our society – freedom, equality, the common good and public accountability. On the one hand, Burke’s critique of systematic political philosophies that portray themselves as universal and based on an abstract form of normative reason accessible to all identifies a potentially devastating blind spot in the republican and liberal traditions that Macaulay represents. On the other, Macaulay’s insistence on a very high standard of equal protection and opportunity for all citizens – combined with an inclusiveness in reconstructing the background social context found in radical philosophers who built on her lead, such as Wollstonecraft and Douglass – provides a powerful rebuff to the dangers of elitism and hierarchy favoured by Burke.

## **Further reading**

### **Macaulay**

Though no published scholarly editions yet exist for Macaulay’s work, facsimile versions of her published writing are available from *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* with an institutional logon (<https://gdc.gale.com/products/eighteenth-century-collections-online/>).

Macaulay, Catharine (2020). *The Correspondence of Catharine Macaulay*. Ed. Karen Green, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

A valuable insight not only into Macaulay’s life but her intellectual engagement with her contemporaries.

### **Burke**

While Burke's work has been extensively collected and reproduced, there is no single, definitive or standard collection, in part because his output was so vast. A detailed bibliography is contained in the *Stanford Encyclopedia* entry on Burke (see Online Resources below).

Burke, Edmund (1999). *The Portable Edmund Burke (Viking Portable Library)*. Ed. Isaac Kramnik, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

The fullest single-volume collection of Burke's important writings

## Secondary reading

Green, Karen (2020). *Catharine Macaulay's Republican Enlightenment*. London: Routledge.

Gunther-Canada, Wendy. *A Friend of Liberty: Catharine Macaulay and the Enlightened Republic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

These are two ground-breaking but accessible recent studies by the two leading Macaulay scholars writing today.

Bourke, Richard (2015). *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

A comprehensive, in-depth and nuanced treatment of Burke's intellectual life and political career.

O'Neill, Daniel (2016). *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

A very clear and systematic reconstruction of Burke's philosophy that challenges the recent scholarly trend of treating Burke as a more liberal thinker.

## Online resources

Green, Karen (2020). Catharine Macaulay. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward Zalta.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/catharine-macaulay/>

Harris, Ian (2020). Edmund Burke. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of* Ed. Edward Zalta.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/burke/>

Several of Macaulay's works are available from UPenn:

<https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupname?key=Macaulay%2C%20Catharine%2C%201731%2D1791>

Many of Burke's works are available on Project Gutenberg:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/author/842>

## Study questions

1. What concepts do Macaulay and Burke seem to share, and how are these understood respectively?
2. What is the relationship between independence, virtue and equality for Macaulay (in each case, consider Burke's alternative conceptions)?
3. Is there a tension between Macaulay's reliance on public reason and her acknowledgement that people are deeply influenced by their social environment?
4. Why is Burke so suspicious of systematic philosophers?
5. How does Burke understand the relationship between conserving tradition and correcting it?
6. On what is the social contract based and what is the individual's place in society?

Can either Macaulay or Burke genuinely offer equality and freedom to women and members of minority social groups?

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