

Phillips, A. (ed.), *Burke, E., A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

With this edition of 'The Enquiry', Adam Phillips provides us with a well structured work. The introduction and the select bibliography frame Burke's book and prepare the reader for a better understanding of the text. A chronology of Burke's life and explanatory notes point out even more clearly the position of the book. There is no author index, and a subject index is also absent, but because of Burke's concise style of writing the contents of the book can act as such.

In the four parts of the introduction Phillips discusses successively (1) Burke's place in the world and in the philosophical literature of the 18th century; (2) his ambivalent attitude towards the French and British radicals whose ideas he opposed; (3) his method of inquiry; (4) and finally some of the main topics of 'The Enquiry'.

Phillips illustrates his introduction with statements from Burke's text. But unfortunately he abandons the readers to their fate when they try to find the precise location of these statements in the text. Personally, I regret the psychoanalytic tendencies in the second part of the introduction (p. xiii-xiv, xv). Burke's ambivalent position towards his opponents, is described as a characteristic of his personality, and at times nearly as a disease. But his position was probably a deliberately chosen, satirical style of writing.

The analysis of Burke's method of inquiry is of great value to the reader. Yet, Phillips seems to be misled by this method of inquiry when he explains the main themes of the book. He describes the Beautiful and the Sublime as "outlaws of rational enquiry. /.../ The Sublime is a rape, Beauty is a lure" (p. xxiii). This exaggeration appears to result from the fact that Burke develops his argumentation by analysing the limits of our passions, in the search for leading principles. Because of this proceeding, the book stresses extreme passions. But between these extremes, there is wide range of passions. This is clearly shown in the description of Astonishment (Part II, section I) : "Astonishment /.../ is the effect of the Sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence and respect".

Burke forms his ideas about Taste, the Beautiful and the Sublime through a critical analysis of some existing theories on that subject. He also tries to expose the causes of recurring misconceptions and confusion

of notions. He does this by basing his arguments on descriptions of passions in literature and on profound examination of his own passions.

Continuing on this line of thought, he points out the false notion that no fixed principles or standards can be found concerning Taste. Like Hume, Burke accepts the existence of such principles. Still, he does not neglect the plurality of possible judgments about a feeling, but he makes a distinction between these judgments and the feeling itself. This distinction runs parallel to the difference between natural and acquired relish. Natural relish concerns the immediate effect on the senses. And since the structure of the senses is nearly the same in all men, the effect must be the same for all.

It is therefore possible to find a fixed principle for natural relish. The diversity, commonly thought to be found in Taste, only applies to the appraisal (by the faculty of judgment) of the effect on the senses. This approval or disapproval can only result from the use of reason. Acquired relish is dependent on the experience of the individual, but these experiences do not alter the natural relish.

A second misunderstanding Burke discusses, concerns the relationship between Pain and Pleasure. Pain is often seen as removal of Pleasure, and Pleasure as removal of Pain. For Burke though, both Pain and Pleasure are of a positive nature. They are not considered opposites to each other, but opposites to a state of indifference. They are therefore, not dependent on each other for their existence. For this reason, Burke distinguishes Pain from Disappointment and Grief, which are caused by the removal of Pleasure; and Pleasure from Delight, which is caused by the removal of Pain.

Once this distinction is made, Burke examines the final causes of the ideas of Pain and Pleasure. He categorizes the passions into passions which belong to self-preservation, and passions which belong to society. The former are caused by Pain and Danger. They are simply painful when their causes affect us directly; and they are delightful when the ideas of Pain or Danger are present, but they do not press too close (Fear). Whatever causes this Delight, Burke calls Sublime.

In the second category, Burke distinguishes between the society of the sexes and the more general society of men and other animals. The passion belonging to the society of the sexes is called love, and always contains a mixture of lust. The object of that passion is the beauty of

women. The passion belonging to the more general society is likewise called love, but it has no mixture of lust. Its object is Beauty.

Burke then tries to find which object attributes cause the ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful, and in doing so, he contrasts these ideas even more sharply. Any object which is in some way terrible, and because of this, arouses the ideas of Pain or Danger, is a source of the Sublime. In contradiction, the attributes in objects that arouse love, are a source of the Beautiful. Sublime objects then, are huge, rugged, obscure and massive. They contain mostly straight lines, or when the lines deviate, this deviation should be strong. The impression of magnitude in sublime objects — the impossibility to judge their boundaries — is made even stronger by the creation of an artificial infinity, which is caused by a uniform succession of their parts. The attributes, required for an object to cause Beauty are brightness — although the colours should not be strong or glaring — smallness, smoothness and delicacy. Beauty shuns both the straight line, and a too strong deviation from it.

The Sublime and the Beautiful are independent for their existence, just like Pain and Pleasure. Thus, they can be found simultaneously in one object. But in such cases, the Sublime will not weaken as much by the presence of Beauty, than Beauty by the presence of the Sublime. This is due to the fact that the Sublime is always stronger than the Beautiful, in the same way that the feeling of Pain is always stronger than a comparable amount of Pleasure.

Burke examines all of the attributes regarding beautiful and sublime objects very extensively in Parts II and III of the book. In the discussion about attributes that result in Beauty, we find once more an important critical analysis, of the reasoning behind the opinion that proportion is an important factor in Beauty. But the fact that reason is necessary in judging proportion, is in contradiction with the fact that Beauty strikes us immediately and no long attention is needed. Burke shows that, because the right proportion occurs frequently in objects, it eventually causes indifference. Beauty strikes us as much by its novelty as the deformed.

In some cases, the effect of object attributes on our minds can be explained by the principle of association. Certain passions are related to objects or ideas because they frequently occur together (acquired relish). Thus, one can for instance, explain why objects which possess all the characteristics that are necessary to provoke the Sublime, do not cause the effect of the Sublime when we have knowledge of the usefulness of

the object.

But not all of our passions can be explained by the principle of association. For 1 3 4of Pain or Pleasure, if he has never before (by some other cause) experienced the feelings of Pain and Pleasure. Some objects must have been naturally agreeable or disagreeable before such associations could be made.

To discern by what other principle the attributes of an object can affect the mind naturally, Burke discusses — in the fourth part of the book — the relationship between the mind and the body. His findings are that the feeling of Pain is caused by an unnatural tension of the nerves. Thus, great objects cause Pain because the eye must look over the vast area of such objects with great speed. Beauty then is caused by a relaxation of the nerves. Yet, if the change from tension to relaxation is too sudden, the mind and the senses cannot properly adapt to the new situation; and this in turn causes a tension of the nerves.

This relationship between body and mind — a gift from Providence — can also take effect in the opposite direction. Not only the senses, but also the passions or ideas in the mind, can cause a tension or a relaxation of the nerves in the body. Thus explaining why Fear — the idea we can have of Pain or Danger, without the actual presence of painful or dangerous situations — can cause the Sublime. A person who suffers violent physical pain, will therefore have almost the same bearing and facial expression as a person in great fear. While objects that cause Pain, influence the mind through mediation of the senses and the nerves, objects that cause Fear affect the organs and the nerves through mediation of mind.

In the final section, Burke analyses the effect of words on our passions. According to him, words do not derive their power by implanting ideas or pictures in our mind. Only in dramatic poetry, where the manners and passions of men are described, does the poet use the art of imitation. But in all other cases words act as a stimulus solely because certain feelings are associated with the sounds of a word.

Nevertheless, eloquence and poetry often affect us more than other arts, and in many cases even more than nature itself. There are three reasons for this : first, with words we can partake in the passions of others; secondly, we can describe many situations of a very emotional nature which seldom occur in reality (e.g., war, death and famine); and thirdly, we can make combinations of words, giving a strong impact to

the simplest of objects we want describe. Burke ends the book with several illustrations of these three causes, clearly demonstrating the unique power of words.

Dirk Puis
Aspirant NFWO
Vrije Universiteit Brussel