

# The Locality of Affections, or Edmund Burke's Moral Foundation of Politics

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*Edmund Burke grounds politics and the state over the pre-political network of moral relations, starting from the family, evolving, through the village, the parish and the town, up to the class and corporation, finally arriving to the nation. These subordinate affections can be geometrically imagined as expanding circles of belonging and, though strictly linked to the state, they are not reducible to it, nor can the state replace them. In Burke's vision, the state of civil society is humankind's state of nature, for the reason that man is always, and since ever, a member of a community: we are from somewhere, Burke seems to suggest. Thus, politics is grounded in morality, and morality, in turn, is based on God's will, which within history takes the form of natural law. The French Revolution, on the contrary, has broken the spontaneity of interactions between individuals and intermediate groups, eventually establishing the Terror.*

## 1. Two "Burkes", One Philosophy

The position of Edmund Burke in the history of philosophy is quite controversial and still ambiguous. Burke (1729-1797) is the man between the two revolutions, the American and the French one, a politician and yet a philosopher, although not a theoretician – he would have rejected this label, since his aversion to abstract reasoning is the well-known cornerstone of all his intellectual production. Over the centuries, historiography has created two "Burkes": on the one hand, the reformist and utilitarian liberal (an interpretation that was prevalent in the 19th century), and on the other, the conservative and traditionalist man (predominant since the second half of the 20th century), so that it is possible to speak of a "Burke case". These interpretations «were in almost irremediable contradiction between them, that of the reformers and that of the counterrevolutionaries»<sup>1</sup>, but this is because Burke never wrote a comprehensive treatise of moral philosophy or political

1 M. Lenci, "Liberale o conservatore? I tentativi novecenteschi di fornire una interpretazione coerente di Burke", in «Bollettino telematico di filosofia politica», online, October, 2000, <http://bfp.sp.unipi.it/cronbib/lenci.htm>. See also M. Lenci, *Individualismo democratico e liberalismo aristocratico nel pensiero politico di Edmund Burke*, Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, Pisa-Rome 1999, pp. 19-87.

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