“The Study of True Politics:” John Brown on Manners and Liberty

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When political thinkers who were of consequence in their own day are neglected the history of political thought is deprived of some of its richness and continuity. Just such a neglected figure is the Revd Dr John Brown (1715-1766), whose works remain uncollected, little read and rarely seriously studied. All that we have are some brief sketches of his life, and occasional references in various studies in the fields of history, political thought, ethics, literature, and education.¹ My concern in this essay is to draw attention to Brown’s significance, but more particularly to rescue his central theme of the political importance of manners from the disregard which has hitherto been its fate, and to illuminate a few of its intriguing aspects.

In the belief that there existed an intimate relationship between the moral and political life of a state, Brown argued that commentators who do not consider the moral character of a people employ an approach to political inquiry both partial and misleading. This emphasis in his thought is illustrative of the kind of paradigm shift in eighteenth-century England detected by J. G. A. Pocock: a shift from the ‘law-centred paradigm’ which focuses on rights to the paradigm of virtue and its antithesis corruption – in essence a move away from the philosophical and juristic to the civic humanist mode of discoursing about politics.² In applying the paradigm of virtue or manners³ to Brown, however, we must be careful not to designate as merely peculiar what is really of most interest in the development of his mature thought. For his approach to political inquiry, far from supplying the objective basis from which to investigate political life he claimed for it, led him in his later works to advocate an intensification of the control exercised by government, a control reaching deep into the personality of the citizen toward the end of giving a specific shape to the motives of social and political action. In this respect, and despite the fact that Brown thought of himself as a Whig committed to the Settlement of 1689, the tendencies of his thought are strikingly at odds with other contemporary currents of political discourse in England. My suggestion is that one should look to the French Enlightenment for traces of a similar train of ideas. But before we can reach this point it is necessary that I set out something of the historical and intellectual

¹ For details of Brown’s life see P. M. Horsey, ‘Dr John Brown (1715-1766)’, Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland antiquarian and archaeological society, NS, 69 (1969), and Donald D. Eddy, A bibliography of John Brown (New York 1971), introduction.
³ It is Pocock’s argument that in England in the eighteenth century virtue became redefined with the aid of the concept of manners. Virtues in the classical civic humanist sense, primarily political in character, while not entirely lost, became subsumed under the new concept (p.365).
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James E. Cronin

The work of Brown's which had the most impact on his contemporaries was unquestionably An estimate of the manners and principles of the times (1757), his analysis of the moral condition of England's leading ranks. The occasion of the publication of this tract was the war with France which began to insignificantly for the English in 1756. It was England's act-bad, Brown informs us in his Explanatory defense of the estimate (1758), that prompted him to do 'service to his country' by pointing out 'the fundamental latent causes of this ill success.' His purpose was to impress upon his countrymen that 'it was the lamentable lack of moral fibre that had brought them to the brink of defeat.

As denunciatory works often do in troubled times the Estimate caught the public imagination and went through six editions before the year was out.5 By early 1758, however, the tide of war had turned. 'Victory returned all he said,' announced Cowper in the Table talk. Burke recalled the affair with much satisfaction:

We emerged from the grip of that speculative despondency, and were buoyed up to the highest pitch of practical vigour. Never did the maincurrent spirit of English government discontinue with more energy, nor even did its genius soar with a broader pro-embrace over France, than at the time when freeness and efficacy had once so hastily acknowledged as their national character, by the good people of this kingdom.6

The stir caused by the Estimate was soon forgotten and Brown was never to regain the fleetin fame afforded him by his 'essay upon the depravity of the times.' Horace Walpole set the seal on contemporary opinion with his customary

The context of the Estimate, 1758 Brown, was encoun material fabricated for a much larger scale of his 'Art history and analysis of manners and principles in their several periods,' which was to have been a valuable survey of the rise and fall of states from ' rude, simple, civilize to 'total destruction and ruin.' Only the circumstances of the times gave the Estimate its 'accidental birth.' John Brown, An exalted defense of the estimate of the manners and principles of the time (London, 1788), pp. 3-5. Brown's Remarks.

5. The popularity of the Estimate is verified by the publishing figures given in entry, A bibliography of John Brown, pp. 50-57. Editions of more extents each were published in 1757 on 3 March, 10 April, 13 April, 5 and 31 May, 4 July, and 1 September. There were also two Dublin editions in 1757. In 1758 a second edition of 1200 copies appeared in London on 20 April, there were editions published in Dublin and Belfast, an American edition appeared, and also two French translations.

6. The preceding edition of this tract was the Monthly review (1758), in which the Estimate was reviewed, and by the Annual register (1758), p. 245. A marked interest in their own literature, the war enabled the success of the book among Brown's contemporaries. Thomas Babington Macaulay, William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, Critical and historical essays (London 1868), p. 386.


8. Harold Lamb, Painted though in England: Letters to Brougham (London 1846), p. 213. Brown found consolation in the belief that he had contributed to his subsequent unpopularity on the grounds that the Estimate had played a singular role in causing the nation from its dependence and licentiousness to its present condition, thereby restoring his wings of prospective deeds. Brown, Explicatory defense, p. 51. Curiously enough Voltaire seems to have been of the same opinion. Andre Rapp, Napoleon (London 1870), p. 658.
were not. Of particular interest, since they reveal the epistemology upon which Brown bases his science of manners, are those jottings to do with the method of political inquiry. These annotations will repay some attention.

Brown shared the enthusiasm of the times for Newton and Locke. In the annotations to the Trinity Estimate he expressed his admiration in glowing terms: the acknowledged fathers of the enlightened age stood "the vast Mountains, towering in the Skies, wrapt in Clouds; [...] Objects of awful Astonishment" (TCD Ms.). Fundamental to the Newtonian methodology and commonly deemed essential in writings of a philosophical or political nature, was the notion that they should bear the marks of independent thinking and impartiality. This was a characteristic which also had its roots in that Machiavellianism which held that if a work is to be of practical use, then it is proper that it "represent things as they are in real truth, rather than as they are imagined". Eighteenth-century thinkers, whether influenced by Newton and Locke or by Machiavelli, all arrived at this position of detachment; from this lofty perch unquestionable truth was there to be grasped. Impartial observation of empirical facts was the professed aim. "The Chief Requisite in a work of this Kind," wrote Brown, "is Impartiality. - It needs but thinking right & meaning well. - The Facts lie open to every one's Observation: but the Blindness of Prejudice is such that every one sees these Facts with a particular Colour thrown upon them" (TCD Ms., p.10). Only the impartial will perceive truth. What is required is a just and extended Discernment of Causes and Effects and this 'can never be seen but by the Impartial' (TCD Ms., p.28).

The assumptions involved here is that Nature is an unchanging reality which can be known objectively. All facts, all experience, are firmly rooted in this reality, and all truths, whether speculative or moral, are founded upon this larger truth. Speculative truth is acquired as a consequence of training in the basic principles of reasoning, as in logic and mathematics; moral truths are those facts of social experience which offer themselves ' irresistibly to the Mind ' (TCD Ms., p.9). But both kinds of truth are based on what we know of Nature (TCD Ms., p.84).

To the question "Who are the best Judges of Truth?" Brown asserts that it is 13. For instance, there is a lengthy section in a series of sixty pages dealing with the necessary qualifications for the "sciences of nature," with particular reference to Brown's own interests in the first volume of the Estimate. There are also valuable sections throughout the book, only a few of which were incorporated into the second volume, regarding the characteristics of the great men, the comparative heights of Robert Walpole, and the virtues of the elder Pitt.

14. The enthusiasm centered principally on the Newtonian methodology. "Newton's" writes a recent commentator, "was seen as the harbinger of an inductive, experimental learning which proceeded by a gradual ascent from the particulars of observation to general laws which were not and virtually impossible to illustrate", L. L. Landa, "Thomas Reid and the Newtonian turn of British philosophical thought", in The Methodological heritage of Newton, ed. Robert E. Butts and John W. Davis (Toronto 1979), p.101.

15. Where no page number is given the quotation is from a front or back cover, flysheet, or an unnumbered section or title page. All quotations are as they appear in the Trinity manuscript.

"They who are best acquainted with the Facts attined, with the Facts that lead to the proof of them, are, and have been habituated to reason upon such Subjects as are in Question" (TCD Ms., p.68). The claim to be able to reach conclusions as a result of reasoned argument or logical inference was also considered to be of absolute importance in philosophical literature and political polemic alike. "The Merit of Reasoning", writes Brown, lies in bringing Facts together for the Proof of your Point, whether the separate Facts be obvious or not: for they may be obvious in Separation & not in Connection" (TCD Ms., p.9). By presenting evidence in a new or uncommon light, or in relation to other evidence previously not considered, the political inquirer can reveal an entirely different picture of what had formerly been taken for granted. "And here", says Brown, "lies the Error of those who think that no Reasoning can be new or strong that is obvious to common Understandings. The air may be full of Sunbeams but it requires Art to collect and draw them to a Focus. In this Case the furer & stronger the Reasoning is, the more obvious it may be" (TCD Ms., pp.8-9). 18 Part of the inquirer's art consists in ordering and grouping his facts in such a way that they direct the eye of the reader as if they could be understood in no other way. For it is too often the case that the reader is misled by the fine phrases of a nicely turned style and thus attends "only to what strikes the Imagination without consulting with Reason". This has made for "beggarly Philosophy" and "given Reputation to many Writers" who have confronted "Visions with Realists" and set forth "what ought to be, for what it is [..]" (TCD Ms., Brown's emphasis). 19 The political inquirer must always keep in view the facts, and those from which he is to make his selection are those which offer themselves "clearly and incontestably to the Observation of the Writer and the Reader", whether they be the product of "ancient Books or modern Practice". 19

What Brown means by a "fact", however, is not always clear. The facts of "modern practice" would seem to present little difficulty — they are the inquirer's own observations of contemporary social and political affairs. The facts supplied by "ancient books" are not so obvious, since Brown includes under this rubric not only the observations of writers of the past, but frequently their maxims and illustrations also, as if these were all of a kind. That the observations of historians and political thinkers of earlier ages should be considered as in some sense facts in legitimate empirical inquiry was not unusual in an age when the writing of history was commonly characterized by informed conjectures. 20 But Brown,

18. "The novelty [...] of scientific discovery comes not from the data, but from the inference by it we are led to look at familiar phenomena in a new way, not at new phenomena in a familiar way" (Stephen Toulmin, The Philosophy of Science, London, Toronto 1958, p.9).


20. "John Brown, as exponent of the manners and principles of the times (London: 1737-38), ii.32.

Trinity College, Dublin, Ms 1448, verso of 'Advertisement'.
throughout his work in the fields of morals, theology, education, and politics relied heavily on, and liberally quoted from, a whole range of works from such authorities as Xenophon, Plato, Herodotus, Aristotle, Cicero, Horace, Tacitus, Seneca, Livy, Quintilian, Lucian, Strabo, Diodorus, and the Apostles, often borrowing the arguments, illustrations, and maxims they expounded indiscriminately. On these occasions he commonly failed to distinguish what was fact (or considered to be fact) from opinion, demanding from the reader the deference to consider all his sources as impeccably reliable.

Nor did Brown confine himself to borrowing from the ancients, but frequently drew upon the work of writers of more recent times. In his political thought particularly he looked to the moderns for his inspiration as well as for his facts. This is of special importance, for Brown was not the first to mark the decadent tendencies and characteristics of the age, and he drew assistance from those who had gone before him. Many of the primary features of decadence had been artfully depicted by his contemporary Hogarth, in his popular series The Rake's Progress which began appearing in 1733. Even earlier, in the late decades of the previous century, Sir William Temple had commented on various aspects of the degeneracy he perceived in the England of his own day, and much similar material was to be found in Bolingbroke and Mandeville in the early decades of the eighteenth century. There were others — bishop Berkeley, for example, who wrote An essay towards preventing the ruin of Great Britain (1721) — but it was Hogarth, Temple, Bolingbroke and Mandeville who did most to influence the shape of Brown's resplendent view of his countrymen.

Hogarth was for Brown the only artist of the age of genuine worth, but not even he, though uncorrupted by the general decay of aesthetic taste, neither by 'comic Precept' nor 'serious Pen,' has been able to keep alive the Taste of Nature, or of Beauty. The fantastic and grotesque have banished both. It was from Temple that Brown took the idea which forms the first principle of his analysis in the Estimate that the structure and durability of a government is dependent on the social environment over which it presides. In Bolingbroke he found the doers of all critics of the political corruption of the day. Though he despised his Tory politics, it was Bolingbroke who counselled him for the devastatingly simple deduction that if a corrupt nation is not reformed quickly then its future leaders, instructed according to the prevailing customs and habits, were bound to inherit the corrupt character of their forerunners, and push the nation further down the path to ruin. Finally, it was Mandeville's Fable of the Bees (1754), though on the whole detested by Brown for the anarchic tendency of its moral theory, which shed light on the moral deficits of an economically flourishing nation. Mandeville impressively argued that one of the vices which followed from gross luxury is that 'it effeminates and enervates the People', and that this was largely the consequence of 'Maze-administration' and 'bad Politricks'. To effect a reformation 'the dexterous Management' of trade by Good Politicians' is required. These were the kind of facts Brown borrowed from the moderns, and which figured significantly in his own political thought.

More important to these than to Brown's science of manners, however, was the influence of Machiavelli and Montesquieu. For a time he was undecided which of them was the superior political scientist. In the first volume of the Estimate he gave the laurels to Montesquieu (c.18). In the Trinity annotations he suggests that 'Machiavel is at least his equal; and seems to have been his Original' (TCD Ms., p.12). By the time the second volume of the Estimate appeared his mind is made up and it is Machiavelli who is glorified as 'the greatest Reasoner upon Facts, that hath appeared in any Age or Country' (i.47). Yet this may be misleading, for Brown shared the universal zeal of the day for Montesquieu's L'Esprit des lois (1748) and it certainly had a very considerable influence on the shape and content of the Estimate. As a modern commentator has remarked, both works exhibit the same reliance on classical authors, the same penchant for striking generalisations, the same interest in the affairs of the ancient city-states, the same concern for the connection between commerce and moral values, and the same regard for the influence of climate. Moreover, references to Montesquieu in the Estimate are abundant.

The influence of Machiavelli was of a different order, but there is no question about his impact on Brown. At one point in the Trinity Estimate Brown considers writing 'a Defence of Machiavel's Character', or possibly 'a Comparison of the Character of Montesquieu & Machiavel' (TCD Ms., p.11); at another he offers it as an explanation of 'political Maxims [...] which shock the Humanity of most Readers' that Machiavelli had become 'familiarisued to the Practition of them in his own Country' (TCD Ms., p.23). Inhumanity, he says, was 'natural' in Machiavelli's Italy. When Italy became divided into a vast Number of petty States, the Conventions & Facts in these States were endless. The Parties were often too small to levy and maintain Armies; hence Insurrections, Conspiracies, Assassinations, were the common Methods of preserving the Design either of the Oppressors or the oppressed. By this means, the Practice of Assassination, Poisoning, &c. by being applied politically [Brown's emphasis], lost a great Part of his Horror in the Opinions of the People who practised it. The anecdotes are rich with observations, inferences, and maxims of political conduct borrowed from the peccant Florentines, and barely a page can be turned without a reference to one of his works. But more than anything else what Brown gained from his study of Machiavelli was an understanding of how best to apply the Newtonian methodology in the field of political inquiry. It was Machiavelli, even more than Newton or Locke, who best illustrated for him the efficacy of detachment, empirical observation, and reasoned argument based upon evident facts; in short, the method by which to arrive at unquestionable truth. Armed
he reasoned that he had only to insist that the correct
the causal relationships between them made
r political inquiry to provide a sure base for
by his answer to his critics: they criticise because
-cause they mistakenly deny or neglect the facts
-see, or because they refuse to acknowledge
-brings these facts to their telling points. His
-see; the world has only to read and 'weigh the

e age human nature was central to the 'modern
cermed himself; this was the basis for all moral
Estimate, the discernment of 'the Causes of the
lies in a true Insight into human Nature' (TCD
is nature in terms of psychological egoism, but
ommon with others, that from birth men are
character as they are introduced to different
fluenced by the opinions of others. Men
versely motivated to action by considerations
according to the social environment in which
ves. Hence if the manners and principles of a
nels will be humanitarian, religious, and public
apily coinciding with the general interests of
asure, if the national character is degenerate
crupt condition of the manners and principles
Manners and principles, then, are those aspects
shape of the moral character of its citizens, and
quirer's empirical research.

His science of politics is surprising, therefore,
ecessarily what is meant by the terms 'manners'
pected his eighteenth-century readers to readily
ven in the language of the times there exists an
ners he appears to mean the general rules,
ual and political behaviour; learnt by precept and
ey are unconsidered and habitual. Good or
the regard for liberty, the spirit of humanity,
ch tend to support and maintain the institutions
dition. Virtuous principles appear to be those,
as of honour and public spirit, which tend to
ating, as an additional support to moral charac-

The constant theme which runs through Brown's analysis is that there exists
an intimate connection between the moral and political condition of a country.
This he learnt from Temple and found confirmed in the thought of Montesquieu.
'The Study of True Politics', he wrote on the title page of the Trinity Estimate
is 'the highest and most praiseworthy among Men: It tends to promote the
Happiness of Kingdoms, as the Study of Morals does that of private Men.'
Brown's aim is to be useful both to men in the conduct of their private lives
and, more especially, to the nation by pointing out those manners and principles
necessary for the practice of public virtue. These ends are necessarily related

32. Brown, Estimate, 1.30-33; ii.64-65.
33. The impact of the increase of trade in all aspects of social and political life in England during
the first half of the eighteenth century was significant. In 1757 imports were almost worth three
times and exports four times as much as they were in 1657. For these and other commercial,
industrial, agricultural, and population statistics see B. R. Mitchell, Abstract of British historical
34. Brown, Estimate, 1.29. Brown's italics. An ingenious and entertaining pamphlet entitled The
Prosperity of Britain proved from the degeneracy of its people (London 1757), sought to show that England's
prosperity actually depended on the prevailing effeminacy of its leading ranks, and that this was
the 'secret doctrine' that Brown wanted to impart to his readers.
for Brown. Quoting Temple, he states his purpose as the timeless aim of all
genuine philosophy (TCD Ms):

To carry on a Work of this Kind to its Completion, cannot be a blamable Design; being
indeed what a distinguished Country man of our own tells us was the Care of the
Philosophers of old Time, who instead of seeking or accepting the public Magnificence
or Office of their Countries, employs'd their Time and Care to improve Men's Reason,
to temper their Affectations, to exalt their Passions, to discover the Vanity as the Mischiefs
of Pride and Ambition, of Riches and Luxury; believing the only Way to make their
Countries happy and safe, was to make Men wise and good, just and reasonable.46

The aim of philosophy is, or should be, public-welfare via national enlightenment
and civic virtue. For Brown this required a close scrutiny of the nation’s manners
as a basis for the task of counselling the introduction of policies designed to
further the end of the public good.

Laws themselves, however, were only of incidental interest to Brown. Political
commentators of the day, Brown among them, commonly held the constitution
established following the 'Glorious Revolution' to be high perfect in the balance,
separation, and harmony of its powers. Yet England was on the brink of
disaster. The logical inference was that neither the constitution nor the laws it
encompassed were sufficient to preserve the state from ruin. Montesquieus had
inferred that a nation's laws could only affect the external actions of the citizen
and did not exhaust the possible methods of controlling human behaviour.48

In other words, says Brown, laws alone cannot regulate a man's private thoughts,
since these may be the product of customs and opinions which are currently
irrespective of the laws, and if this be true then 'nothing can be
decided concerning the Duration of the British State from its mere external Model.49

When considering the capacity of a state to resist debilitating changes we must
take into account the moral character of its people as well as its political form.
Just as it is a mistake to attribute the defects of the age solely to the misconduct
of individuals (the influence-peddling of Walpole and Newcastle cannot be blamed
for all England's misfortunes),80 so it is a mistake to trace the fall of
states to defective laws. For though a state has 'ill-modelled Laws' if its
manners and principles be wholesome and tend to the public good it will yet
survive, even 'the best Laws can never secure the duration of a State, where
Manners and Principles are corrupt'.81

Chief among those who neglect this ruling circumstance, Brown claimed,
were Lord Bolingbroke and David Hume, both of whom he condemned to the
ranks of 'superficial Pretenders to the political science'.82 Brown's criticism of
Bolingbroke, however, inspired one suspect by similarity to his Tory politics,
is misplaced. In the essay On the idea of a patria (1738) Bolingbroke, far
from ignoring, lay special emphasis on the importance of national character in
any calculations of a political nature. He argued that while the spirit and
character of a people remain in their 'original purity and vigour', their institutions
could not be significantly altered, nor liberty be betrayed, save by foreign
conquest. But once the spirit and character of a people be corrupted then
institutions will soon degenerate, for if the circumstances be precarious even the
weakest of princes or governments could employ them to serve sinister ends.83

On the other hand, a free government could not possibly be maintained among
a corrupt people, since those orders which are proper to maintain liberty, while
a people remain uncorrupt, become improper and harmful to liberty when a
people is grown corrupt. To remedy this abuse, new laws alone will not be
sufficient.84 Bolingbroke's own paranoia for the ailing condition of England is 'to
restore and preserve it under old laws, and an old constitution, by reinfusing
into the minds of men the spirit of the constitution'.pp.243-45

In contrast Hume's 'science of politics' is, says Duncan Forbes correctly,
wholly untouched by that Machiavellian morality, or the political pathology
concerned with the degree of corruption and lack of public spirit in a state,
which was so all-pervasive in eighteen-thirties Britain.85 The first assumption
of Hume's science is that 'the nature of man is uniform; even is governed in
the public realm, whether acting alone or in combination, by self-interest'.86

This accepted, the political scientist should concern himself not with the moral
character of a nation's citizens, but with their probable balance of interest that
are advanced among them for the general good of the community as a whole.
Moreover, if politics is to be truly a science it must be assumed that laws and
forms of government have a uniform influence upon societies.87 Under these two
assumptions is founded the cardinal principle of Hume's science of politics that
it is upon a nation's institutions that its capacity to survive in an orderly and
courageous condition depends. Just as the 'sumptuous governments' of classical
Athens were due to 'defects in the original constitution'; so the stability of
contemporary Venice is firmly grounded on the orderly form of its government.

Constitutions, government institutions, and legislation are for Hume the primary

46. Brown, Essays, i.61-62.
47. In a letter to Andrew Miller dated 30 May 1735 Hume writes: 'I doubt not but I could easily reduce Mr Brown; but as I had taken a resolution never to have the same Association with these Fellows, I shall not readily be induced to pay any attention to him.' Brown, continues, 'is a Platonist [... ] of that low Fellow Warburton. And any thing so low as Warburton, or his Filerinos, I should certainly abhor, to engage with The Letters of David Hume, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford, 1952), 192.
49. Duncan Forbes, Hume's philosophical politics (Cambridge, 1973), pp.242-245. See ch.1 of this
work for a detailed exposition of Hume's position.

50. That men may still be said to act from motives of self-interest when acting in combination is
in part Hume's argument in the essay 'Of the Independence of Parliament', Essays, moral, political,
and literary (London, 1752).
51. David Hume, Enquiry concerning the human understanding and concerning the principle of morals, ed.
L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford 1791), sec.168, part 1, p.90.
52. Hume, 'That politics may be reduced to a science', Essays, p.19.
determining factors of the condition of a state, both moral and political. It is
these structural arrangements which give it order and upon which its survival
depends. Manners, therefore, will only be a secondary concern for the political
inquirer anxious to provide a scientific study of political life. What the Legislator
will learn from this science is that, on the basis that there exists a certain
regularity between causes and effects, 'wise regulations in any commonwealth
are the most valuable legacy that can be left to future ages'.

It is this argument for the primacy of political institutions that was uppermost
in Brown's mind when he argued his own case for a science of politics based on
manners. His side of the dispute, however, is profoundly confused by a persistent
ambiguity regarding the direction of the causal relationship between institutions
and the rules, habits, and conventions of social and political life. In the Trinity
Estimate the first concept of his science of manners, that the durability of a state is
dependent upon the predominant manners and principles of its leading ranks
(1.91), is brought into question; 'Political Writers', says Brown, 'have generally
attributed the fall of States to some defective Principle in the Constitution of
their Laws. Perhaps the general Defect of their Institutions was, their not
effectually providing for the Stability and Security of Good Manners, Virtue
and Fortitude' (TCD Ms). This suggests that if institutions were better estab-
lished then virtuous manners would result as a matter of course; that the first is a
necessary requirement for the second. The confusion is exacerbated when on
the same page as the last quotation he argues that it was the 'sole force' of
virtuous manners and principles that enabled Sparta to continue so long, but
elsewhere says that it was due to the particular laws established by Lycurgus
that the manners and principles of Sparta were of such an austere nature, and
that this was the reason why she survived virtually unchanged for so many
centuries. This reversal of the causal relationship can also be seen in the
Estimate, where we find testimony to the power of institutions in Brown's
arguments for legal restrictions on foreign travel (4.30), on extreem trade in
luxurious goods and financial capitalism, for the government to apply more
rigid standards of censorship in order to curtail the publication of licentious and
irregular literature (5.169-70), and to take a hand in controlling alcoholism
and gambling. All these were measures to be taken by government to help
stem the corruption of England's moral character. Later on Brown was to argue
that it was a principal defect of the constitutional settlement following the
Revolution that it failed to establish a salutary system of national education;
the very scheme he was to propose as the long-term solution to the continuing
decay of the nation's moral standards.

Despite all professions to the contrary, then, Brown appears to have accepted in
practice what he denied in theory, that the duration of a state depends on

45. Essay, p.13. See also the essay 'Of national characters'.
46. For Brown's fullest discussion of the causes of the duration, decay and final death of States
see, Thoughts on civil & moral, sects. viii and xiv.
47. TCD Ms, p.132; Estimn, l.154-55, l.81-82.
48. Lastly, enumerated gambling in its various terms in a sermon 'On the pursuit of false
pleasure and the mischief of insupportable gaming', preached at Back on 11 May 1756, and included
in his Brown's sermons (London 1764).
49. Brown, Thoughts on civil liberty, p.300.

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character of those in office and positions of trust and thereby of the nation in general. Later on he came to be dissatisfied with the spirit of this situation. He recognized that it could provide only a palliative when what was needed was a cure. He came to believe that the Legislator must plan for the distant future, and in the later period of his life his thought was almost entirely given over to pondering on those institutions necessary to revive the state in its pristine Whig condition.

Brown was drawn to this conclusion as a direct consequence of his belief that manners are the most important factors in the capacity of a state to maintain itself. Given this assumption the way to ensure the duration of the state is to purify the moral character of its citizens. Moreover, history had shown Brown (the example of Lycurgus’s Sparta readily comes to mind) that in order to develop a citizen body with a healthy moral character strict regulations are required. This willingness to entertain restrictions in an age when Englishmen were commonly very jealous of their liberty is what interests me here. For it was not Brown’s aims to restrict liberty, but to create an ordered and virtuous society. In the event, however, he completely subordinated the interests of the individual to those of the state. The rhetoric of liberty remains but its essence is given up.

What did Brown understand by the term ‘liberty’? Most certainly, from whom he frequently took his lead, a clue. Montesquieu distinguished between the liberty of the individual to do whatever he in his power to will, and the liberty of the subject in relation to government. ‘Philosophic liberty’ consists in ‘the free exercise of the will; or at least [...] in an opinion that we have the free exercise of our will’. Political liberty he defined as ‘the power of doing what we ought to will, and in not being constrained to do what we ought not to will’. It is incorrect that the laws of society tend towards the establishment of political liberty, that they create the conditions in which political liberty is vouchsafed to all. Philosophic or unconfined liberty must be rejected for political or public liberty. But laws, points out Brown, are the only means to achieve this end. Indeed, when left alone and unsupported by other institutions, they are incapable of doing so. They may regulate the exterior or public behavior of the citizen, but they cannot keep the passions in check, and men are often driven to actions by desires and appetites not merely selfish but, when unconfined, occasionally detrimental to the public welfare. Desires, appetites, habits and opinions, when generalised, are what constitute a man’s ‘character’, and this is shaped by the social environment. The principal features of this environment are the prevailing manners and principles. Those who neglect

- The Spirit of the laws, I, 69-n.
- Montesquieu also defines political liberty as the right to do whatever the laws permit or do not expressly prohibit, and this leads to some confusion. For a discussion of the problem see John Pinder, Man and society (London 1966), ch.7.
- See Montesquieu, The Spirit of the laws, I, ch.16, and Brown, Thoughts on civil liberty, p.224.
- ‘Man’s’, says Husser, ‘is a variable being, incommensurable with many different opinions, principles and rules of conduct. What may be true while he adheres to one way of thinking will be found false when he rejects his opinion. The test of this is that one can shape men according to whatever principles are thought desirable without changing their instines and opinions. ‘Consequence must take mankind as they find them, and cannot pretend to introduce any views change in their principles and ways of thinking’ (Of commerce, Kings).

Those who neglect their influence, argues Brown, have done so because they have failed to recognize the strength of the connection between the character of a man, what he thinks, and how he acts. The advocates of unlimited freedom of thought and expression are guilty of this. They think they are defending liberty, but in actual fact they underwrite the very foundations upon which it rests. They disregard moral and religious instruction on the charge of inculcating prejudices into the minds of children, or that it is to limit their power to reason, and generally hold, like Mandeville, ‘That you are to think what you will: Only to act honestly.’ But the attempt to found a truly free community on such a maxim is doomed from the outset. For a man to act honestly he must be a man of virtue, and virtue is surely the consequence of accident. Rather it is the fruit of a constant attention to moral and religious principles. Hence to violate or flout the established manners, as Brown believed ‘free thinkers’ like Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Bolingbroke, and Hume were doing, is to strike at the general foundations of the state which maintain the liberty of its citizens.

To prevent liberty from degenerating into licentiousness what is needed is a supporting system of virtuous manners. Perfect liberty cannot be restored perhaps, but in a great degree it can be approached by impressing the dictates of virtue on the mind so that the passions are in harmony with the public good. To be properly and truly free, therefore, a man must be virtuous, since only then will he will what he ought to will. It follows from this that when virtue in decay public freedom is in decline, and the only way to recapture it is to reinroduce those manners which are in harmony with the best interests of state. The first regard of any government must always be for the condition of the manners of its citizens.

How to reintroduce those manners conducive to public freedom was the problem which occupied Brown in his final years. In his three essays on The first principles of education written in reply to Rousseau’s Emile (1762), in the two essays On the duty of charitable distribution in which he rebuked Mandeville’s strictures on the Charity Schools, in Thoughts on civil liberty, as illuminator and judicator (1765), in the appendix to a pamphlet On the female character and education (1765), and in his exhortant plans for reform of the Russian state under Catherine the Great, Brown never tired of setting out the requirements of a sound Christian education. Education was the key to virtue and to the virtuous state. Fundamentally didactic and authoritarian in character, the purpose of his

- 55 1790-155.
- Sir Brown, Thoughts on civil liberty, p.102. Is it not pleasant to hear a Pretender to Philosophy talk thus: ‘Suffer nobody to act but what is lawful: and every Body to think what he pleases.’ Fab. of Bons, R.G.G. no.22 (FCD Ms).
- 56 Montesquieu distinguished between the political virtues of the republican and moral or Christian virtues in his ‘Explanatory notes’ at the front of The Spirit of the laws. What Brown calls ‘vices’, however, seems to be a combination of those virtues; religion and honour are essential components of virtue and both are necessary for political liberty.
- 65 Brown, Thoughts on civil liberty, pp.149-157.
- 66 All five essays are included in Brown’s forecast on various subjects.
educational schemes were to inculcate those social and moral "truths" which enable children in later adult life to grasp and pursue their real or long-term interests. The underlying theme throughout is that the individual's interest is intimately bound up with the interests of society as a whole, hence children must be early introduced to sound manners and good habits of thought and action. In short, they must be formed to be virtuous, for only then, so the argument goes, can they be truly free.

In *Thoughts on civil liberty* Brown considered at some length the manners of the Spartans, Athenians, and Romans. Compared to the last two institutions of Sparta, he thought barbaric (they promote prostitution, adultery, thieving, and condone assassination), but what he admired was the way they were preserved. The harmony of her institutions, together with the promotion of aspicious principles, secured the long duration of her government. This was the great success of Lycurgus. Sparta was the perfect example of a state in which the coincidence of passions and desires with public law was achieved. In Sparta the institutions were supreme, regulating every mode of human action. Not only were the great principles of religion, honour, and civic virtue harnessed to this task, but the unified system of national education created the spirit of patriotism necessary to a free state (pp.49-50). Thus was the Spartans, says Brown, "strongly and unalterably possessed with the Love of their Country" (p.47, Brown's Italic). The history of Sparta provided certain proof that "Opinion may be free, yet still united" and that "this free Union can only be the happy Effect of an early and rigorous Education; by which the growing Minds of the Community are voluntarily led, by public Institutions into one common channel of Habit, Principle, and Action" (p.56, Brown's Italic). The lack of such a system of education was the chief fault of Athens and Rome; its introduction is the remedy for England's moral deficiencies (pp.52-57; 79-81).

For Brown, then, the end of education is an entirely political one. Concerned for the welfare and tranquillity of the state the purpose of education is to produce citizens who will naturally subordinate their private interests to the good of the whole. This was the first tenet of all Brown had to say on education. England's young must be shielded from corrupt manners and uniformly educated in opinions and habits based on the precepts of the state religion and the political principles of the Revolutionary Settlement. This was the opportunity Brown saw in the Charity Schools; in these schools large numbers of England's youthful poor could be taught to embrace and respect the existing social and political order. Here, he continued, subjects could be formed who, through their industry and sense of civic virtue, could be expected to contribute unsurprisingly to the well-being of the state.

The moral assumption upon which Brown's proposals are based are two: that there is only one solution to the problem of life in society, that is, how men are to exist together in a harmonious condition; and ii. that the state has the moral duty to coerce its citizens into the correct path. Given these assumptions the place of liberty necessarily becomes problematic. In the volumes of the *Estimate* Brown generally employed the term in the conventional Whig manner to mean the benefits enjoyed under England's 'matchless' constitution. 14 In the later works he appears to have in mind freedom in some other sense, something more than the consequence of a mixed and balanced constitution. Here freedom is primarily a moral rather than a legal notion, implying moral principles over and above those encompassed by just laws. 15 Honour, religion, and civic virtue are the principles of correct moral action, the principles of the good citizen. The problem is that when Brown writes of the liberty established and protected by the constitution, and when he writes of the liberties established on a foundation of virtue, he confuses different notions of liberty. In the Estimate he argues with the Whigs that the constitution guarantees the liberty of all Englishmen; in the later works he argues that it is the duty of the state to teach men to wish for only that which is virtuous, and the closer each man comes to the ideal the closer he approaches perfect liberty. Conversely, each time a man seeks to fulfill wishes or desires which are not virtuous, so each time he falls short of that perfect liberty which is his true goal. Liberty is no longer a condition of life, an arena free from the interference of government, but an end to be attained; it has been transformed from the condition of choice to the choice that a man would make had he sufficient knowledge of virtue. Most emphatically this was not how Brown's English contemporaries commonly conceived of liberty.

The radical Dissenter Joseph Priestley met Brown's proposals for a scheme of national education with a direct negative; the reasons why Brown wanted to see a system of national education established were precisely those why it should be resisted. It was a code designed to fortify the existing aristocratic and intolerant arrangements of social and political life. Children were to be instilled with habits and opinions with no other purpose in mind than the maintenance of Church and State as by law established. Such a scheme was a violation of individual rights, a subversion to the proper end of education, incompatible with the ends of civil society, and in effect a formula for servitude and national stagnation. 16

6. Edward Forbes describes this as 'the greatest theme and central motif of all Brown's *Estimate*'. (Lord Henry's philosophical principles, p.139).

7. For Brown's argument that 'goodness' is morally superior to 'justice' because it requires positive contributions to public happiness, whereas justice demands only the observance of the laws and the reforming from evil see the sermon 'Of the different principles of goodness, justice and mercy', preached at St Nicholas, St Augustine's, included in sermon on several subjects.

8. For this understanding I am indebted to Maitland's Berlin's essay 'Two concepts of liberty', in *First essays on Liberty* (London and New York 1946).

9. Joseph Priestley, *An essay on the first principles of government, and on the nature of political, civil and religious liberty* (1791; 2nd edition, London 1792), pp.4-146. In the preface Priestley announced that this work "owes its rise to the remarks I formerly wrote on Dr Brown's proposal for a code of Education". Priestley's object is a reference to Brown's essay on the code of education. By Dr Brown, which is printed with the essay on a course of liberal education (London 1752). I have not seen a copy of this essay but Priestley assures us that the substance of the Remarks is repeated in a more concise form in his Essay on the first principles of government.

10. It is interesting to note that Brougham believed that the adoption of Brown's Parliament for the purposes of state schools would have appealed to Brown: "he would have been well pleased for an Inspection School upon the very summary of the principles" (Letters between Brougham, Perceval, &c. or the Respects thereupon, p.129, The Works of James Brougham, published under the superintendence of his mother, John Brougham, London 1843; p.130). Brougham may well have become familiar with Brown's scheme of education through Priestley's critique to the Essay on the first principles of government.

If Brown's plans for a code of national education went against the grain of the thought of those Englishmen anxious to broaden the parameters of religious and civil liberty, it is also true that his ideas correspond closely with other currents of progressive thought taking shape on the Continent during the same period. In particular, Brown shared with such writers as Rousseau, Helvetius, and d'Holbach, among others, a penchant for social planning that is at once both typical of the Enlightenment in France and directly contrary to one of its most treasured values. This contradiction is perhaps best summed up by the phrase 'the paradox of freedom'. The source of the paradox can, I believe, be traced in part to the influence of the example of Sparta on these thinkers, to what J. L. Talmon has called 'the special myth of antiquity', in which the image of liberty is equated with the public virtues of the citizen. The citizens of Sparta for these men 'was proudly free, yet a marvel of ascetic discipline'.47 To Rousseau Sparta was the city famous for its virtues. In Sparta 'men are born virtuous, the very air of the country seems to teach them virtue'.48 Of its inhabitants nothing is left to us except the memory of their heroic actions. Should such monuments be worth less to us than the curious statues Athens has left us?49 The guiding principle of the citizen of Sparta was the honour of the state, and he laid claim to no life or interests outside that of the community. Freedom is much heralded as a mark of the respect and honour that is due to the citizen, but it is his role as a citizen that was of the first importance to the Spartan.

With this example of civic virtue before them, Brown and his French counterparts set out like Lycurgus, whom they so wished to emulate, to reconstruct the world on the basis of an unchanging pattern, in which they planned to integrate the conditions essential for the Spartan ethic to thrive.50 The place of liberty in their plans was bound to become a problem. The myth of Sparta can and has been used to reflect many different values and beliefs, but the one political ideal that it cannot be made to reflect is the belief in individual liberty.51 The question of freedom became enmeshed in a whole range of other possibilities. In the hands of Rousseau the attempt to balance the claims of freedom against those of equality and social justice received its classical expression. But the paradox of freedom is not unique to Rousseau. The French Enlightenment wrestled manfully with the problem of how to make freedom compatible with a previously thought-out pattern of social existence. The solutions explored by the philosophers in their belief that there is nothing that all had their beginnings, as did Brown's, in the belief that there is nothing that could not be done in the art of forming the character of a man by correctly established institutions.52

Education was deemed to be central to this process. The education prescribed by Lycurgus might be faulty in detail but its thoroughness and its public character were certainly to be praised. The Spartans fully realised the relation of education to virtue, hence the curriculum of their education was an instruction in public virtue. Education in Sparta was not only by the state, it was for the state. Through education men were to be taught to ignore those passions which urge actions contrary to the established pattern in favour of those useful to society.

It was the schemes for national education proposed by French revolutionaries, inspired by the ideas of their philosophe ancestors, that prompted another radical Dissenter, William Godwin, to remark that it was the very political nature of such schemes which demanded their rejection. 'The project of national education', he wrote, 'ought uniformly to be discouraged, on account of its obvious alliance with national government.'53 Godwin feared, like Priestley, that an education system under the control of government would be used to strengthen its position and perpetuate existing social and political arrangements. The young ought not to be taught to reverence the constitution but to venerate truth, and the constitution only in so far as it corresponded with 'their unqualified deductions of truth'. Schemes of national education tend to perpetuate errors and 'to form all minds upon one model' (p.617).

The affinity between Brown's thought and that of the French philosophe is manifest, and the criticism of Godwin are as readily applied to the former as to the schemes inspired by the latter. Brown's urge to reconstruct the national character of England irresistibly came to the fore in his later writings in which his attentions turned to education to provide the essential support the state required. Implicit in this calculation was, no doubt, his satisfaction with the existing arrangements, but it was his disillusionment with the moral condition of the English people that demanded, or so it seemed to him, the imposition of a new moral character on the public face of England. This required the introduction of far-reaching regulative policies increasing the power of government over the people and necessarily limiting the scope for individual liberty. In this lay Brown's ultimate care for England's ills, as revealed and dictated by his science of manners. In part it amounted to an abdication of responsibility, since it was to subsequent generations of suitably educated Englishmen that he looked to accomplish this change in the nation's fortunes. It was left to future circumstances to alter the plans and policies of the past.

47. J. L. Talmon, The Origins of Assistance Democracy (New York 1970), p.11. Part of this work is a discussion of the contributions of Helvetius, d'Holbach, Rousseau, Morely, and Mary to the genesis of the mystique of 'civilization democracy'.

48. Edmund Burke, The Spirit of the Age (London 1777), p.525. The passage refers to Burke's view of the eighteenth century as the age of faith. Voltaire was one of the few notable anti-Spartan (see pp.335-337).


50. Brown took this to extraordinary lengths in his plan for reform of Russia under Catherine the Great. For a discussion of these plans see Nicholas Blunt, 'Dissenters, Brown and some early educational projects of Catherine IT', The Slavonic and East European Review, 46 (1967-1968), pp.159-164.

51. See Steinberg, The Spartan tradition, p.11.

52. See Talmon, The Origins of Assistance Democracy, pp.33-35. This is a fundamental treat of Helvetius's De Imitatione (1780), translated as Imitation on the Mind (London 1795), and his anonymously published De Homine (1782), translated as A Study on Man, or, An individual Character and its Education (London 1777), and of Helvetius's Œuvres de la nature (1779, with notes by Diderot, translated as Œuvres of nature, or, the laws of the moral and physical world (London 1791-1794). Brinsmade was no doubt correct that the adoption of his Passions for the purposes of state schools would also have appealed to Helvetius: he would have been delighted to use an Inspector School [...] for that inculcative, and by that alone, he might have been enabled to have given an experimental proof of the truth of his proposition (supporting it to be true) that anybody might be taught anything, one person as well as another!' (Passions, Book i, ch.15).

generations of Englishmen to raise a new Sparta out of the ashes of the decayed and dissolute Athens that Engaged had become. This was the fruit of Brown’s science of manners and his dubious legacy to his countrymen. Few were convinced. As Priesley and Godwin were quick to point out, the problem of freedom demanded a more sensitive approach to the needs of human nature than that provided by Brown.