

CONSERVATISM

Russell Kirk has created ten principles that define conservatism in his book. I disagree with them.

First, the conservative believes that there exists an enduring moral order.

That order is made for man, and man is made for it: human nature is a constant, and moral truths are permanent. It has been said by liberal intellectuals that the conservative believes all social questions, at heart, to be questions of private morality. Properly understood, this statement is quite true. A society in which men and women are governed by belief in an enduring moral order, by a strong sense of right and wrong, by personal convictions about justice and honor, will be a good society—whatever political machinery it may utilize; while a society in which men and women are morally adrift, ignorant of norms, and intent chiefly upon gratification of appetites, will be a bad society—no matter how many people vote and no matter how liberal its formal constitution may be.

Many of my debates in recent weeks has been the nature of morality in laws. Commonly, and in Kirk's view, a system or set of moral beliefs is a necessary foundation for a civil society. I have argued, and will continue to do so, that such a foundation is self-affirming and delusional.

First, if a person believes they are moral, and that their actions are beneficial to themselves and others, then their morality should be shared by everyone as it will lead to beneficial actions. In a society where a consistent set of morals is supported and enforced, all positive actions will support the continuing enforcement of those morals. Attempts to extend or modify the morals will be fought strenuously. Any examples of situations, though minor, that argue for a change in the morals will be considered amoral acts. The greater good surpasses all minor evils.

Second, groups with a set of morality different than the predominant groups can and will obtain some freedom to act according to their moral codes, even when such codes are in opposition to the dominant morality. We see this today with Islam and Christianity. The moral code of Islam has fundamental differences with that of the dominant Judeo-Christian code that has dominated the United States for over 200 years. As communities begin to impose an Islamic code, one that is considered equal to the Judeo-Christian code, those communities will find citizens marginalized and in violation of a community moral code, that itself is a violation of our system of laws.

A reliance on a system of moral codes as the basis for laws risks significant changes in individual rights if the predominant moral code shifts from Judeo-Christian to Islamic. But in and of itself, changing the dominant code is not inconsistent with this first principle.

Second, the conservative adheres to custom, convention, and continuity.

It is old custom that enables people to live together peaceably; the destroyers of custom demolish more than they know or desire. It is through convention—a word much abused in our time—that we contrive to avoid perpetual disputes about rights and duties: law at base is a body of conventions. Continuity is the means of linking generation to generation; it matters as much for society as it does for the individual; without it, life is meaningless. When successful revolutionaries have effaced old customs, derided old conventions, and broken the continuity of social institutions—why, presently they discover the necessity of establishing fresh customs, conventions, and continuity; but that process is painful and slow; and the new social order that eventually emerges may be much inferior to the old order that radicals overthrew in their zeal for the Earthly Paradise.

Conservatives are champions of custom, convention, and continuity because they prefer the devil they know to the devil they don't know. Order and justice and freedom, they believe, are the artificial products of a long social experience, the result of centuries of trial and reflection and sacrifice. Thus the body social is a kind of spiritual corporation, comparable to the church; it may even be called a community of souls. Human society is no machine, to be treated mechanically. The continuity, the life-blood, of a society must not be interrupted. Burke's reminder of the necessity for prudent change is in the mind of the conservative. But necessary change, conservatives argue, ought to be gradual and discriminatory, never unfixing old interests at once.

I call this the 'traditionalist's clause'. It is the most common of conservative arguments against change, almost any change. Despite their knowledge that change is necessary to the orderly flow of society. Elementary change in society, by technological change, demands new customs and conventions. Separation of the races, the women's movement, civil rights were all significant disruptions in the established society and its institutions. But none of those events would be considered ill advised. Only after the fact does society say "well, yes, those were good changes".

"Order and justice and freedom are the artificial products of a long social experience" belies the founding of our country. By all measures, our Founding Fathers were anti-conservative, liberal to the extreme, to think that a representative democracy founded upon the rights and liberties of the individual could function and prosper. No country in history sought to establish such a government and society.

"The continuity, the life-blood, of a society must not be interrupted" ignores the change that goes on in a dynamic human society at all times. When a society can be isolated from change, it does not stabilize, it stagnates. What is good enough for the father, is NOT good enough for the child. No parent, wishing their child a long and prosperous life, believes such. How many children have been raised by good parents, supported by jobs, companies and industries that no longer exist? Change happens. To seek to prevent that change from impacting society is to seek a status quo. That by necessity limits personal freedoms and liberties.

Finally, "Continuity is the means of linking generation to generation; it matters as much for society as it does for the individual; without it, life is meaningless." My only link to my grandparents - for almost my entire life - was and is my parents recollection of them. I live in a different country than they did. I live in a society that is significantly more technologically advanced than they did. I grew up in a society that was more equal than they did. What continuity existed, exists only in the relationship I have with my parents. The society I live in is fundamentally different than that my grandparents lived in. My parents have straddled that difference and found the old so detrimental to their desires for their children that they left, broke continuity, that former society. It is not continuity of society that makes life meaningful, it is individual freedom of choice and association that makes life meaningful.

Third, conservatives believe in what may be called the principle of prescription.

Conservatives sense that modern people are dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, able to see farther than their ancestors only because of the great stature of those who have preceded us in time. Therefore conservatives very often emphasize the importance of prescription—that is, of things established by immemorial usage, so that the mind of man runneth not to the contrary. There exist rights of which the chief sanction is their antiquity—including rights to property, often. Similarly, our morals are prescriptive in great part. Conservatives argue that we are unlikely, we moderns, to make any brave new discoveries in morals or politics or taste. It is perilous to weigh every passing issue on the basis of private judgment and private rationality. The individual is foolish, but the species is wise, Burke declared. In politics we do well to abide by precedent and

precept and even prejudice, for the great mysterious incorporation of the human race has acquired a prescriptive wisdom far greater than any man's petty private rationality.

“The individual is foolish, but the species is wise” is fundamentally at odds with individual rights and freedoms. Why would a ‘conservative’ seek to allow individuals freedom when only society (or the species) has the wisdom to ordain future actions? I benefit from all that have proceeded me, but to limit my actions or freedoms because of the limitations antiquity faced is to deny each of us the benefits of their fruits. The idea that property rights find their basis in antiquity limits most concepts of property rights to the Constitution, which was a break from antiquity. This is an attempt to define morality as established and unchanging. The idea that “new discoveries in morals, politics or taste” are unlikely is to ignore HISTORY! A woman or black man as President? Women's rights? Civil rights? The content of their character, not the color of their skin? These are changes, ‘discoveries’ that were not ‘a ha’ events, but recognition that the past had failed, that the morality of the past had prevented freedom and liberty for ALL.

Fourth, conservatives are guided by their principle of prudence.

Burke agrees with Plato that in the statesman, prudence is chief among virtues. Any public measure ought to be judged by its probable long-run consequences, not merely by temporary advantage or popularity. Liberals and radicals, the conservative says, are imprudent: for they dash at their objectives without giving much heed to the risk of new abuses worse than the evils they hope to sweep away. As John Randolph of Roanoke put it, Providence moves slowly, but the devil always hurries. Human society being complex, remedies cannot be simple if they are to be efficacious. The conservative declares that he acts only after sufficient reflection, having weighed the consequences. Sudden and slashing reforms are as perilous as sudden and slashing surgery.

Something I might agree with. Nope. I would suggest that if ‘after sufficient reflection, having weighted the consequences’ actually resulted in action, then we would benefit from such reflection. But it does not. If you will not change, you will not have sufficient evidence to support a decision for or against the change, except that history will show you the status quo is sufficient. Stress on society is caused when change is both forced, and fought against. A child pulling on the arm of an adult will continue to pull until the connection is broken and the child falls OR the adult slowly begins to move in the direction of the child and the child needs less exertion to continue the motion. Society that stands steadfast, risks a break with it's own offspring, unless it shows a willingness to act in the direction it is being pulled. Only a cautious step forward relieves the stress. Sudden is only the realization that change can no longer be denied. The stress of change begins the day a position is taken. It builds because those supporting a particular position refuse to acknowledge that others have already moved on from that position.

Fifth, conservatives pay attention to the principle of variety.

They feel affection for the proliferating intricacy of long-established social institutions and modes of life, as distinguished from the narrowing uniformity and deadening egalitarianism of radical systems. For the preservation of a healthy diversity in any civilization, there must survive orders and classes, differences in material condition, and many sorts of inequality. The only true forms of equality are equality at the Last Judgment and equality before a just court of law; all other attempts at levelling must lead, at best, to social stagnation. Society requires honest and able leadership; and if natural and institutional differences are destroyed, presently some tyrant or host of squalid oligarchs will create new forms of inequality.

This contradicts much of what comes before it. It also fails to acknowledge 'all men are created equal'. It suggests, Kirk suggests, that inequality is something to be encouraged, even sought after: "there must survive orders and classes, differences in material condition and many sorts of inequality". This may be a situation where MY lack of ability or knowledge is causing a misunderstanding. Our society acknowledges a diversity of outcomes. We, our society, does not expect, nor require equality of results. But it also does not actively - or it should not - promote inequality. "All other attempts at leveling must lead, at best, to social stagnation." Isn't the attempt to establish a uniform moral code, a form of leveling? Isn't a requirement that all adhere to specific norms, an attempt to level? Isn't the attempt to limit the liberties of one, to adhere to social continuity, an attempt to level? An attempt to force a particular outcome to be consistent with the rest of society?

Sixth, conservatives are chastened by their principle of imperfectability.

Human nature suffers irremediably from certain grave faults, the conservatives know. Man being imperfect, no perfect social order ever can be created. Because of human restlessness, mankind would grow rebellious under any utopian domination, and would break out once more in violent discontent—or else expire of boredom. To seek for utopia is to end in disaster, the conservative says: we are not made for perfect things. All that we reasonably can expect is a tolerably ordered, just, and free society, in which some evils, maladjustments, and suffering will continue to lurk. By proper attention to prudent reform, we may preserve and improve this tolerable order. But if the old institutional and moral safeguards of a nation are neglected, then the anarchic impulse in humankind breaks loose: "the ceremony of innocence is drowned." The ideologues who promise the perfection of man and society have converted a great part of the twentieth-century world into a terrestrial hell.

If my sinful nature is inherent, by what rights to I try to ignore it, give in and be what I am! Such is the hell Paul(?) considered. If society is imperfect, well, we know, and we should just accept that because any attempt at fixing it might lead to an impossible utopia, or worse, boredom. All we can reasonably expect is "some evils, maladjustments and suffering". Why? Why not work to eliminate evils, maladjustments and suffering? Accept them as the natural consequence of an imperfect humanity? I agree we are imperfect, but that does not give us license to ignore those imperfections. What is worse, is to allow institutions WE created to result in evils, maladjustments and suffering by design. Knowing such evils exist and to do nothing but accept the imperfection is to deny our own evil.

Seventh, conservatives are persuaded that freedom and property are closely linked.

Separate property from private possession, and Leviathan becomes master of all. Upon the foundation of private property, great civilizations are built. The more widespread is the possession of private property, the more stable and productive is a commonwealth. Economic levelling, conservatives maintain, is not economic progress. Getting and spending are not the chief aims of human existence; but a sound economic basis for the person, the family, and the commonwealth is much to be desired.

Sir Henry Maine, in his *Village Communities*, puts strongly the case for private property, as distinguished from communal property: "Nobody is at liberty to attack several property and to say at the same time that he values civilization. The history of the two cannot be disentangled." For the institution of several property—that is, private property—has been a powerful instrument for teaching men and women responsibility, for providing motives to integrity, for supporting general culture, for raising mankind above the level of mere drudgery, for affording leisure to think and freedom to act. To be able to retain the fruits of one's labor; to be able to see one's work made permanent; to be able to bequeath one's property to one's posterity; to be able to rise from the natural condition of grinding poverty to the security of enduring accomplishment; to have something that is really one's own—these are advantages difficult to deny. The conservative acknowledges that the possession of property fixes certain duties upon the possessor; he accepts those moral and legal obligations cheerfully.

By definition, the conservative should seek to insure as many as possible in society hold property. Is this consistent with what came before it? I don't disagree that personal freedom and personal property are linked, but holding personal property does not cause freedom. Freedom allows for the holding of personal property. "Upon the foundation of private property, great civilizations are built." Only a select few in history 'owned' property. Owning property is a consequence of freedom. Upon the foundation of FREEDOM, great civilizations are built.

Eighth, conservatives uphold voluntary community, quite as they oppose involuntary collectivism.

Although Americans have been attached strongly to privacy and private rights, they also have been a people conspicuous for a successful spirit of community. In a genuine community, the decisions most directly affecting the lives of citizens are made locally and voluntarily. Some of these functions are carried out by local political bodies, others by private associations: so long as they are kept local, and are marked by the general agreement of those affected, they constitute healthy community. But when these functions pass by default or usurpation to centralized authority, then community is in serious danger. Whatever is beneficent and prudent in modern democracy is made possible through cooperative volition. If, then, in the name of an abstract Democracy, the functions of community are transferred to distant political direction—why, real government by the consent of the governed gives way to a standardizing process hostile to freedom and human dignity.

For a nation is no stronger than the numerous little communities of which it is composed. A central administration, or a corps of select managers and civil servants, however well intentioned and well trained, cannot confer justice and prosperity and tranquility upon a mass of men and women deprived of their old responsibilities. That experiment has been made before; and it has been disastrous. It is the performance of our duties in community that teaches us prudence and efficiency and charity.

An argument for Federalism I will not dispute. I will note, from *On Liberty*:

"Protection, therefore, against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough; there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them"

Communities can be little terror pits too, with their own rules and demands, limits and infringements. It is not enough to accept that a community can state, and enforce standards upon all of its members. Individuals, when free, can and will diverge from the norm on occasion.

Ninth, the conservative perceives the need for prudent restraints upon power and upon human passions.

Politically speaking, power is the ability to do as one likes, regardless of the wills of one's fellows. A state in which an individual or a small group are able to dominate the wills of their fellows without check is a despotism, whether it is called monarchical or aristocratic or democratic. When every person claims to be a power unto himself, then society falls into anarchy. Anarchy never lasts long, being intolerable for everyone, and contrary to the ineluctable fact that some persons are more strong and more clever than their neighbors. To anarchy there succeeds tyranny or oligarchy, in which power is monopolized by a very few.

The conservative endeavors to so limit and balance political power that anarchy or tyranny may not arise. In every age, nevertheless, men and women are tempted to overthrow the limitations upon power, for the sake of some fancied temporary advantage. It is characteristic of the radical that he thinks of power as a force for good—so long as the power falls into his hands. In the name of liberty, the French and Russian revolutionaries

abolished the old restraints upon power; but power cannot be abolished; it always finds its way into someone's hands. That power which the revolutionaries had thought oppressive in the hands of the old regime became many times as tyrannical in the hands of the radical new masters of the state.

Knowing human nature for a mixture of good and evil, the conservative does not put his trust in mere benevolence. Constitutional restrictions, political checks and balances, adequate enforcement of the laws, the old intricate web of restraints upon will and appetite—these the conservative approves as instruments of freedom and order. A just government maintains a healthy tension between the claims of authority and the claims of liberty.

Let me rephrase and see if the result is still to your liking:

‘The conservative perceives the need for prudent restraints upon human liberties and freedoms.’

Is this what we want? I understand the desire to limit people when the free expression of their liberties and freedoms have the potential to infringe upon the liberties and freedoms of others, but that is not what is being claimed. “A just government maintains a healthy tension between the claims of authority and the claims of liberty’ is an affront to this country and everything the Founding Fathers stood for. To them, any attempt by the government to infringe upon the freedoms and liberties of the individual was suspect. First and foremost, government is our servant, not our equal and certainly not our master. Even if the master is benevolent and just, it is still a master and that is unacceptable to us - or it should be.

“Constitutional restrictions, political checks and balances, adequate enforcement of the laws, the old intricate web of restraints upon will and appetite” are all meant to be restraints not on individuals, but upon GOVERNMENT.

“When every person claims to be a power unto himself, then society falls into anarchy” is unfortunate because the individual is sovereign is the foundation of this country. My rights are inherent, they do not flow from society or government. I have the right to do whatever my desires, my imagination, and my resources allow - PROVIDED - I do not infringe, limit or harm another. Individual rights is the cornerstone on which we as a nation are built. To deny that, is to deny freedom.

Tenth, the thinking conservative understands that permanence and change must be recognized and reconciled in a vigorous society.

The conservative is not opposed to social improvement, although he doubts whether there is any such force as a mystical Progress, with a Roman P, at work in the world. When a society is progressing in some respects, usually it is declining in other respects. The conservative knows that any healthy society is influenced by two forces, which Samuel Taylor Coleridge called its Permanence and its Progression. The Permanence of a society is formed by those enduring interests and convictions that gives us stability and continuity; without that Permanence, the fountains of the great deep are broken up, society slipping into anarchy. The Progression in a society is that spirit and that body of talents which urge us on to prudent reform and improvement; without that Progression, a people stagnate.

Therefore the intelligent conservative endeavors to reconcile the claims of Permanence and the claims of Progression. He thinks that the liberal and the radical, blind to the just claims of Permanence, would endanger the heritage bequeathed to us, in an endeavor to hurry us into some dubious Terrestrial Paradise. The conservative, in short, favors reasoned and temperate progress; he is opposed to the cult of Progress, whose votaries believe that everything new necessarily is superior to everything old.

Change is essential to the body social, the conservative reasons, just as it is essential to the human body. A body that has ceased to renew itself has begun to die. But if that body is to be vigorous, the change must occur

in a regular manner, harmonizing with the form and nature of that body; otherwise change produces a monstrous growth, a cancer, which devours its host. The conservative takes care that nothing in a society should ever be wholly old, and that nothing should ever be wholly new. This is the means of the conservation of a nation, quite as it is the means of conservation of a living organism. Just how much change a society requires, and what sort of change, depend upon the circumstances of an age and a nation.

Permanence is a false belief. It doesn't exist and to attempt to force it is to deny change both as individuals and as a society. The biology of humanity will not change much over the centuries, but just about everything else will, with or without an effort to do so. Institutions are not needed to enforce those things that do not change. You don't need an institution to promote procreation. And, an institution designed to promote change in something that cannot change, will fail, but only after significant damage is done - one child rule in China is ample evidence. Institutions are created to prevent change, or to establish a specific order to change. Such an institution, based on human freedoms, is built upon shifting sands. The more it attempts to control the change, the more the sand shifts under its foundations. "The conservative, in short, favors reasoned and temperate progress;" recalls a previous comment where if reasoned and temperate progress were being made, calls for more change would be chastened. But, too often, there is too much reason, and no progress. A society must change. Humans change. Events change both. A society that tries to prevent change, or throttle it to a manageable pace introduces stress and fractures where no need to have been.

"Just how much change a society requires, and what sort of change"...is not something that can be determined in advance, or by reasoned debate. Society changes, only reasoned debate can help society adjust to that change in a way that helps all its members, those that oppose the change, and those that welcome it.

Such, then, are ten principles that have loomed large during the two centuries of modern conservative thought.

Too bad. These are principles that attempt to define conservatism in a way that limits society. Too much freedom scares people. Someone in a debate argued my definition of rights (anything I can do based upon the limits of my abilities, imagination and resources) gives anyone license to do anything! And with the limitation that I can not infringe, limit or harm another, they are correct. THIS is the foundation of our country! Individual rights, freedoms, liberties is boundless except where it crosses another.

If you think that Conservatism, as a political philosophy, is more correctly stated by Kirk, then, please, follow your own path. I prefer Conservatism, as a political philosophy, is more correctly stated by our Founding Fathers through the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution.