

AN INTRODUCTION TO CONSERVATISM

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Conservatism encompasses the accumulation of experience and wisdom over many generations, enlightened and guided by Divine Revelation. Much of the knowledge embodied in conservatism cannot be put into words but consists rather in certain dispositions and habits of the mind and heart. However, there are certain fundamental truths that have been articulated within this tradition with increasing clarity and certainty. To many Americans these truths may seem mere truisms or platitudes ("self-evident", as Jefferson put it), yet it is vitally important to remind ourselves periodically of what we know, to ensure that this body of wisdom can be passed on without loss to a new generation.

Conservatism does not produce a mere laundry list of policy recommendations, nor does it represent the interests of this or that class or special interest. Nor is conservatism grounded in a reflexive reaction to change, nor in a nostalgic attachment to the past. Rather, it begins by rejecting what C. S. Lewis called "chronological bigotry": the foolish notion that contemporary thinkers have a monopoly on the truth, simply because they are alive today and not in an earlier, "less enlightened" era. Conservatives draw on the accumulated wisdom of the past to form a comprehensive and coherent view of the world, from which we derive certain principles essential to the promotion of the common good.

FOUR POSTULATES

Every philosophy has certain basic propositions upon which everything else is based. These propositions are called postulates.

GOD. The cosmos is the creation of an infinite God, who has a unique purpose for each individual human being. Hence, human beings are essentially equal, and each life is of infinite value. Human beings have been uniquely chosen to bear the "image" of God, and to act as God's stewards over the earth and its many forms of life.

Therefore, conservatives reject the following philosophies, each of which is part of the intellectual foundations of the consensus of today's academic, media and political elite:

- Atheism and materialism -- the notion that human life is the accidental and meaningless result of mindless material processes.
- Racism and chauvinism -- that certain races or classes of people are inherently superior in ultimate value.
- Collectivism -- the thesis that individuals are important only as parts of society, that their lives have no significance or meaning beyond that assumed to them by their society.

- Secular humanism -- that we human beings must define the meaning and purpose of our own existence.
- Deep ecology -- the belief that the labor and technical achievements of mankind are inherently evil, and that only the undisturbed wilderness is good.
- Animal rights anti-humanism -- that non-human animals, despite their lack of will or conscience, are on equal moral standing with human beings by virtue of their capacity for pain and pleasure.

Conservatives envision a society in which each human being, no matter how humble in origin or apparently ordinary in talents, is treated with sacred respect. We see the drama of each unfolding human life as rich in meaning and significance. Consequently, we treat each person's life as inviolable and are unwilling to sacrifice the few for the good of the many.

HUMAN NATURE. Human beings share a common nature or essence. This immutable nature forms a basis for universal values and norms, and for a real distinction between good and evil. Good is whatever brings this nature to a state of complete and perfect development, and evil is whatever distorts or perverts some aspect of it. Moral virtue is valuable in itself, meeting a natural human need, and is not merely a social construction or a means to other ends. Individual human beings receive from God individual callings or vocations, which they must each be free to pursue.

Therefore, conservatives reject the following ethical philosophies, which together provide the rationale for contemporary leftist social policy:

- Relativism -- that what is good or right varies fundamentally from time to time or place to place, that there are no universal truths of morality and politics.
- Constructivism -- that what is right and just is nothing more than the product of social forces and historical accidents.
- Subjectivism -- that what is good or right for an individual is determined simply by that individual's feelings or inclinations.
- Cultural determinism -- that human nature is infinitely malleable by culture.
- Nominalism -- that nothing has any definite nature, other than that which we ascribe to it through our invention of words or concepts.

Conservatives affirm the existence of natural law, defining and protecting the natural rights of each person. These rights are inalienable and endowed to us by our Creator. They are, therefore, not subject to revision or repeal by any political coalition, no matter how powerful. Natural law provides each of us with Archimedes' fixed point, to which we can appeal against the injustice of the powerful. Conservatives, therefore, are not easily cowed into submission to any tyranny. Instead, conservative thought and practice provides a principled limitation of the power and the scope of human government, as embodied in the Bill of Rights.

Belief in the enduring truths of human nature gives us an optimism about the future. Even today, as bleak as the indicators of social and cultural health may be, we

conservatives look forward with hope to a restoration of the family, the community, and a civilized culture.

OBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE. Human beings have a fallible but reliable capacity to discover real truth through logic, experience, and reflection on the deposit of inherited wisdom. Manifestations of this capacity can be found in science, scholarship, prudence, moral imagination and philosophy. Science, when properly pursued, is a source of objective knowledge of great value in fulfilling our responsibilities, but it is not the only source of genuine knowledge.

Therefore, conservatives reject the following philosophies of knowledge, each of which plays a significant role in marginalizing the wisdom of the past and empowering a pseudo-scientific elite of policy experts:

- Post-modernism -- that science is merely the expression of political ideology, and that the difference between good and bad science, or between science and pseudo-science, has no objective validity.
- Scientism -- that there is no knowledge outside science, and that nothing is real that is not scientifically verifiable.
- Empiricism -- that nothing exists beyond what can be verified by our five senses.
- Skepticism -- that we know nothing with certainty.

Conservatives are not swayed by transitory intellectual fashions of the academy or the salon. Confidence in the power and reliability of common sense translates into stable, consistent and effective social policy. At the same time, we learn from scientific research when it is conducted according to sound methods and without political bias. Time and time again, genuine science confirms the wisdom of traditional ideas, such as the importance of faith, character, the nuclear family, and the classical tradition of education.

ORIGINAL SIN. Human beings have an innate proclivity to rebel against God and the created limitations of human nature. This rebellion manifests itself as arrogant pride, irrational sensuality, and inhumanity toward others.

Therefore, conservatives reject the following errors in political philosophy, that motivate the left's various campaigns of social destruction, or that enervate opposition to such mad endeavors:

- Utopianism -- belief in the infinite perfectibility of man.
- Positivism -- the denial of the fundamental reality of evil, attributing all human evil to superficial causes, such as poverty, maladjustment, lack of education, or distorted socioeconomic conditions.
- Ethical dualism -- attributing evil exclusively to some particular group or class (the nobility, clergy, the bourgeoisie, Jews, the corporate elite), instead of recognizing that "the line between good and evil cuts through every human heart" (as Solzhenitsyn has put it).

- Pessimism or cynicism -- the view that mankind is so corrupted that there is no hope for relative progress or improvement.

Real social, cultural and political progress is possible, but only when conservative ideas predominate. In conservatism, hope is tempered by realism, leading to patient and measured action in support of virtue and justice. Conservatives look for opportunities to strengthen the good that remains in existing institutions. Like Hippocrates, conservatives remember the wisdom of the principle: first, do no harm. We resist the temptation to launch a large-scale untested schemes for reform.

For conservatives, the leading role in social improvement must be taken by individuals working together in voluntary association. We look to faith-based charities and mutual aid societies that were so successful in improving social conditions in 19th century America to provide proven models for reversing the social decay resulting from a generation of failed leftist programs.

FIVE MANDATES

The potentialities of human nature lie within five distinct spheres or "mandates" (as the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called them).

LIFE. Since each human life is of infinite value, all innocent human life must (from the moment of conception until the point of total brain death) be protected from intentional destruction and wanton recklessness. Moreover, each must be free to develop and to exercise the natural human capacity for meaningful action and association.

Therefore, conservatives oppose (1) intentional abortion, (2) assisted suicide and euthanasia, (3) political terrorism, and (4) unjust warfare (such as the indiscriminate killing of non-combatants).

Conservatives look forward to a time when each human life is again held to be sacred and inviolable, and when the myth of overpopulation has been supplanted by the recognition that no human being is superfluous or unwanted. In such a world, young people will look forward to a life full of meaning and promise, and the current epidemic of senseless killing, both of self and of others, will subside.

MARRIAGE. The perpetuation of the human race takes place primarily through the nuclear family, based upon the permanent union of a man and woman in marriage. The primary responsibility for nurturing and educating the child lies with the child's natural or adoptive parents.

Therefore, conservatives oppose (1) attempts by the state to usurp or undermine the parental role, (2) the recognition of so-called "homosexual marriage" or other deviations from monogamy, (3) divorce on demand, (4) attempts to blur or deny the distinction between men and women or to devalue the roles of mother or father, (5) limitations on home schooling, and (6) attempts to use economic or tax policy to force mothers into the work force.

Conservatives see the restoration of the health and integrity of the nuclear family as an urgent priority. A strong family is the foundation of all other institutions. Conservatives welcome social and technological change that make possible the restoration of vital functions to the home, so that families will not merely live together, but work, learn and play together as well.

WORK/STEWARDSHIP. Human beings have both the potential and the warrant to transform their environment through work and the exercise of creativity and reasoned choice in meeting their needs, both biological and cultural. Moreover, the human race has the shared responsibility of maintaining the beauty and fruitfulness of the earth for the sake of future generations.

Therefore, conservatives oppose (1) the ideology of "deep ecology," which condemns all human work and technology as inherently evil, (2) a utilitarianism that views nature as existing solely to meet human needs, with no value in itself, and (3) attempts to undermine long-term care of the earth through the weakening or confusing of private ownership, replacing private stewardship with short-sighted bureaucratic management.

As the contrasting experience of the United States and the Soviet bloc in the 20th century makes clear, private land ownership is superior to centralized, bureaucratic management of natural resources, whether success is measured in terms of conservation, beautification or economic efficiency. A similar contrast in success at technical innovation between the two systems confirms the superiority of the entrepreneurial spirit of the free market over the dictates of central planners.

In contrast to the eco-pessimists, who see nothing but "ecological damage" resulting from every achievement of human ingenuity, conservatives celebrate the inherent dignity of work and creativity. We see a growing population and a lengthening life span as indicators of progress, not as a "time bomb" to be defused by draconian controls.

LAW/PUNISHMENT. The limitedness of human knowledge and compassion and our proclivity for evil necessitate the regulation of society by means of fixed and general rules of law. Transgressions of these rules must be dealt with in an equitable and dispassionate manner. The government exists in order to codify these rules and to deal with transgressions in a regular and predictable way.

Therefore, conservatives oppose (1) the imposition of arbitrary regulations issued on a case-by-case basis, (2) judges acting as legislators, and (3) the loss of personal responsibility, due to the attribution of misdeeds to the criminal's genes or environment.

Conservatives insist that punishment for crime be swift and certain. We value the protections of customary due process but deplore the impositions of raw judicial power, such as the infamous exclusionary rule.

Under conservative auspices, the laws would be few in number, slow to change, and clear in meaning. Judges, legislators and bureaucrats would not attempt to micromanage the

affairs of the household or the firm. Instead, people would individually grow in wisdom and virtue as they become accustomed to making their own decisions and to taking personal responsibility for their actions.

CULTURE. In order to fulfill their ultimate purpose, human beings must be free to take part in activities of intrinsic value, including worship, art, study and discussion. These needs necessitate the acknowledgment of the existence of distinct, autonomous institutions, including the church or temple, the school and university, and voluntary associations.

Therefore, conservatives oppose (1) the establishment of religious institutions by the state, (2) treating religious interests as of no special value, over and above secular interests, (3) effective control by the state of the arts, humanities, science and education, (4) a wall of separation that interferes with the right of the people to affirm their religious commitments publicly and collectively, or that excludes religious ideas and convictions from the public square.

SEVEN PRINCIPLES

The understanding of the human condition sketched above informs the conservative's political philosophy. This philosophy can be formulated in the following seven principles, each of which can be given compelling justification in terms of the fundamental facts of human nature.

PIETY (Respect for Tradition). Piety is that respect and honor owed to the venerable institutions and practices of one's homeland. Piety serves a dual purpose: it supports our capacity for continuing inter-generational progress, by acknowledging our connections to the endeavors of our forebears, and it checks the invention of novel forms of evil. Piety is the basis for the continuity of the constitution of society, for the principle of legal precedent, for the regulation of immigration and naturalization, and for the respect for long-established titles to land. This principle does not exclude the possibility of reform and improvement of social practices, but does ensure that such reforms not be undertaken lightly, nor without a sense of the tragic inevitability of loss that accompanies all progress.

ACCOUNTABILITY (of Rulers to the Ruled). Since human life has a purpose that transcends the activities of any merely human society, and since human beings are, in relation to that purpose, essentially equal, no one person has the right to use others as mere means, or to override the will and judgment of another unconditionally. Hence, those in any position of authority must consider themselves as the servants and agents of the public and must, therefore, be held accountable to that public through periodic elections.

SUBSIDIARITY (Federalism). Whenever there is a choice between assigning a power to an office with a wider jurisdiction or to one with a narrower jurisdiction, the power should always be assigned to the latter, for two reasons. First, the abuse of office is an inherent danger, and where the abuse occurs within a smaller jurisdiction, its victims

have a greater chance to seek outside help, to escape or to resist the injustice. Second, human knowledge and compassion are limited, and an officer with smaller jurisdiction is more likely to have the specialized knowledge and empathy needed to make wise decisions.

THE RULE OF LAW. The rule of law is needed to restrain the practice of evil, and to create a stable and predictable social environment within which persons, families and associations may act reasonably. This means that, insofar as possible, officers of the state must not develop the habit of issuing arbitrary dictates, nor must the general public develop the habit of accepting them. Instead, the decisions of officers must be limited to formulating general rules, applying those general rules to particular cases, and organizing government for the enforcement of the law and the defense of the state.

SEPARATION OF POWERS. The functions of the government are threefold: the codification of the law in its generality, the adjudication of particular cases under the law, and the enforcement of the law against those who would defy it. Since these functions are separable, and since all people have the natural bent to overstep the bounds of their office, separate functions should be assigned to separate offices.

MEDIATING INSTITUTIONS. Society must recognize and respect the rights, not only of individual adult members, but also of families, religious congregations, and voluntary associations. The state should respect and support the integrity of marriage and the authority of parents, intervening only when a family has ceased to function as such. The state must respect the internal governance of religious bodies. The engagement of the state with education should be minimal.

PRIVATE PROPERTY AND FREE MARKETS. The management of families and cultural institutions and the practice of work require the control of land and other natural resources. Individual persons, families and associations must have the power of acquiring property, i.e., specific and well-defined spheres of responsibility and control. The acquisition and disposal of property (including exchange, gift and the use of contract) must be governed by general rules, and owners must be free to exercise their own judgment in whatever is not specifically forbidden. The existence of a free market for the exchange of property and services (including the private ownership of the means of production), within a system of well-defined property rights, creates an environment in which long-term projects are well-coordinated and in which individuals, families and associations are free to pursue their own proper functions.

CONCLUSION

The founders of the American republic, schooled as they were in the classics of Western civilization, understood and applied all seven of these principles. The enduring success of the Constitution they crafted, and of the civilization that took shape on this continent, bear eloquent witness to the validity of these principles. In the course of the 20th century, much of the intellectual leadership of our country has abandoned or betrayed these proven ideas, placing their faith instead in a materialistic positivism or in a wildy romantic idealism, and sometimes, paradoxically, embracing both of these faiths at once.

Sowing the wind, we have reaped a whirlwind of social disorder, cultural decline, and political corruption. Today, conservatives lead the way toward a restoration of sanity and a reconstruction of society built on the solid foundation of the permanent truths.

A SHORT LIST OF CONSERVATIVE CLASSICS

Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* and *The Politics*
Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*
Whittaker Chambers, *Witness*
George Gilder, *Men and Marriage* and *Wealth and Poverty*
Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* and *The Constitution of Liberty*
Henry Hazlitt, *Economics in One Lesson*
Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind from Burke to Eliot*
Peter Kreeft, *The Unaborted Socrates*
C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*
Madison, Hamilton and Jay, *The Federalist Papers*
Frank S. Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom*
Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* and *Warning to the West*
Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*