

What Does It Mean to Be a Conservative?, Part 2



By Steven Yates

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[“Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites ... in proportion as they are more disposed to listen to the counsels of the wise and good, in preference to the flattery of knaves. Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.”](#) –Edmund Burke, “Letter to a Member of the General Assembly,” 1791.

5. Back to Basics: Eight Conservative Principles.

If they try, conservative thinkers *can* articulate the basic values that motivate them to write and act. They *can* answer the question, *what are we trying to conserve?* and in a way not necessarily tied to current controversies such as whether to support Trump or not (though I’ve no idea who else they’d presently support).

Russell Kirk tried, and the result was [Ten Conservative Principles](#). I thought some of his were a bit obscure, so I’ve settled on *eight items* as of major importance (we can always supply add-ons later).

Kirk noted that conservatism does not have a “magnum opus” like communism does (Marx’s and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* or Marx’s *Das Kapital*).

The reason: as a philosophy for living in society and in the world as it is, conservatism is more “organic”: tethered more closely to and woven into the lives of *people*. It did not *start* as a systematic body of ideas worked out by an intellectual. Hence it isn’t easy to systematize. Yet I’ve tried. My results aren’t identical to Kirk’s. Other conservative writers might work out different ways of saying these things, and *that’s okay*. If conservatism really is “organic,” *not* proceeding from some rationalist’s pen, this is what we’d expect.

First, we must sweep aside the debris we’ve inherited, especially the Utopias of philosophers from Plato down through Francis Bacon to modern technocrats such as B.F. Skinner and the more recent ones in the World Economic Forum.

Conservatism is non-Utopian. We’ll see why.

In that case, to be a *conservative* in my sense is to believe that:

- *An enduring, transcendentally-grounded moral order binds us all.* What grounds moral order is Almighty God Himself as Supreme Creator and source of all value. God having created humanity in His image (Gen 1:26-28), this is the best grounding for what “transcends” much conservative policy and corrects a few things it gets wrong: *all persons have intrinsic value – value they have by virtue of being human, and not derived from anything beyond having been created in God’s image.* Can atheists promote this, and the principles enumerated below? They can try, of course, but I think they’ll have trouble *justifying* anything special or intrinsically valuable about us as persons, all of us unique. This alone will have

consequences (think of abortion and the debates surrounding it). Institutions of whatever sort should serve persons, not the other way around. When they do this, they establish *trust*, which is essential to a functional societal order. What we've seen in recent history is a slow but largescale and long term collapse of trust resulting from loss of confidence in institutions, born of the decay in personal and civic *virtues* when secularism is assumed and religion becomes a private and completely optional indulgence to be "explained" by secular psychology.

- *We live in a fallen and partly broken world*, whether we call this *original sin* or something else (imperfection, fallibility, etc.). Even given the *best* and *most virtuous* parenting, the *best* education, and the *best* work to do, we are *all* still beset by moral weakness and temptation. Even the most diligent are doing the best they can. This is a reason it is a mistake to compare candidates for political office, or heads of institutions, or even thought leaders looked up to in entire civilizations, to some kind of Ideal Man. *All* will fall short and we'll be paralyzed. *All* candidates for an office, institutions, and societies will have various strengths and weaknesses, and we must make the best and *wisest* choices we can (and in collapsing civilizations, *wisdom* may include the choice to *separate* if all choices seem equally or almost equally vile).
- *Basic beliefs, traditions, customs, fundamental institutions* (e.g., the family, and private property) are validated not by abstract reasoning but from having passed the test of time. Hence the conservative tends to respect custom, tradition, "old and familiar ways of doing things." A basic belief, moreover, is that lives have purpose. As Proverbs says, "Without vision, the people perish." This purpose is typically found in a connection to something *larger than self*. This may be a natural human impulse. We cannot tolerate a sense of

meaninglessness and will fill the vacuum with something, anything. For the conservative Christian, this 'something' is God. For others, it will be some surrogate for God such as a political movement or loyalty to state authority, loyalty to one's work or profession, or perhaps just love of money as an end in itself. If these aren't obtainable, one turns to drugs or alcohol or sexual promiscuity or some combination of these or something else to distract from the emptiness or numb the pain. As a last resort, one ends it all with suicide.

Family units are not optional. Perhaps they would be if we did not come into the world as helpless infants. Family systems exist in every culture ever studied by anthropologists. There are variations, of course, and plenty of imperfections. Childrearing is essential, because children are a community's future. Education in the customs and other expectations of one's culture is also essential. Its purpose is to prepare the next generation for the realities and necessities of life in the world as it is. If the Western family unit in particular, shaped by Scripture, was somehow unsound, we wouldn't have survived much less built Western civilization.

Private property is also a societal good that has appeared nowhere else. What is justly acquired and owned, one tends to take care of. Owning private property is *not*, as we'll see below, an absolute *license* to do whatever one wants. The sanctity of human life, for example, trumps it: because of the intrinsic value of persons, you cannot sacrifice someone to some pagan god on an altar on your property. Yes, this is an extreme example. But the virtuous person does *not* use his/her property in ways that harm others, short or long term, or interfere with them without their knowledge or permission. The solution to whatever abuses of private property rights can be documented is not to abolish private property rights but to promote virtuous conduct and supply sensible regulations to

constrain what *isn't* virtuous. Speaking of which:

- *Private passions need to be restrained.* This is a tough one for intellectuals, because they're so used to thinking of us as "rational animals" (Aristotle), although a few philosophers such as David Hume were more realistic ("reason is the slave of the passions"). As psychologists have figured out, we're far more creatures of emotion (passion) than we are reason. Reason identifies, classifies, explains, solves problems; it reaches conclusions validly (one hopes) from premises. Its capacity to restrain potentially very powerful passions is *not* its default setting. But restraint of passions is necessary if we're going to live together and work together in communities. We either learn to restrain them ourselves with systems that discipline us, this being built into childrearing and education, or they will need to be restrained from the outside—typically, whether one likes it or not, by government. So who restrains government? *We the people* restrain it, so that it serves the purposes we created it to serve. We'll return to this problem below.

The point is: *freedom isn't free. It is not the freedom to do whatever we please. It is the freedom to act morally and virtuously, to do the right things by ourselves and by others.* If we misuse what freedom we have, we soon don't have any. But if we see those around us as having intrinsic value, just like us, as having been created in God's image just like ourselves, that will put us ahead of the pack in how to act.

The *economic* side to all this begins with the distinction between *needs* and *wants*. *Needs* are everything that keeps you alive (oxygen, food, water, a roof over your head, the responsible care of others before you're old enough to care for yourself responsibly). Most everything else is a *want*. It's true, the distinction is not an absolute dichotomy (is a suitable partner a need or a want?). But adults can tell the

difference most of the time; one of the signs of being an adult is acting accordingly, both in the public marketplace and in one's personal life. There are civilization-created needs, i.e., the necessities of a "normal" life (electricity, for example, or a telephone, and these days, an Internet connection).

- Speaking of economics, conservatives will see *political economy as "downstream" from culture*. I think this is what Steve Bannon had in mind when he described a country as more than its economy, and this ties in with the idea that what Big Business sees as good for itself is not necessarily good for the country. It depends on the *values* businesses are embodying. *Culture, moreover, is "downstream" from worldview*. What this means: beliefs such as those supplied by religion (or the cultivated irreligiosity of secularism) have more influence on the public mind and public behavior than purely economic considerations (this goes against both Marxists and many capitalists both of whom see economics as the fundamental science of humanity). By presenting a set of extra-economic values, Christian or otherwise, worldview and culture set conditions for what is produced and how much; how money is made, distributed, and spent; how much is saved, etc. Again, a great deal of what goes on in a free marketplace presumes relationships based on *trust*, because most people prefer to do business with people they know, trust, and like, and in an overall ambience of trust and safety (e.g., freedom from random criminality). When trust breaks down, whatever the cause, the free marketplace tends to follow.
- Because of (2), I think a *real* conservative would assert that *concentrations of power are dangerous to liberty, wherever located*. This favors a mindset, ensuing programs, and policies favoring decentralizing power and distributing it across a variety of institutions. And since in capitalist civilization *wealth becomes power*,

this favors the idea that *massive and increasing concentrations of wealth are also dangerous*. Indeed, there was once a species of *liberal* who argued for minimizing inequality even if their focus was more on race than on class. *Real* conservatives, it seems to me, should be acutely uncomfortable with how *financialization* in the context of the neoliberal economics of the past 40 years has allowed a coterie of billionaires to concentrate their wealth and grow ever larger and more controlling – enhanced by the central bank (the Federal Reserve System) created for just this purpose. The arguments here need not be moral. All they need do, based on history, is demonstrate that massive economic inequality is destabilizing – *especially if there is a widespread perception that the “haves” got where they are by somehow cheating, or working the system, which requires those outside the enclaves of actual privilege to actually work for their livings, and this latter comes to seem increasingly futile because of inflation as currency loses its purchasing power.*

Real conservatives should favor *closing the Federal Reserve!* Central banks are inherently dangerous! If that seems radical, that’s a sign of how far the centralization of wealth and power have come, and how much the primary destroyers of freedom in the West have come to be accepted.

- For a conservative, *locality matters. Places within designated borders are special.* Borders don’t have to be “eternal” for this to be true. They just have to be agreed upon by those living within them, who require those on the outside as well as governing authorities on the inside to respect them. America is more than “an idea” (although it *is* that). It is a unique place, founded through a unique process, in accordance with unique ideals – ideals originating in Christendom which we have admittedly struggled to practice consistently

(e.g., equal rights of all persons under the law). But by keeping these ideals firmly in mind, conservatives on the Right can offer progressives on the Left everything they can say they legitimately want, such as a country free of irrational prejudice and discrimination. Many of us supported such goals back in the 1960s, after all – before they were hijacked (rallying cries against racial discrimination replaced by racial quotas and preferential hiring to achieve “parity,” for example). Which brings me to:

- *Calls for change* can be validated on this basis, given also what we affirmed in (1) but tempered by (2). *Conservatives need not oppose calls for change in kneejerk fashion but rather should assess them according to these criteria.* Thomas S. Kuhn is best known for his landmark tract *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (orig. 1962). He also penned a thoughtful essay entitled “The Essential Tension,” that between “liberal” and “conservative” impulses in the physical sciences. The former favor openness to new ideas which, at its extreme, lies dangerous credulity; the latter try to close new ideas off and maintain the status quo. In this direction lies stagnation. Kuhn argued for a careful and constantly shifting balance between the two – based not on “criteria” that can be specified in advance but needing constant negotiation and renegotiation, because we learn new things, circumstances do change, and innovation and improvisation become necessary.

What applies in the physical sciences surely applies doubly in human communities filled with emotion-driven agents. We are problem solvers. But the burden of evidence that a solution works and that change is necessary is invariably on the change agent, not on the critic. That said, the critic has a balancing obligation, in the interests of intellectual honesty, not to move the goal posts or establish criteria so high that *no one* can meet them.

6. What's Next? Does Conservatism Have a Future?

We've laid out *principles*. Our principles are grounded in an ethical sensibility that acknowledges God and seeks to manifest the eternal in our daily lives and in our communities. Our opponents – enemies, if we're honest about it – see only historicity, change, and their visions of a man-made Utopia to come.

The leftist-globalist axis has no principles other than whatever advances power – a capacity to dictate the terms of life to other human beings, whom they see as highly evolved animals, not beings created in the image of a Supreme Being. Hence there are no reasons not to treat them like cattle.

This puts the conservative at a structural disadvantage. I've often had the feeling of having brought a knife to a gunfight. You can't reason with people whose starting premise is that reason doesn't count; *power* are what counts (*money* is how you keep score). You can't be "nice" to them, with calls for "dialogue." Niceness is not reciprocated but treated with contempt. They don't want dialogue with those they consider beneath them. Conservatives have tried to play by the rules of the knife fight and issued *statements* but been unable to do anything to stop the advance of leftism in the culture, any more than they've been able to stop the advance of globalism on the world scene. Indeed, all too many conservatives have been bamboozled by economistic narratives about how "globalization will make us all rich" and "open borders is great for the economy."

So it's going to take much more than yet another assertion of conservative principles. What I've done here is a start, but not more than that. Trumpian "populism" has done more to monkey wrench left-globalist efforts, if only by being unpredictable and uncontrollable. The Donald Trump that went into office in 2017 clearly had no idea what he was going up against. The Donald Trump of 2024 has definitely learned a few

things, and those behind him [are strategizing accordingly](#)! But it's still going to take more than winning an election – assuming that's even possible – and strategizing on desktops, to bring down the leftist-globalist axis.

Conservatives, as I noted, are not Utopians. They understand the need for rules, and that in a fallen world, rules don't protect or enforce themselves.

7. Interlude: From *A Few Good Men* (1992)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2sLcfQKU_co&pp=ygU0YSBmZXcgZ29vZCBtZW4%3D

“Son, we live in a world that has walls, and those walls have to be guarded by men with guns. Who's gonna do it? You? You, Lt. Weinberg? I have a greater responsibility than you could possibly fathom! You weep for Santiago and you curse the Marines! You have that luxury! You have the luxury of not knowing what I know; that Santiago's death, while tragic, probably saved lives! And my existence, while grotesque and incomprehensible to you, *saves lives*! You don't want the truth because deep down in places you don't talk about at parties, you *want* me on that wall! You *need* me on that wall! We use words like *honor, code, loyalty*! We use these words as the backbone of a life spent *defending something*! You use them as a *punchline*! I have neither the time nor the inclination to explain myself to a man who rises and sleeps under the blanket of the very freedom that I provide, and then questions the manner in which I provide it!! I would rather you just said “thank you” and went on your way. Otherwise, I suggest you pick up a weapon and stand a post. Either way, I don't give a *damn* what you think you are entitled to!!” –Col. Nathan R. Jessup, *A Few Good Men* (1992)

8. Sheep, Wolves, and Sheepdogs: Modified.

Author and U.S. Army Lt. Col. (Ret.) Dave Grossman penned a disquieting statement [on sheep, wolves, and sheepdogs](#). He

offers a supplement to everything penned above that conservatives ought to consider.

The common people are sheep. In our context, this is not pejorative. Grossman meant it in the sense of those who are peaceful, take care of their families, mostly mind their own business, and won't hurt others and unless provoked. They just want to be left alone as I've described. They take ethical principles seriously and try to live by them, however imperfectly.

Grossman's point: left to their own devices, the sheep are all but helpless when the wolf attacks.

The wolf lives by his own rules and has no qualms about using force to get what he wants.

Who protects the sheep from wolves? Sheepdogs, that's who.

When a mass shooter attacks, the sheep take cover. If there's a sheepdog on the scene, he pulls out the weapon he is never without and sets about taking the wolf down if he can.

The sheepdog is prepared both mentally and physically to use deadly force if a situation calls for it, even at the cost of his own life. The sheepdog understands that there are principles worth dying for; otherwise, nothing is really worth living for.

Sheepdogs include *properly, ethically-trained* soldiers, their superiors, Navy SEALs, police officers ... and members of any militia devoted to securing and maintaining the freedoms of those in their charge.

The men with guns on the walls.

Sheepdog ethics has a firm rule: *never harm the sheep. Your job is to protect the sheep by confronting and defeating the wolf.* A sheepdog who harms the sheep is kicked out.

The sheep don't care for the sheepdog. On the face of it, the sheepdog looks kind of wolfish. He and the wolf are both capable of violence. The sheepdog is a reminder that the world isn't always "nice," and that any society needs policing, borders, and defense forces to protect them. Else the wolves attack and feed on the sheep without mercy.

The sheepdog points out the unpleasant reality that you can't be "nice" to the wolf. He'll go right on being a wolf. That's his nature. The sheepdog gets used to not being listened to. Most sheep are in denial, and will stay in denial – and then beg for protection when the wolf attacks.

What Grossman doesn't tell us is what to do once we realize that *the wolves are now in charge, in all the pinnacles of power!*

Sadly, given the Global Corporatocracy in all its guises, the wolf presently controls much of the planet via its political economies and finances! Call him the Global Wolf!

He doesn't control everything, however. He thus wants more control. He wants Total Spectrum Dominance, a surveillance-and-control global state, the sheep reduced to complete dependence on systems the Global Wolf controls, so that He may feed on the sheep at his leisure!

This is the biggest dilemma of our era!

What kind of sheepdog do we need to confront the Global Wolf who spends more financial resources in a day advancing his agenda than a sheepdog can expect to see in his life.

The truth:

Wolves of any sort will not be nice unless they are *forced* to behave themselves, generally through fear of a greater power! Needless to say, the wolf isn't much inclined to believe in a transcendent God, or anything else he can't see, hear, taste,

touch, and smell – and eat.

Given the New Normal and where this year seems to be going, it may be too late for the West. Because of inattention and the misbegotten skepticism of those who go on and on about “conspiracy theories,” the Global Wolf has gotten too far and taken too much.

A Trump victory won’t be enough. I doubt that what *needs* to be done, *can* be done in just four years. *No* president has that much power. Trump’s most important choice will therefore be his VP. It has to be someone who shares his vision and goals of a U.S. freed from leftists and the Deep State, and *able to continue what Trump began for eight more years.*

Considering how long the Global Wolf has been at work, this *still* might not be enough time!

What conservatives need, therefore, is a rational Plan B to organize themselves and separate, if need be, forming self-sufficient communities built around solid family structures and sustainable small businesses, working from the bottom up instead of from the top down, able to sustain and defend themselves when the Global Wolf attacks, as he inevitably will. Those of us presently in our 60s and therefore too old to man posts on walls ourselves will have to live with the fact that we probably won’t live to see the outcome of the coming battle.

What we have, though, is God on our side!

[Part 1,](#)

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Steven Yates is a (still recovering) ex-academic with a PhD in Philosophy. He taught for more than 15 years total at several universities in the Southeastern U.S. He authored more than 20 articles, book reviews, and review essays in academic journals and anthologies. Refused tenure and unable to obtain full-time academic employment (and with an increasing number of very fundamental philosophical essays refused publication in journals), he turned to alternative platforms and heretical notions, including about academia itself. In 2021 he moved to Chile. He is married to a Chilean national.

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Steven Yates's book *Four Cardinal Errors: Reasons for the Decline of the American Republic* (2011) can be ordered [here](#).

His philosophical work *What Should Philosophy Do? A Theory* (2021) can be obtained [here](#) or [here](#).

His paranormal horror novel *The Shadow Over Sarnath* (2023) can be gotten [here](#).

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