

THE NEOCONSERVATIVE CONUNDRUM

Jack Kerwick

Much has been written in relatively recent years about the enigmatic phenomenon known as “neoconservatism.” Despite the name, neoconservatism is not properly speaking a form of conservatism at all. Rather, it is an expression of modern rationalism that, as such, differs *in kind* from classical conservatism. Internal to each tradition of thought, as it has been articulated by its most illustrious representatives, is a cluster of enduring ideas regarding reason, morality, and the character of a modern state that is irreconcilably at odds with that which composes the other.

Any study of neoconservatism must begin with Leo Strauss.¹ In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss writes that “the need for natural right” is the same today as it has always been, for “to reject natural right is tantamount to saying that all right is positive right, and this means that what is right is determined exclusively by the legislators and the courts of the various countries.” In order to discriminate between

just and unjust laws, Strauss continues, we are in need of a standard that is more than just an “ideal” that has been “adopted by our society or our ‘civilization’” and that is “embodied in its way of life or its institutions,” for “if the principles are sufficiently justified by the fact that they are accepted by a society, the principles of cannibalism are as defensible or sound as those of civilized life.” That is, “if there is no standard” by which to evaluate “positive right” that is “higher than the ideal of our society, we are utterly unable to take a critical distance from that ideal.” The rejection of natural right, therefore, leads to “nihilism.” Actually, “it is identical with nihilism.” For Strauss, either we affirm natural right or “we realize that the principles of our actions have no support [other] than our blind choice.”²

Strauss identifies as the enemies of “natural right” those whom he describes as “historicists.” He also characterizes them as “eminent conservatives” who initially found their distinctive ideological voice while

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responding to “the natural rights doctrines that had prepared” the “cataclysm” of the French Revolution. Such conservatives or “historicists” appeared “to have realized somehow that the acceptance of any universal or abstract principles has necessarily a revolutionary, disturbing, [and] unsettling effect,” that such “recognition . . . tends to prevent men from wholeheartedly identifying themselves with, or accepting, the social order that fate has allotted them.”³

The most eminent of Strauss’s conservatives is Edmund Burke. Although Strauss offers a charitable, perceptive analysis of Burke’s powerful and sustained fight against the obsession with theory that drove the latter’s adversaries in the eighteenth century, and while to some extent he endorses it, linking Burke with the likes of Aristotle, who more than two millennia earlier cautioned against confusing the theoretical with the practical, he ultimately blames Burke for further facilitating modernity’s self-conceit. By Strauss’s lights, Burke is responsible for “a certain depreciation of reason.”⁴ The problem, as Strauss understands it, is that “Burke’s opposition to modern ‘rationalism’ shifts almost insensibly into an opposition to ‘rationalism’ as such.”

Yet Burke’s critique “reveals itself least ambiguously in its most important practical consequence”: his conception of a constitution. That Burke holds reason itself in low esteem, Strauss contends, is proved by the fact that Burke “rejects the view that constitutions can be ‘made’ in favor of the view that they must ‘grow,’” and he rejects “in particular the view that the best social order can be or ought to be the work of an individual, of a wise ‘legislator’ or founder.”⁵

We will revisit Burke’s thought, and in greater detail, a little later. The point here is to grasp not so much Burke’s positions but rather Strauss’s. And the latter’s critique of

conservatism’s “patron saint” is particularly telling in this regard, for not only does it bring into sharp focus the stark contrast in philosophical temperament between these two thinkers; it also illuminates certain themes concerning rationality, ethics, and the character of a modern state that will distinguish the thought of Strauss’s ideological heirs.

Among such heirs, no one is more prominent than Allan Bloom.

In his *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom writes of the United States that it “is one of the highest and most extreme achievements of the rational quest for the good life according to nature,” for “its political structure” relies upon “the use of the rational principles of natural right.” That is, the American “regime . . . promised untrammelled freedom to reason.” Bloom notes that “a powerful attachment” to the principles enunciated in the Declaration of Independence, which had historically been the chief objective of “the education of democratic man,” required a radical departure from “the kinds of attachments” demanded by “traditional communities.” Traditional societies have always relied upon “myth and passion,” “severe discipline and authority,” in order to instill in its members “an instinctive, unqualified, even fanatic patriotism.” In contrast, education in the United States had sought to inspire in its citizens a “reflected, rational, calm, even self-interested loyalty,” not to the country as such, but to its “form of government and its rational principles.” On this understanding of the American identity, “class, race, religion, national origin or culture all disappear or become dim when bathed in the light of natural rights, which give men common interests and make them truly brothers.”⁶

Bloom is concerned that “the West’s universal or intellectually imperialistic claims”

are under attack by, among such other culprits, “historicism” and “cultural relativism.” In treating “the West” as but one more culture among others, “equality in the republic of cultures” may be achieved but only at the unacceptable cost of doing a great injustice to the West’s “cultural imperative,” its unique “needs.”⁷

Bloom finds all this lamentable, for it accounts not just for “the closing of the *American* mind” but also for the repeal of the Enlightenment project itself. “There is practically no contemporary regime that is not somehow a result of Enlightenment, and the best of modern regimes—liberal democracy—is entirely its product.” What Bloom—and, with him, most neoconservatives—regards as “liberal democracy” is understood as “the regime of equality and liberty, of the rights of man,” and “the regime of reason.” America, Bloom believes, is “liberal democracy” par excellence, for it is the first country in all of human history to have been founded upon “*rational principles*.” They knew that since “reciprocal recognition of rights needs little training, no philosophy, and abstracts from all differences of national character,” Americans “could be whatever they wanted to be as long as they recognized that the same applied to all other men and they were willing to support and defend the government that guaranteed that dispensation.”⁸

This is why, Bloom suggests, the only alternative to “liberal democracy”—“cultural relativism”—is war. He alludes to Nietzsche, a “cultural relativist” who saw that relativism means “war, great cruelty rather than great compassion.” War can achieve peace, but when this is the means by which it is realized, peace is never more than tenuous. “Liberal democracies,” on the other hand, need not resort to violence to coexist peacefully with one another. “Liberal democracies do not fight wars with one another, because they see the

same human nature and the same rights applicable everywhere and to everyone.” However, “cultures fight wars with one another.”⁹

Strauss and Bloom may have been among the most influential and able exponents of the theoretical vision that has since acquired the name “neoconservatism,” but the theory to which they gave systematic expression has long since passed into the popular domain. Douglas Murray explains how neoconservatism assumed flesh, as it were, in American politics. Murray identifies March 8, 1983, as *the* decisive moment when neoconservatism launched its way into the popular American imagination. It was on this date that President Ronald Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as “an evil empire.” Neoconservative notables like Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz, as well as many others, were ecstatic that Reagan unequivocally rejected the “moral relativism” in terms of which the conventional wisdom had insisted on understanding the Cold War for decades.

Reagan’s speech was the absolute antithesis of the orthodoxy complained of by Strauss. The speech constituted a stand—a stand that neoconservatives encouraged and wanted repeated: clarification on democratic opposition to tyranny, and support for absolutes, in particular, and, unapologetically, the necessity and incomparability of freedom.

From the standpoint of neoconservatives, then, “democratic opposition to tyranny” is basically tantamount to an affirmation of “absolutes,” including and especially “the absolute value” of freedom. This speech of Reagan’s emboldened neoconservatives to pass “beyond a purely ‘anti-communist’ stand” and argue “for the encouragement and kindling of democracy across the globe.”¹⁰

Neoconservatism differs from traditional

conservatism—“socially, economically, and philosophically.” Neoconservatives represent “revolutionary conservatism.” While neo-conservatives have their views on domestic affairs, “in an era of global crises, it was on foreign policy that neoconservatives made their most distinctive and impassioned mark.” Murray thus summarizes the founding Statement of Principles of the Project for the New American Century.

The signatories [of the statement] declared that the use of American power had been repeatedly shown over the previous century to be a force for good. For the next century America needed, among other things, to: increase its defense spending to enable it to carry out its global responsibilities; strengthen ties with its democratic allies; challenge regimes hostile to American interests and values; and “promote the cause of ‘political and economic freedom abroad.’”

Murray mentions that neoconservatives understood well that “corollaries of erasing tyrannies and spreading democracy were interventionism, nation-building, and many of the other difficulties that had long concerned traditional conservatives.”¹¹

By quoting his post-9/11 West Point speech, Murray distinguishes George W. Bush as a neoconservative president.

Some worry that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree. Different circumstances require different methods, but not different moralities. Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place. . . . We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name.

Murray approvingly quotes Norman Podhoretz’s description of “the Bush doctrine” as relying “on a repudiation of moral relativism and an entirely unapologetic assertion of the need for and the possibility of moral judgment in the realm of world affairs.”¹²

Murray isn’t the only one who has popularized neoconservatism, which has become virtually synonymous with today’s “conservative movement.” Take, for example, nationally syndicated radio talk show host and CNN contributor William Bennett. Bennett, too, enthusiastically applauds President Bush for having “revive[d] the language of good and evil,” language that the entrenchment of “relativism” has inhibited us from appropriating. The “War on Terror,” not unlike World War II and the Cold War, is “a war about good and evil.”¹³

In previous times, Bennett asserts, children in this country were educated to appreciate “the superior goodness of the American way of life,”¹⁴ and they learned that American patriotism consisted of “our steadfast devotion to the ideals of freedom and equality.” American patriots, beginning with “the patriots of 1776 and 1787,” have always been devoted “to something quite new—a new nation conceived in a new way and dedicated to a self-evident truth that all men are created equal,” “a country tied together in loyalty to a principle” whose “universality . . . caught fire and inspired a diverse group of men, women, Northerners, Southerners,” and “even European nobility to make great sacrifices” for it.¹⁵

Neoconservatives, we now realize, tend to share in common the following beliefs. First, morality consists primarily of “self-evident” *principles* specifying “natural” or “human rights” that belong to *all* human beings just by virtue of their humanity. Second, because these principles are “self-evident,” they are

rationally or intellectually accessible to *all people in all places* and at *all times*. Thus, according to the neoconservative, neither reason nor morality is encumbered by the parochial considerations thrown up by tradition, custom, or habit. Reason and morality are unitary phenomena that, as such, ultimately owe *nothing* to the contingencies of place and time. Third, since “liberal democracy” is the only kind of regime that embodies principles of “natural rights,” and since the United States is *the* “liberal democracy” extraordinary, the first society in all of human history erected upon “the proposition that all men are created equal,” “liberal democracies” in general, and the United States in particular, have an obligation to advance “the human rights” of people *everywhere*. Finally, the only alternative to the “moral realism” of “natural rights” is “historicism” or “relativism.”

The eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish philosopher and parliamentarian Edmund Burke is widely regarded as “the patron saint” of modern conservatism. Burke formulated his conservative vision of society and politics piecemeal, as it were, in reaction to the conflagration of the French Revolution. Still, the circumstances of its emergence aside, there is to be detected in Burke’s writings a coherent political philosophy that many subsequent thinkers adopted as their own. Strauss’s allegations to the contrary aside, Burke *never* renounced reason; he renounced the dominant Enlightenment conception of Reason—what has since come to be identified with rationalism. Burke had no use for the notion, which figured prominently in the intellectual machinations of the *philosophes*, of a Reason unencumbered by tradition.

We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in

each man is small, and that the individuals would be better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages.

What Burke refers to as “the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages,” is *tradition*, the repository of precisely that “prejudice” that, “with its reason, has a motive to give action to that reason, and an affection which will give it permanence.”¹⁶

Nor does Burke deny “natural rights.” Natural rights “may and do exist in total independence” of government, and “in much greater clearness, and in a much greater degree of abstract perfection,” he declares. Yet it is their “abstract perfection” that “is their practical defect,” for when “these metaphysic rights” are brought to bear upon the resolution of political disputes, “like rays of light which pierce into a dense medium,” they are “refracted from their straight line.” Given “the gross and complicated mass of human passions and concerns,” as well as the fact that “the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity,” it is “absurd to talk of them as if they continued in the simplicity of their original direction.” Natural rights are “pretended rights.” They are “extremes” that, “in proportion as they are metaphysically true,” are “morally and politically false.” The problem with “the Rights of Man” is that “against these there can be no prescription.” Furthermore, they “admit no temperament, and no compromise.”¹⁷ For Burke, the only rights worth talking about are the product of “prescription,” the cultural “inheritance” of those to whom they belong.

This more or less parochial construal of rights in terms of the imagery of an “inheritance,” Burke maintains, has at least two crucial advantages over its transhistorical competitor. The first is that “the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of

conservation, and a sure principle of transmission, without at all excluding a principle of improvement.” Also, this “image of a relation of blood” bolsters “the fallible and feeble contrivances of our reason” by consolidating “the Constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties.” Burke says that by “adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections,” by “keeping inseparable, and cherishing with the warmth of all their combined and mutually reflected charities, our state, our hearths, our sepulchers, and our altars,” we cultivate within ourselves “a sense of habitual native dignity,” and “our liberty becomes a noble freedom.”¹⁸

Burke’s rejection of both the unencumbered Intellect and the abstract morality of rights with which it is conjoined inform his rejection of the ideal constitution as Strauss and “the classics” conceived it. Recall, Strauss chastises Burke for maintaining that “the best constitution” is *not* “a contrivance of reason” but, rather, *one* that “has come into being without guiding reflection, continuously, slowly, not to say imperceptibly,” and over “a great length of time, and by a great variety of accidents.” It is not “‘formed upon a regular plan or with any unity of design’ but toward ‘the greatest variety of ends.’”¹⁹

Michael Oakeshott was a twentieth-century successor to Burke, a conservative in the classical sense of this term. In his famous essay “Rationalism in Politics,” he writes that faith in “the superiority of the unencumbered intellect” rests upon an erroneous notion of knowledge.²⁰ Oakeshott distinguishes two ideal types of knowledge: “technical” knowledge and “practical” or “traditional” knowledge. All knowledge involves both components, and each is inseparable from the other. The rationalist who believes in “the unencumbered intellect” wrongly assumes that all knowledge is “technical.”

The fundamental difference between these two sorts of knowledge is that technical knowledge consists of “rules which are, or may be, deliberately learned, remembered, and, as we say, put into practice.” The “chief characteristic” of technical knowledge is that it is susceptible to “precise formulation.” The logic of the syllogism, a cookbook, and the rules of scientific research are illustrations of technical knowledge. Technical knowledge is express excogitation. In contrast, however, practical knowledge defies explicit articulation. It “exists only in use, is not reflective and (unlike technique) cannot be formulated in rules.” This does not mean that practical knowledge is “esoteric”; quite the contrary, it can indeed be imparted, but “the method” by which it is disseminated “is not the method of formulated doctrine.”²¹

The technical knowledge of the rationalist conveys the impression of “certainty.” This is its appeal. It “seems to be a self-complete sort of knowledge because it seems to range between an identifiable initial point (where it breaks in upon sheer ignorance) and an identifiable terminal point, where it is complete, as in learning the rules of a game.” Moreover, “the application” of technical knowledge appears, “as nearly as possible, purely mechanical,” and its proponents suppose that it relies on nothing “not itself provided in the technique.”²² This, of course, is a fiction, for technical knowledge is never anything more than the abridgement of a practice, a tradition, and, as such, is dependent upon a prereflective, customary, or habitual manner of life. For instance, a cookbook (an instance of technical knowledge) can come about only at the hand of one who *already* knows *how* to cook. Activity always precedes the rules, principles, and ideals that are distilled from it; and these rules, principles, and ideals inescapably omit a substantial part of our knowledge, nuances that can only be *imparted*, not *memorized*.

The rationalist's conception of reason and knowledge informs his conception of morality. "The morality of the Rationalist is the morality of the self-conscious pursuit of moral ideals." This being so, moral education consists in "the presentation and explanation of moral principles."²³

Oakeshott alludes to the Declaration of Independence as the quintessential expression of the political-moral vision of rationalism. Because American independence originates in an "express rejection of a tradition," its architects had to "appeal to something which is itself thought not to depend upon tradition." The tradition-transcendent standard to which they appealed was constituted by "principles" that "were not the product of civilization" but, rather, "natural, 'written in the whole of the volume of human nature.'" These abstract principles of natural right, the Founders affirmed, "were to be discovered in nature by human reason, by a technique of inquiry available alike to all men and requiring no extraordinary intelligence in its use." However, as Oakeshott is quick to point out, this was an illusion, "for the inspiration of Jefferson and the other founders of American independence was the ideology which Locke had distilled from the English political tradition." It is of no surprise, Oakeshott adds, that the Declaration "should have become one of the sacred documents of the politics of Rationalism," as well as "the inspiration and pattern of many later adventures in the rationalist reconstruction of society."²⁴

The neoconservative's endorsement of rationalist models of reason and morality inform his commitment to a peculiar conception of the state. In Oakeshott's terms, neoconservatives share with other rationalists a propensity to conceive the State as an "enterprise association." On this model, citizens are partners or comrades joined together in collective pursuit of a common end.

In his essay "Talking Politics," Oakeshott writes that from this perspective, a state is "an association of human beings related to one another in terms of their joint pursuit of some recognized substantive purpose." The purpose is taken to be a premeditated ideal—like, say, Equality or Virtue—toward the realization of which all citizens must devote (at least) some of their resources. "What is here attributed to a state, or is said to be what a state may or should be made to become, is a well-known mode of association: that in which a Many becomes One in virtue of a common substantive engagement."²⁵

In an enterprise association, "the central feature is the uniting purpose" that relates citizens to each other, a purpose that "must be a substantive condition of things to be procured or an interest in such a condition of things to be promoted." The rules that characterize a state conceived as an enterprise association lack any intrinsic value, for their "desirability lies in their propensity to promote, or at least not to hinder, the pursuit of the purpose." Its government "is a managerial engagement." The idea of the state as an enterprise association reveals itself not just in "grandiose constructions" of the kind associated with communism, say, but also "in temporary expedients to promote affluence or diminish poverty and in bursts of missionary zeal toward the world at large."²⁶

Unlike neoconservatives, classical conservatives conceive of the state, not as an "enterprise association," but, rather, as a "civil association." The state has no supreme purpose or common good in the service of which citizens must be enlisted. The citizens of a civil association are united not in terms of a common substantive purpose that demands their devotion but in terms of *law*. The law is composed of "non-instrumental rules of conduct," as Oakeshott writes, rules

that do *not* “specify a practice or routine purporting to promote the achievement of a substantive purpose,” but “conditions to be subscribed to in choosing and acting,” formal conditions, not substantive actions. While the associates of a civil association “have a common concern,” they lack a “common substantive purpose.” Their common concern is that all members of the association will faithfully discharge “their obligations to observe the conditions prescribed in these non-instrumental rules of conduct.”²⁷

For classical conservatives, civil association has no ends. The only ends that exist are those that each associate, each citizen, chooses to pursue. The laws that citizens are bound to observe do not tell them *what* to do; they tell them *how* they must do whatever it is they choose to do.

It was my intention to show here that neoconservatism and classical conservatism differ from one another not just in degree but *in kind*. They are fundamentally incompatible

traditions of thought, for each affirms conceptions of reason, morality, and the state that the other denies. More specifically, neoconservatism, I have argued, is a form of rationalism, the intellectual tradition in response to which conservatism originally emerged.

It is worth noting that as far as contemporary American politics are concerned, classical conservatism must be judged as having fallen upon particularly hard times. With the notable exception of Patrick J. Buchanan, it has been quite some time since it has had a popular voice. This isn't to say that it is dead, but, for the most part, the conservative *movement* today *is* a neoconservative movement: the epistemological, ethical, and political philosophical suppositions constitutive of neoconservatism figure centrally, even if largely unconsciously, within the thought of the majority of self-declared “conservatives.” Whether this condition will last, whether classical conservatism will succeed in reversing its misfortunes, is left to be seen.

- 1 While there has always been some dispute over Strauss's relationship with neoconservatism, even such stalwart neoconservatives as Douglas Murray readily concede that “Strauss is a useful and necessary point of entry for any investigation of neoconservatism.” See Murray's *Neoconservatism: Why We Need It* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006), 2.
- 2 Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 7th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 2, 3, 5, 6.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 13, 14.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 312.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 313.
- 6 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 39, 27.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 39, 38, 193.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 259, 53.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 202.
- 10 Murray, *Neoconservatism*, 59.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 38, 82, 82–82, 73.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 95.
- 13 William J. Bennett, *Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 45.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 15 Bennett, William J., ed. *The Spirit of America* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 26.
- 16 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in *The Portable Edmund Burke*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 451–52.
- 17 Not only did Burke not deny natural rights; he affirmed the existence of natural law. For Burke, natural rights are inseparable from and contingent upon a system of obligations that is the natural law. See Peter J. Stanlis's groundbreaking *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958), 441–42, 443, 440.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 206, 207.
- 19 Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 314.
- 20 Michael Oakshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1962), 11.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 12, 14, emphases mine.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 31–33.
- 25 Michael Oakshott, “Talking Politics,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1962), 450–51.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 451, 452.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 454.