

Russell Kirk: The Mystery of Human Existence

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Introduction

Russell Kirk's 1953 classic, *The Conservative Mind*, was more than a discovery, but less than an invention, of an Anglo-American conservative intellectual tradition. Kirk successfully wove disparate threads into a coherent scholarly tapestry, making clear a previously inchoate conservative heritage that remains important to this day.

Regarded therefore as a founder of modern American conservatism, Kirk was "one of the most important men of letters in the twentieth century."¹ He is still held in honor (though perhaps less than he deserves) decades after his death in 1994. He did not win all of his battles over the nature and practice of conservatism, let alone more broadly, but those engaged with intellectual conservatism had, and have, to reckon with him.

Kirk's conservatism was based on belief in a moral order beyond human will, coupled with an acute awareness of the limitations of private human reason in apprehending, articulating, and applying that moral order to society and politics. Thus, the first of Kirk's six canons of conservative thought, as originally formulated in *The Conservative Mind*, was "Belief that divine intent rules society as well as conscience, forging an eternal chain of right and duty which links great and obscure, living and dead. Political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems. A narrow rationality...cannot of itself satisfy human needs." He then quoted the memorable line that, "Human reason set up a cross on Calvary, human reason set up the cup of

¹ Bradley J. Birzer, *Russell Kirk: American Conservative*, (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 8.

hemlock, human reason was canonized in Notre Dame” before concluding that “politics is the art of apprehending and applying the Justice which is above nature.”²

This passage would be modified in subsequent editions over the years, but the message remained consistent. In *The Politics of Prudence* (1993), Kirk declared as the first principle of conservatism that “*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.*”³ This affirmation of enduring moral truths was followed by Kirk’s endorsement of “custom, convention, and continuity” and the “principle of prescription.” Kirk wrote that “it is perilous to weigh every passing issue on the basis of private judgement and private rationality.”⁴ Conservatives affirm the existence of permanent moral truths, but they are skeptical of the capabilities of human reason to unerringly apprehend and articulate them—the conservative thus values tradition and the wisdom of the past.

Consequently, Kirk’s conservative revival was founded on convictions that many philosophers have treated as contradictory: belief in real moral truth and natural law, combined with an anti-rationalist suspicion of the capacity of human reason to apprehend and articulate moral truth in absolute propositions. Following the example of Edmund Burke, Kirk’s conservatism rejects Enlightenment philosophy, which tended to take mathematics as a model for all knowledge, including moral knowledge. True moral knowledge, per the Enlightenment, would be derived from universal principles, expressed as philosophical propositions demonstrable to all rational persons, and applicable to practical politics. Moral relativism has often been presented as the alternative to this rationalism perspective.

² Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana*, (Chicago: Regnery, 1953), 7-8.

³ Russell Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 1993) 17.

⁴ Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, 19.

Against this dichotomy of rationalism and relativism, Kirk asserted that there is a moral order beyond human invention, to which we owe obedience and which ought to inform our culture, politics and economics. However, he appended his conviction that the truths of this moral order, and their subsequent application, cannot be precisely defined by human reason, leaving us dependent upon convention and tradition for much of our moral knowledge.

Reason's Limits

While serving in the Army during the second world war (his station in the Utah desert left the young scholar much time to read and reflect), Kirk realized that he did not “sympathize with the chief currents of thought and feeling” of the Enlightenment, but that what he “respected in the Enlightenment was the men who had stood against the whole tendency of their epoch—such men as Johnson and Burke.”⁵ The latter in particular would define his thought; out of the multitude of poets, philosophers and politicians whom Kirk wrote about, Edmund Burke was the lodestar of his thought, perhaps followed by T.S. Eliot. Consequently, in reading Kirk, it is sometimes difficult to delineate where the summary and interpretation of Burke leave off and commentary and criticism begin.

Following Burke's lead, Kirk contended that the model of rationality embraced by the Enlightenment obscures essential moral and political truths. Though Enlightenment thinkers hoped to establish a compelling standard of universal public rationality, they failed. They proved unable to provide a method for rationally deriving and demonstrating universal moral and political truths. They began by seeking the philosophical equivalent of the methodology of mathematics, and ended by substituting private speculation in place of public reason.

⁵ Russell Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 68.

This failure was demonstrated by the French revolutionaries and their apologists, who claimed to be establishing a political regime based on the laws of a universal reason and nature. But in hindsight, Burke's objections were vindicated. Far from being purely rational, the revolutionaries' philosophies were captive to a multitude of prejudices and presuppositions. The Revolution's radical theories of universal reason and rights were not publicly vindicated, but were instead exposed as so much ill-founded private speculation. A regime that proclaimed liberty, equality and fraternity bloodily descended into tyranny and war. The application of the Rights of Man produced an enormity of wrongs done to men.

By Kirk's time, metaphysicians were held in less esteem than during the heady days of the French Revolution's celebrations of Reason. But rationalism endured, albeit often in altered guise. From scientific socialism to positivism to the cults of social science experts, the rationalist impulse hid the ragged mantle of metaphysics under the lab coat of science.

Against the spirit of his age, Kirk found that his was "not an Enlightenment mind," for he did "not love cold harmony and perfect regulation of organization." He added that the "men of the Enlightenment had cold hearts and smug heads," and that their successors "were in the process of imposing upon all the world a dreary conformity, with Efficiency and Progress and Equality for their watchwords—abstractions preferred to all those fascinating and lovable peculiarities of human nature and human society that are the products of prescription and tradition."⁶

In all cases, whether the revolutionary *philosophes* or the revolutionary scientific socialists or the authoritative (and often authoritarian) experts, rationalism aims to apprehend truth through an act of intellect (whether speculative or methodological), and articulate it so that

⁶ Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination*, 68-69.

it may be unerringly applied. The conformity of rationalist systems is thus revealed as a consequence of the will to power of those who seek to rule through intellectual domination. Rationalism's sin is hubris, as it begins with the belief that finite humans can apprehend, articulate and apply universal truths without regard for our own weaknesses and contingencies. Pride thus leads to misunderstanding. The rationalist mentally constructs a model universe, or at least a part of it, that he (and it has usually been a he) is capable of fully comprehending. He simplifies the world, or artificially isolates part of it, to the point where his intellect can encompass it. The mystery of human existence as finite creatures, thrown into life, is rejected in favor of a totalizing system that is meant to bring the cosmos and society under control by the intellect.

Kirk opposed this intellectual arrogance, having learned from Burke and others that human reason is limited, human circumstances complex, and human goodness fallible. Kirk traced this view to Burke's Christianity, "which the men of the Enlightenment violently rejected."⁷ He found in Burke's thought acceptance that "We must leave much to Providence; to presume to perfect man and society by a neat 'rational' scheme is a monstrous act of *hubris*."⁸ Man must accept truth as it can be known to him within his limited and contingent existence, rather than trying to attain to a God's-eye view that apprehends the entirety of truth.

Likewise, Kirk found much to admire in T.S. Eliot, the great metaphysical poet and critic who was "opposed to abstract systems created out of private rationality," and who, like Burke, "came to dread not the intellect itself—certainly not to dread right reason—but rather to dread defecated rationality, arrogantly severed from larger sources of wisdom. He dreaded this

⁷ Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered*, (Wilmington, DE: ISI, 1997), 165.

⁸ Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* 165.

presumption in the person, and he dreaded it in the commonwealth.”⁹ Kirk increasingly used Eliot’s language in his writing, which gave them a mystical aura at times. This was intentional, for Kirk knew that not all truths can be perfectly communicated through philosophical propositions. Thus, in his writing he used the imagery of Burke and Eliot as he emphasized their wisdom in rejecting rationalistic schemes.

Truth, Tradition and the Sword of Imagination

Kirk’s rejection of Enlightenment rationalism and its heirs did not fall into the morass of a thoroughgoing moral relativism. He avoided the trap (identified by Alasdair MacIntyre and others) of accepting the Enlightenment’s model of rationality as definitive, thereby leading to a rejection of the reality of reason and truth by those who perceive the failure of the Enlightenment project. Kirk knew that moral truths are real, though they cannot be reduced to definitive postulates and philosophical propositions as part of a comprehensive system. Rather, they are apprehended through a variety of means, from tradition to the moral imagination.

Birzer explains that Kirk “wanted to profess myriad good little truths.”¹⁰ We should strive for knowledge of particular moral truths that can be instantiated in our lives, rather than chasing the illusion of a complete, rational, demonstrable moral system. Thus, Birzer notes that Kirk, like Burke, believed that “natural rights exist, but a definite set of rights for all times and all places and all persons might simply be unknowable and uncategorizable to the human’s finite capacities.”¹¹ We must be content to realize truth within our finitude, rather than constructing rationalist systems that aim to transcend our human limitations. The language of natural rights

⁹ Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot’s Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century*, (Peru, Illinois: Sherwood Sugden and Co., 1984), 45.

¹⁰ Birzer, *Russell Kirk: American Conservative*, 101.

¹¹ Birzer, *Russell Kirk: American Conservative*, 250.

may be a useful method of communication and discourse regarding moral truths, but only if the intrinsic limitations of all human reason and discourse are born in mind.

It is here that Edmund Burke may be most essential to Kirk's thought. Twentieth century scholars, including Peter Stanlis and Francis Canavan, had noted that Burke was not the utilitarian many had presumed him to be. Rather, they showed that Burke was a natural law thinker, but these revisionist scholars did not always appreciate their subject's unique contributions to natural law theory. Burke's understanding of the natural law was informed by the natural law tradition, but (as noted in the chapter on Burke in this volume), he was no doctrinarian Thomist (neo or otherwise).

Kirk agreed that Burke was a follower of the natural law tradition, who "enunciates the doctrine of the *jus naturale*, the law of the universe, the creation of the Divine mind, of which the laws of man are only imperfect manifestations."¹² He argued that in Burke's view, human laws and institutions are meant to reflect the order and goodness of God and His eternal law, which man defies at his peril. Consequently, Kirk found that "Burke declared that men do not make laws, they merely ratify or distort the laws of God."¹³ Contrary to what many prior scholars of Burke had thought, Kirk argued that for Burke the standard by which human laws are to be judged is not their apparent utility (often narrowly defined), but their conformity with the natural law. Nor was Burke's attachment to religion rooted in its social utility. Rather, Kirk argued that "Burke does not approve religion because it is a bulwark of order, instead he says that mundane order is derived from, and remains a part of, Divine order."¹⁴ The portrait that emerges of Burke in Kirk's study is not that of a conservative utilitarian but of a natural law thinker, albeit one who

¹² Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* 32.

¹³ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 43.

¹⁴ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 28.

was most influenced by the classical tradition of Cicero rather than the scholastic tradition of Aquinas.

Of the scholars who recovered Burke as a natural law thinker, Kirk may have best understood the corrective that Burke provided to the corruption that Enlightenment rationalism had worked upon natural law theorizing. Modern and Enlightenment thinkers had transmuted the idea of natural law into a source of mathematical models for morality and politics. But the natural law is not a heavenly statute book that can be apprehended through reason and readily applied to practical politics. Even if it were understood in such a fashion, superlative acts of individual reason are not a firm foundation for a moral and political order. To constantly reevaluate each new circumstance from first principles (even if they could be established, which they have not) would be intolerable.

Kirk knew that social order depends on habit, and that the instantiation of natural law precepts depends less on reason than on prescription. He wrote that “it seems that people are decent, when they are decent, chiefly out of habit. They fall into habits of decent conduct by religious instruction, by settled family life, by assuming private responsibilities.”¹⁵ Philosophers and statesmen have tasks of reflection and reform, but they ought to begin with a determination to preserve the good, knowing that a tolerably good social order is often fragile, and that most men do not reason their way to moral truths, but inherit and assimilate them through family, church and culture.

These politics of prudence were championed by Burke, who was a great reformer as well as a foe of radical revolution. Even as he condemned the French Revolution, Burke directed the impeachment of Hastings for wrongs committed against the British Empire’s subjects in India.

¹⁵ Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination*, 126.

Burke's reforming efforts were undertaken not on behalf of abstract systems of rights, but on the best of the moral knowledge and traditions of the world.

But the radicals of the Enlightenment were eager to tear down the social order that instructed men in their moral duties, in part because they had embraced a fallacious idea of human nature that stripped away man's social realities. Their theories of man's natural state removed man from the relationships and institutions that form and define him. In contrast, Burke rejected theories of natural rights that posited man in an unnatural, asocial state. Society is the natural state of man, and art is man's nature. Nonetheless, a good social and political order is established only with difficulty, often through painful trial and error. Kirk knew that even within the natural social order of mankind, "Disorder always had been the natural condition of man; order, the product of elaborate artifice."¹⁶ An asocial state of mankind would be dreadful; "Order, justice and freedom are garden plants; the natural condition of humankind is that of the jungle."¹⁷ The jungle is not asocial, but it is often brutal.

The effort to elucidate the precepts of the natural law by positing a humanity whose essence is the opposite of the real social condition of humanity was a failure. The moral truths of the natural law are not found through abstract speculation that strips away the realities of human existence as it is in search of an abstract human essence. Rather, they are apprehended throughout the human experience. The process by which moral and political truths are realized involves the whole person, as she actually exists in society, rather than the naked intellect contemplating an isolated individual.

Kirk understood that Burke in particular had redeemed tradition as a mediator of natural law, rather than its opponent. Indeed, tradition functions as a form of the public reason that was

¹⁶ Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination*, 378.

¹⁷ Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination*, 394.

so elusive for Enlightenment thinkers. In Burke's language, instead of each man relying on his own private stock of reason, tradition allows him to rely upon the bank and capital of nations and of ages—the natural law as instantiated and practiced.

While discussing Cicero, Kirk connected this reliance on tradition to the importance of the moral imagination, asserting that the “natural law is not a fixed code in opposition to the law of the state: properly understood, the law of nature is the moral imagination and that natural law enables us, through reason, to apply customary and statutory law humanely. The natural law, in Cicero's expression of it, is ethical principle interpreting the rules by which men live together in community.”¹⁸ The natural law is known through the moral imagination reflecting upon experience and tradition, more than through the abstract efforts of reason.

And the moral imagination is inculcated in many different ways. Kirk knew that art and religion are as essential to the formation and continuation of a sound political and social order as is philosophy. The moral imagination is shaped by culture, with its symbols, norms and narratives, and so he wrote about art and literature and architecture. He wrote an insightful book about T.S. Eliot, his friend and the greatest poet of the twentieth century. He even wrote gothic fiction. He enjoyed ghost stories; there was sometimes money to be made in writing them, but his efforts are also rich with nutrients for the moral imagination of his readers. Some of Kirk's fiction sold well (*Old House of Fear* sold more copies than all his other books combined),¹⁹ but he did not have the enduring success of a J.R.R. Tolkien (whose work Kirk admired). Still, his tales were part of his efforts to water and fertilize the wasteland that Eliot had so memorably described.

¹⁸ Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2004), 112.

¹⁹ Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination*, 250.

We are creatures of narrative and imagination, more than of reason. Kirk declared that what “chiefly distinguishes the human kingdom from the animal kingdom is the power of imagination possessed by the human race.”²⁰ This may overstate the matter, but it is true that reason and imagination are interactive and complementary within the human consciousness. The apprehension of moral truth depends on the right quality of imagination, as much as right reason. And both reason and imagination are shaped by culture and language, rather than existing in a realm of pure intellects and essences. As Kirk put it, “so far as we can delineate the features of natural justice, Burke suggests, it is the experience of mankind which supplies our knowledge of Divine law; and the experience of the species is taught to us not only through history, but through myth and fable, custom and prejudice.”²¹ The moral truths that should guide us will be made manifest through the whole of our experience.

As Kirk understood Burke’s view, we know the Divine mind and will through “the prejudices and traditions which millenniums of human experience with Divine means and judgments have implanted in the mind of the species.”²² Man, as a social being, cannot exist outside of tradition, and though tradition is not infallible, regarding it with humility is the proper response given the grave limits of private reason, and the extent to which we are always shaped by tradition. We are instructed both consciously and unconsciously by these legacies of the past, though we also influence them in return as we partake of them. Unlike the philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer and Alasdair MacIntyre, Kirk did not undertake a full philosophical exploration of tradition (though he had read MacIntyre at least).²³ However, it is clear that Kirk did not view

²⁰ Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination*, 309

²¹ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 44.

²² Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 26.

²³ Birzer, *Russell Kirk: American Conservative*, 257.

tradition as static, but as something reformed and renewed as it is handed down through generations.

Kirk observed such a dynamic in the American founding, and his book *The Roots of American Order* provides an illustration of his understanding of tradition. Arguing against those who saw America as a project of Enlightenment or classical liberal philosophy (and therefore anti-traditional), he traced the traditions upon which the framers of the United States relied, often consciously. The United States founding was influenced by natural law thinking, but it was not reducible to the rationalistic natural rights theories of Locke and his followers. For instance, Kirk noted that “Blackstone and his American disciples Story and Kent...looked upon the common law as the nearest approach (however imperfect) to natural law, because it had grown out of the experiences and observations and consensus of many generations of wise men and had been tested repeatedly for its conformity to natural law.”²⁴

Though the natural law may justify and inform rebellion against unjust government, Kirk emphasized that it should do so in defense of concrete goods, not on behalf of abstract ideals. He repeatedly pointed out that the American colonists rebelled to preserve a patrimony and habit of self-government, unlike the radicals of the French Revolution. The American War for Independence was waged in defense of rights that were long-standing, rather than the product of abstract speculation. The Declaration of Independence appeals to both natural law and natural rights, but also contains many complaints regarding violations of the traditional rights and practices of self-government that the colonists had enjoyed.

Therefore, in the American context Kirk’s conservatism directs us toward the Constitution and the inheritance of our history and traditions, rather than defining the United

²⁴ Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, 371.

States according to a few sentences from the beginning of the Declaration of Independence.

Birzer explains that Kirk knows that “simply because Locke or Jefferson declared three rights as rights did not make them so and never could. To believe that either of these men identified the rights perfectly would be to presume that each knew things that only God can know, and the result would be nothing short of a parody of real rights and real justice.”²⁵ The United States was not established as a project of Enlightenment rationalism, and Kirk resisted attempts to rebrand it as such.

Conclusion

Though the conservative intellectual tradition Russell Kirk illuminated has not always triumphed over its rivals in the academy and in politics, his work remains indispensable reading for educated conservatives, and those who seek to understand them. Kirk established intellectual conservatism as neither rationalistic nor relativistic. Conservatives believe that there is an enduring moral order to which we owe obedience, and that we, as finite, contingent creatures, cannot fully encompass it through an act of intellectual domination. With our limitations, we must often rely upon tradition, informed by the moral imagination. But tradition is alive, always needing renewal and often needing reform. We should, however, prefer to proceed cautiously, mindful of our limits and frailties, rather than eagerly seeking to remake culture and government in accord with rationalist plans.

This wisdom is frequently neglected, even by self-described conservatives. Kirk’s legacy is too often unheeded by those who claim to honor him. Nonetheless, his works still nourish the moral imaginations of readers, and his ideas resonate with those who seek to redeem the time. Kirk liked to reference Eliot’s observation that there are no lost causes because there are no

²⁵ Birzer, *Russell Kirk: American Conservative*, 251.

gained causes, and the conservative cause is, by definition, perpetual. But Kirk repelled
rationalist assaults, rebuilt and restored an intellectual conservatism, and added a noble amount
to the wisdom held in the bank and capital of ages.