



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on January 8, 2013

Learning Conservatism from Edmund Burke

As the members of America's "conservative" party struggle to get a hold of themselves following this past election, they should revisit — or visit — the thought of modern conservatism's "patron saint," Edmund Burke.

If anything distinguishes conservatism from other brands of political thought, it is its affirmation of tradition. This Burke makes clear. This attachment to *tradition*, in turn, is inseparable from its disavowal of "metaphysical abstraction." Radicals of all types think that they can surmount their cultural traditions — their civilization — by bringing them before the tribunal of their own intellects. Burke is having none of it.

"We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason," Burke famously wrote, for "we suspect that this stock in each man is small." Human reason, far from preceding tradition, is actually dependent upon it. Thus, rather than rely upon their own reason, individuals "would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages" — i.e. tradition.

This lofty conception of Reason for which radicals are known — F.A. Hayek called it "the fatal conceit" — gives rise to a morality of *ideals* or *principles*. For example, the radicals of the French Revolution upon whom Burke set his sights touted the ideals of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. Radicals in other times and places have centered their attention on Human Rights, say, or Virtue, Piety, Democracy, and the Will of the People.

There is nothing wrong with ideals and principles as such. The problem sets in when they are treated as if they were timeless and self-evident truths that can be effortlessly grasped by people everywhere. It is when we ignore the fact that these ideals and principles are meaningful only within the context of the specific traditions within which they developed that trouble promises to ensue.

As Burke says, we must guard against "the metaphysic sophistry" and "delusive plausibilities" of radicals who would divest our ideals of "every relation" so that they are left standing "in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction." We must take care to remember that it is "circumstances" that "render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind."

Those who follow a morality of ideals aspire to be something like "citizens of the world." Those who recognize that morality is rooted in tradition, however, know that "charity starts at home," as we say.





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They recognize, in other words, that it is our families, churches, and local communities — our “little platoons,” Burke called them — that make us into the moral beings that we are.

Given that the family is the quintessential “little platoon,” it is with the imagery of the family that Burke chose to drape the relationship between the citizen and his state. The English, he wrote, “claim and assert our liberties,” not as deductions from abstract principles, but “as an *entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity.” (Emphasis added.)

Burke explained that in giving to “our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood,” the idea of an inheritance conjoins “the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties” while “adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections.”

The turn from a morality of ideals toward a traditional morality that Burke urged has been heeded by many a conservative. The same, unfortunately, can not be said of Republicans. Neither do they seem to share his skepticism of Reason.

But if the members of America’s “conservative” party did listen to Burke, maybe they would realize a few things.

First, because the best intentions of even the brightest of folks often have wildly unpredictable consequences, top-down societal schemes for which Big Government is known must be resisted at every turn.

Translation: A genuinely federal, or constitutional, government of the sort mapped out by the Founders must be the goal for which every conservative works.

Second, national defense is one thing. International crusades or wars for Freedom or Democracy or any other ideal are something else entirely. Every conservative must recognize them for the utopian, and inevitably destructive, fantasies that they are.

Third, massive third-world immigration of the kind that America has been promoting for nearly half a century is something conservatives must strive to end. The morality embodied by our institutions generally, and our constitutional institutions particularly, is culturally specific. That is, it is Eurocentric. The vast majority of today’s immigrants are strangers to Western moral norms, when they aren’t outright hostile toward them. And in any event, not only are there no institutional arrangements in place to encourage them to become literate in our ways, but the spirit of our times encourages them to resist assimilation.

Familiarity with Burke is necessary if the members of our conservative party are going to start acting like conservatives.



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