



The Neoconservative Philosophy

Whether “anti-Semitism” is or ever was a meaningful concept is a matter with which we needn’t concern ourselves. What we know is that it is commonly equated with anti-Jewish animus. The point I wish to make here is that not only is it illegitimate to view the word “neoconservatism” as the function of this sort of animus, but it is wrong to think that it is a pejorative term of *any* sort.

Neoconservatism is a distinctive political orientation. In fact, not only is it distinct from what I will call the classical conservative tradition, it is fundamentally different *in kind* from the latter.



We have a tendency to define political orientations in terms of the specific policy positions typically associated with them. For example, a “liberal” is someone who supports “abortion rights,” “labor unions,” expansive “welfare” entitlements, etc. while a “conservative” opposes abortion and favors “limited government” and a “strong national defense.” But the identity of any political orientation really comes into focus once we look beyond the substance of the policy prescriptions to the formal philosophical suppositions that inform them.

[Epistemology](#), [ethics](#), and [political philosophy](#) are three branches of philosophy. The first is the study of knowledge. Those who specialize in epistemology concern themselves with such questions as: What is knowledge? Is it attainable and, if so, *how* do we attain it? Ethics is the study of morality. Ethicists analyze such basic moral concepts as obligation, right, good, evil, virtue, and a host of other topics constitutive of the moral life. Political philosophy, as the name suggests, is the exploration of politics. Characteristic political philosophical questions are: What kind of entity is the state? What is or should be the relationship between the government and the citizen?

Upon analyzing neoconservatism, what we discover is that epistemologically, ethically, and political philosophically, it is much more akin to what is commonly called “liberalism” than it is the classical conservatism of which [Edmund Burke](#) is said to be the “patron saint.”

Epistemology

From the neoconservative’s conception of America as a “propositional” or “[creedal](#)” nation — a nation erected upon an idea — we can derive his conception of reason. For the neoconservative, Reason stands over and above culture and tradition. It owes nothing to contingency. There is one and the same Intellect for all rational beings, regardless of time and place. This, of course, doesn’t mean that all people possess equal intellectual facility; what it means is that if there *was* such equality, then all rational minds would converge seamlessly upon the same ideas.

The neoconservative is, in other words, a *Rationalist*. As such, he is of a piece with leftist Rationalists of various sorts who for the last couple centuries or so have insisted upon the competence of unaided



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on May 30, 2011

Reason to supply “solutions” to all of life’s problems.

However, this [Rationalism](#) of which neoconservatism is the most recent expression is exactly that intellectual fashion against which classical conservatism originally emerged as the distinctive tradition that it is. It was the Rationalist’s substitution of an omniscient, omnipotent Reason for an omniscient, omnipotent God that inspired Burke and the like to formulate what has since been known as conservatism.

Ethics

The neoconservative’s idea of Reason is inseparable from his ethics and his political philosophy. Let’s look at the former first.

The abstract, universal, omnipotent Reason at the center of the neoconservative’s epistemological scheme provides access to moral *principles* that are equally abstract and universal. That is, morality, for the neoconservative, is comprised first and foremost of principles, whether they are called “Human Rights,” “Liberty,” “Equality,” “Freedom,” or whatever. These are principles that, because they are held to be accessible to all rational beings, are [self-evident](#).

Now, principles are indispensable to any morality; there is nothing distinctive, much less controversial, about a moral vision allotting room for principles. But the rationalist morality of the neoconservative both assigns [principles a central position](#) as well as regards them as *timeless*. Since that which is timeless by definition transcends time, what this implies is that the moral principles of the neoconservative transcend tradition, habit, and custom.

In short, these moral principles owe nothing to just those things that classical conservatives have regarded as the sources of moral inspiration and character formation. Principles, as I said, are important. Yet to concede this much is most certainly *not* endorse the neoconservative’s understanding of principles. Rather, for the classical conservative, far from subsisting in advance of tradition, moral principles are abstracted from it. That is, moral principles stand in relation to traditions of conduct the way that grammatical principles stand in relation to living languages: Before there are principles there must first be a tradition to give them life.

Political Philosophy

The neoconservative views the state — or what is more customarily referred to as “the nation-state” — as a certain kind of association, what the conservative philosopher [Michael Oakeshott](#) called an “enterprise association.” An association of this kind is determined by its *end* or *goal*, a substantive state of affairs toward the realization of which all of the associates are expected to contribute. In the case of the state, this goal has been variously defined: Equality, Freedom, Security, Piety, Prosperity, and Virtue are just some of the candidates that have been submitted.

When the neoconservative erroneously speaks of it in terms of a system of “free *enterprise*,” he reveals his bias in favor of this reading of the state. If this is what the state is, then its end is Prosperity or Affluence. More telling, however, is the neoconservative’s penchant for conceiving the state, or at least the American state, as a Democracy.

The neoconservative’s assertion to the contrary notwithstanding, “democracy” refers to nothing more or less than the terms in which *authority* is constituted; it does *not* refer to *the engagements* that a state will or should pursue. “Democracy,” in other words, is a certain kind of *procedure*. It has nothing to do with *the results* that a government will seek to produce. Democracy *could* give us Ron Paul or Barack



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Obama, the Muslim Brotherhood or Hamas. So, those who think that only a faux democratic system could catapult a terrorist into office are sorely mistaken as to what democracy is.

An enterprise association is incompatible with the freedom and liberty that our Constitution was designed to supply and secure, for the members of an enterprise association are not *free* to pursue their own ends but, rather, are required to part with some of their resources in order to pursue the end of the collective enterprise.

The classical conservative knows this. This is why he sees in the Constitution, at least as it was originally conceived, the terms, not of an enterprise association, but of a *civil* association.

Neoconservatism is a distinctive way of attending to politics, but it is eons apart from classical conservatism.



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