

The Starry Hosts in Order Move

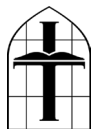
Henry Grove (1683–1738)

The starry hosts in order move,
Observant of their bounds;
And every year, and every day
The sun repeats his rounds.

While generations rise and fall,
Immortal is the race;
And time may shift the fading scenes,
But not the earth displace.

What winter's withering breath destroys,
The following spring supplies;
And age, in vigorous youth renewed,
Beholds itself, and dies.

The life by thee preserved, O God,
Shall all be spent for thee;
And flowing bear thy praise along
To vast eternity.



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In the Nick of Time

The Rise of Modern Conservatism

Kevin T. Bauder

In high school I was taught that a conservative favors the existing conditions, while anyone who wishes to change those conditions is a liberal. The point was illustrated by a worker's wage. If you wanted a raise, said our teacher, then you were a liberal. If you wanted to keep the same wage, then you were a conservative.

This discussion was, of course, misleading. It was not merely worthless, but downright damaging. Yet many who use the label *conservative* seem to have no clearer idea of what that position entails.

Conservatism is in some ways an ancient way of thinking. You can find its roots in the Bible. Its modern permutation has been mediated through Edmund Burke in England, and it has clarified certain emphases through both the Federalists and the anti-Federalists of the American founding. Its American expression has been worked out in response to a whole series of conflicts. Still, modern conservatism is a phenomenon that arose only after the Second World War. It represents a combination of influences from three principal thinkers and one popularizer.

The first thinker was Russell Kirk, who provided the historical platform upon which conservatism rests. Kirk worked out this platform in several books, the most influential of which is *The Conservative Mind*. This work traces conservative thought from Edmund Burke to George Santayana. Later editions go on to include T. S. Eliot. The point of the book is to survey the development of conservative ideals, showing how various principles have emerged from different movements and thinkers.

Kirk's work is particularly noteworthy for its articulation of key ideas that define conservatism. These include the following. (1) Belief in a transcendent order or body of natural law that rules society as well as conscience. (2) Affection for the variety and mystery of human existence, leading to a rejection of social leveling and uniformity. (3) Affirmation of the rule of law and its equal application, but recognition that human distinctions necessarily lead to inequality of condition. (4) Recognition that freedom and property rights are joined such that when private property is threatened, the authoritarian state becomes irresistible. (5) Faith in custom, prescription, and tradition as

practical guides, combined with a distrust of those who wish to restructure society along abstract and unproven schemes (ideologies). (6) Realization that change must be tempered with prudence since hasty innovation can often be destructive.

If Kirk provided the historical platform for conservatism, Richard M. Weaver articulated the philosophical rationale. Like Kirk, Weaver developed his ideas in multiple volumes. The most important was *Ideas Have Consequences*.

For Weaver, the key distinction in the way people approach the world has to do with what he called the *metaphysical dream*. Weaver defined a metaphysical dream as an intuition or sentiment about the immanent nature of reality. Weaver grapples with the question of how people can justify their beliefs about the world, especially their moral beliefs. Moderns try to do this by looking directly at the particular things of the present world. Weaver, however, argues for an order that exists above and beyond the tangible world. Unless one begins with this transcendent order and allows it to define one's vision of the world, the result will be chaos and destruction. For Weaver, conservatism is most importantly the attempt to discern and to define reality by this transcendent order.

Effectively, Weaver expands the first point of Kirk's definition. Most people find his argument to be difficult on a first reading. It does become easier as Weaver applies it to the particulars of Western life and thought. Still, most readers will need to go through *Ideas Have Consequences* at least three times before they can begin to make sense of it. That seems like a lot of effort, but the book will repay careful readers.

The third key work that shaped postwar conservatism is Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*. In this and other works, Hayek defends property rights as essential to human freedom and flourishing. Hayek's work is thus an expanded defense of the fourth point in Kirk's definition. He represents the position that is sometimes called *Austrian economics*. He writes with passion because of his personal encounter with both the nationalistic and communist forms of socialism. He personally rejected the label *conservative*, but his thought provides the economic plank in the conservative platform.

If Hayek's ideas are taken by themselves, they can lead to libertarianism as readily as to conservatism. Because of their commitment to a transcendent order, however, conservatives are not libertarians. The difference became clear in the work of the great popularizer of conservative ideals, William F. Buckley.

While Buckley wrote books (lots of them), his most enduring influence came through his magazine, *National Review*. Buckley's mission was to synthesize the ideas of Kirk, Weaver, and Hayek, and to stake out an intellectual territory to be occupied by modern conservatism. To do that, his most urgent task was to distinguish a genuine conservatism from two destructive pretenders.

One was the amoral libertarianism of Ayn Rand. The other was the populist conspiricism represented by the John Birch Society. As he began the work of articulating conservative ideals, his first step was to debunk both the "Objectivist" libertarians and the Birchers.

Buckley's synthesis and energetic defense of conservative ideals built a movement that eventually changed the world. These ideals persuaded many, and they led directly to the Reagan Revolution and the collapse of communism. The subsequent weakening of conservatism can probably be traced to the abandonment of these ideals and of Buckley's synthesis. What passes for conservatism today is too often a direct rejection of one or more of the core conservative ideas.

Can conservatism be restored? Perhaps. If so, its restoration will begin when people recognize that it is not primarily a political stance, but a set of moral sensibilities and ideas. People who wish to become intelligent conservatives must first aim to experience those sensibilities and to grasp those ideas. There is no better way to do that than to go to the sources, and the sources of modern conservatism lie in Kirk, Weaver, and Hayek. A mastery of their core works is essential for anyone who intends to be a thoughtful conservative activist rather than a mere reactionary.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
