

## Freedom and Virtue – Chapter 1

### Do-It-Yourself Conservatism?\*

M. MORTON AUERBACH (vs. M. STANTON EVANS, FRANK S. MEYER, AND RUSSELL KIRK)

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Anyone who has tried to apply the term “conservative” to more than one period of history knows that the word is extremely flexible. In its original eighteenth-century European usage, “conservative” referred to an opponent of the French Revolution. The tradition against which the Revolution was directed was the heritage of the Middle Ages. Therefore, a conservative was at that time one who defended medieval values against the “liberals” who supported the principles of revolutionary France. Among other things, the conservative medievalists believed in the supreme importance of 1) a cohesive, organic community; 2) a code of “natural law” and religious orthodoxy which emphasizes moral obligations and duties; 3) a sharply graded system of social status which teaches each to stay in his “allotted place” in society; 4) a citizenry which demands no more of the community than what custom assigns to one’s social position; and 5) leadership at the top by a leisured aristocracy. The liberal revolutionaries denied the primacy of every one of these concepts. Their ideology favored 1) the individual instead of the community; 2) a moral code which began with “natural rights” and freedoms instead of duties; 3) a society based on open competition instead of social status; 4) a citizenry which expects reward according to individual ability instead of custom; and 5) leadership by the middle class. These premises led liberals to conclude that a good society should have free enterprise, civil liberties, and limited government.

For twentieth-century Americans the terms “conservative” and “liberal” have acquired not only different meanings but self-contradictory ones. *National Review* now calls someone a Liberal if he favors the administrative or the welfare state, regardless of whether he does so for socialist reasons, for authoritarian reasons, or for reasons which are still liberal in the original sense of the word. On the other hand, we usually use the word “conservative” to mean one who wants government to leave private enterprise alone. In other words, what was once liberalism has now become conservatism. To increase the confusion, a number of intellectuals (who are called the “new conservatives”) have been trying recently to link American conservatism to Edmund Burke, the classic spokesman for the original medieval form of conservatism. Consequently, the term “conservatism” is now being used to mean opposition to the administrative state, regardless of whether the opposition results from classical liberal or from medieval premises. Thus, Barry Goldwater, obviously a conservative of the classical liberal variety, cites Russell Kirk as his favorite theoretician, in spite of the fact that Kirk is an avowed Burkean who deplores the passing of aristocracy. Frederick Wilhelmsen, whose favorite period of history seems to lie somewhere in the Middle Ages, appears alongside William Buckley, whose preference would almost certainly be for one or more of the liberal centuries. And Russell Kirk, who

has charged Buckley with erroneous defense of individualism, continues to be a favorite of Buckley's *National Review*.

The fallacious attempt to link medievalism with classical liberalism goes back to Burke himself who, unlike Continental conservatives of the eighteenth century, wanted to defend a version of medievalism which was tempered by a considerable amount of liberalism. Some months ago, in a book entitled *The Conservative Illusion*, I discussed the many contradictions to which Burke was forced because of his insistence on keeping both medievalism and liberalism in a single political theory. I also demonstrated that Burke's followers (the "new conservatives") have simply built new contradictions on his old ones, without ever having resolved the original problem.

*The Conservative Illusion* dealt exclusively with the predominantly medieval, Burkean type of conservatism and *not at all* with the primarily liberal type of conservatism to be found in *National Review*. The response of *National Review* [M. Stanton Evans' review, Jan. 30, 1960] provided a fascinating study in evasion. First it charged that my analysis of Burke was a "verbal agony," the charge apparently resting on the premise that if I found any contradictions in Burke, it must be my fault, not his. Then it dismissed the rest of the book on the grounds that it was not directed at "authentic" conservatism. "Authentic" conservatism turned out to be primarily the classical liberalism of James Madison, which was simply not the subject of the book. But the list of authentic simultaneously included Burkeans and others whose first premises are medieval. Thus the review concluded with precisely the fallacy which it found so inconceivable in my analysis of Burke.

Consider the position of William Buckley. Even from a casual reading of his books, one can see that his major premises rest primarily on the desire to maximize individual freedom and competition. Like most American conservatives, Buckley is interested first in increasing economic freedom by diminishing the economic role of government. But a preponderance of both educators and voters have been willing to maintain and probably increase government participation in economics. Therefore, to allow intellectual and political freedom under present conditions is to allow increasing restrictions on economic freedom. Conversely, one who would affirm this last freedom must restrict the first two. One of Buckley's major arguments against what he calls "Liberals" is that in choosing to follow intellectual freedom and political democracy wherever they may lead, the "Liberals" have been destroying economic freedom, thus being guilty of a major inconsistency. But if this is wrong, then why is it valid for Buckley simply to turn the fallacy upside down? If freedom is the supreme value, then isn't the diminution of any freedom wrong, whether economic, intellectual, or political?

It follows that Buckley would have a much more difficult time justifying all of his positions if he had to do so with the same premise, namely, the need to maximize individual freedom. It is much easier simply to tailor the argument to the occasion. Thus, when he wants a clear statement of the limits on legitimate

government intervention in private affairs he turns to an early formulation of John Stuart Mill or some classical liberal formulation. But when he wants to argue for intellectual conformity to “tradition,” Buckley suddenly begins quoting from Edmund Burke conveniently glossing over the fact that he uses “tradition” to mean specifically the classical liberal tradition, while Burke uses the word to mean primarily the medieval tradition. Indeed, Burkean arguments are always handy when Buckley needs to avoid embarrassing responsibility to the concept of freedom, even though he never uses Burke’s terminology in its original meaning. Could this be why it has become so important for *National Review* to maintain an imaginary escape tunnel connecting Burke with James Madison, *i.e.*, joining medievalism and classical liberalism? Will conservatism continue to offer nothing more than an array of mutually exclusive “principles” from which all are invited to pick what suits them? Is this the age of do-it-yourself conservatism?

### ***Techniques and Circumstances***

#### **M. Stanton Evans**

Mr. Auerbach’s problem, I think, is twofold: First, he obviously does identify his subject with “medievalism,” repeatedly defining conservatism as the amalgam of convictions, techniques and moods which marked the politics of an aristocratic past. He fails to determine which elements in that amalgam are essential points of philosophy, and which are technical or stylistic epiphenomena characterizing it at a particular point in time. Thus, in his present list of conservative beliefs, he makes no apparent distinction between “a code of natural law” and “leadership at the top of a leisured aristocracy.” He ignores the truism that while principles are by definition constant, the technique by which they can be vindicated may alter from age—*e.g.*, when understanding is improved by experience or new information (as Hamilton suggested in Federalist No. 9), or when circumstances have become changed so radically that former techniques are no longer effective (as when liberalism, not conservatism, has become the *status quo*).

Second, having failed to isolate the essentials of conservative philosophy, Auerbach inevitably fails to demonstrate any system of relations between that philosophy and the form of our political institutions. He therefore fails to demonstrate a necessary disjunction between conservative principles and political liberty, and thus to prove his asserted “inconsistency” on the part of libertarian conservatives.

If we view conservatism as a philosophy, rather than as an immutable catalogue of tastes and foibles, I think we can attribute to it certain primary and constant affirmations. The conservative believes ours is a God-centered, and therefore an ordered, universe; that man’s purpose is to shape his life to the patterns of order proceeding from the Divine center of life; and that, in seeking this objective, man is hampered by a fallible intellect and vagrant will.

Properly construed, this view of things is not only compatible with a due regard for human freedom, but demands it. The conservative's first concern is that man restrain his appetites by the imperatives of right choice—choice which can take place only in circumstances favoring volition. Moreover, the reign of appetite is most destructive, and the incentives and opportunities for its exercise most plentiful, when fallible man is endowed with unlimited power over his fellow beings. If man is corrupted in mind and impulse, he is hardly to be trusted with the unbridled potencies of the state. For both reasons, the limitation of government power becomes the highest *political* objective of conservatism.

That conservative views on the nature of man are commensurable with political liberty is demonstrated by the American Constitution. Mr. Auerbach's flinging about of the phrase "classical liberalism" cannot alter the fact that the Constitution, premised upon a deep mistrust of human nature and designed to curb its excesses, is a profoundly conservative document. A canvas of the debates in convention, and of the commentaries of Madison, reveals our Constitution-makers anxious to maintain freedom by counterpoising ambitions and placing countless impediments in the way of change; and to a large extent, their work was successful. What Mr. Auerbach calls an "inconsistency" is in fact the vital equilibrium, centered in the wisdom of conservatism, of the free society.

By protesting that these are not the sort of people about whom he was writing, Mr. Auerbach destroys his original effort to prove conservatism an "illusion" incapable of practical results. Indeed, if he confesses that he excludes the conservative movement as it now exists in the United States, it becomes apparent that it is Mr. Auerbach's book, and not conservatism, which is irrelevant to reality.

### ***The Separation of Powers***

#### **Frank S. Meyer**

In his reply to Stanton Evans' review of *The Conservative Illusion*, Professor Auerbach restates more succinctly the central contentions of the book itself: 1) that a belief in transcendental truth is incompatible with a belief in individual human freedom, and 2) that therefore the rapidly growing American conservatism of today is an intellectual monstrosity rent by contradictions.

What Professor Auerbach fails to understand is that the Christian understanding of the nature and destiny of man, which is the foundation of Western civilization, is always and everywhere what conservatives strive to conserve. That understanding accepts the existence of absolute truth and good and at the same time recognizes that men are created with the free will to accept or reject that truth and good. Conservatism, therefore, demands both the struggle to vindicate truth and good and the establishment of conditions in which the free will of individual persons can be effectively exercised.

Conservatism sees two overriding evils in society. On the one hand, it fights against determinist philosophies, which equate truth and good with whatever happens historically to succeed, and against relativist philosophies, which deny the very existence of truth and good. On the other hand, it resists the growth of a monopoly of power, usually exercised through the state, which suppresses or distorts the exercise of free will by individual persons. It believes, further, that such a monopoly of force can be as thoroughly and evilly exercised by a “democratic” majority as by an “aristocratic” minority or by a single tyrant.

Professor Auerbach is right when he says that conservatives oppose the contemporary aggrandizement of the state and its movement towards totalitarianism (what he so gently characterizes as “the administrative state”), for the aggrandizing state is the enemy of the freedom of the person. He is wrong when he regards such opposition as incompatible with “medieval” belief in “natural law and religious orthodoxy.” Indeed, the Middle Ages maintained a separation of powers both through the geographically decentralized institutions of feudalism and through the balance of powers between church and state. That separation of powers placed feudal Europe, as Professor Wittfogel has demonstrated in his *Oriental Despotism*, among the freest societies in the history of man.

American conservatives do not wish to return to medieval conditions. They do wish, in modern conditions, to preserve and develop the tension between the transcendent ends of man and the freedom through which he can attain those ends, the tension which Western civilization has always expressed. They will not be diverted from pursuing that course by semantic or historicist arguments based upon the struggles between nineteenth-century conservatives and nineteenth-century liberals. The nineteenth century, heir to the disruption of the French Revolution, was a brief and distorted era in the long history of Western civilization. In its struggles there was truth on both sides, and from both sides the contemporary American conservative can learn. But it is the authentic tradition of the West which he is striving to recover, a tradition which goes far deeper than the parochial disputes of the nineteenth century.

The American conservative has indeed a special heritage, the discussions and the achievements of the Founders of the American Constitution (Madison pre-eminently), men who established the highest political form the West has yet created to express the tension of transcendent truth and human freedom. The political structure they left us has its contradictions, no doubt; but, like the contradictions Professor Auerbach finds among American conservatives today, they reflect the imperfect state of man and the tension within which he must live if he is to be true to his nature, striving towards transcendent ends in freedom.

### ***Conservatism Is Not an Ideology***

**Russell Kirk**

Mr. Auerbach's fundamental difficulties are two:

1) He thinks of political preferences as rigid categories, or compartments, made up of abstractions relentlessly adhered to, regardless of altered circumstances: in short, he confounds political theory with ideology. Since conservatism never was an ideology, he is all adrift.

2) He thinks of political ideas as somehow bound to neat historical periods—"medieval," "nineteenth century," and the like. In truth, great political ideas transcend particular institutions and periods. The reflecting conservative adheres not to some idealized historical era, but to what Dr. Leo Strauss calls "the Great Tradition."

This confusion leads Mr. Auerbach into his errors about Burke. What Burke championed was not "medievalism," but the Great Tradition. He was defending the politics of Cicero, the moral system of Christianity, and the civil social order which had developed so successfully in England. (That Mr. Auerbach can think of England in the latter half of the eighteenth century as somehow medieval serves to justify Jacques Barzun's strictures on the American Ph.D.; a cursory reading of Lecky or Leslie Stephen would have dispelled this curious illusion.) There is no inconsistency between the *Letter to a Noble Lord* and *Thoughts on Scarcity*: for Burke was not trying to harmonize medieval economic practices and constitutional government, but rather was engaged in a justification of certain enduring moral and political norms.

Similarly, Auerbach seems to think that Burke's defense of aristocracy is somehow medieval—and that therefore Senator Goldwater cannot hold the same concept of just leadership. (According to this line of reasoning, John Adams, too, must have been a medievalist—and even Jefferson.) But what Burke actually said is this: "A true natural aristocracy is not a separate interest in the state, or separable from it. It is an essential integrant part of any large body rightly constituted. It is formed out of a class of legitimate presumptions, which, taken as generalities, must be admitted for actual truths." And Burke goes on to include among this natural aristocracy—not merely landed proprietors, but the genuinely leisured and strictly educated; the administrators of law and justice; professors of science and arts; rich traders with their "habitual regard to commutative justice." One remarkable good expression of this natural aristocracy, as things have turned out, is the United States Senate, of which Mr. Barry Goldwater is so eminent a member. Such an aristocracy is not "medieval," but simply essential to every just and successful civil social order.

Mr. Auerbach, a liberal ideologue, is distressed because conservatives are making headway nowadays—and so he reproaches them for not behaving like ideologues of another persuasion. But I fear that thinking conservatives will not meekly squeeze themselves into Mr. Auerbach's rather medieval categories. What we have seen during recent years in this country, and somewhat earlier in Britain, is the gradual fusion of conservatives and old-fangled liberals (the minority faction of the liberal interest) into a fairly coherent body of opinion. Walter Bagehot predicted, and approved, this development as early as 1875. Not

being ideologues, people of conservative convictions have modified and improved their practical politics to suit the needs of our age. But being ideologues, liberals of Mr. Auerbach's stamp cling to hollow slogans, refusing to admit that liberalism is a dead thing in the twentieth century: and thus we arrive at the paradox which Mr. Auerbach cannot see, that nowadays liberals are far more mossbacked, and "conservative" in the bad sense of the term—an inverted conservatism of negations—than are the real conservatives.