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## *The Particular and the Universal: Kirk's Second Canon of Conservative Thought*

Since the nation's founding a salutary tension has informed American political thought—a tension between the abstract, universal truths expressed in the first part of the Declaration of Independence and the particular, experience-based prudence of the Constitution. The one establishes moral imperatives (and defines a just government) while the other establishes a new order out of the lessons of the past wedded to the cultural conventions of the American people. While the tension itself has fostered some of the most productive political thought in the American tradition, the pressure to end the tension, to simplify the American ideal, and to articulate to ourselves and a listening world a defining principle, has led to a notable imbalance. From the right, perhaps more than from the left, we hear that America is a nation of ideas, by which they mean the abstract natural rights articulated in the Declaration of Independence, and these ideas supply the defining meaning of our collective identity, the single cord that binds the nation together. Not an ethnos, not even a patchwork of peoples wedded together by a common history and by the cords of affection that come from generations of reciprocity, the United States is an idea.

To the degree that this one side of our identity eclipses the other, America as a nation becomes less important. The idea is more important than the nation that it birthed and the nation serves as a useful vehicle for establishing in practice these ideals, first domestically and then globally. The very universality of these principles, disconnected intellectually from a constraining context, makes the expansion of these ideals, insofar as it is possible,

a moral imperative. This moral imperative has justified a good many changes in our Constitution (and interpretations of our Constitution), to say nothing of the growth of the federal government. Equally important, the natural rights ideals of the Declaration served as the stated reason for entering into World War I and has, ever since, played a very important rhetorical role in our nation's foreign policy.

In part because of the simple clarity of the natural rights appeal, the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, as well as an enduring belief that all humans are created equal, have become axioms in our democracy. The other side of the tension—the one that emphasizes particular and unique cultural conventions—does not, by contrast, reduce to self-evident propositions and, indeed, can appear to be at odds with the universal principles that seem so self-evident. To make matters worse, those who have been the most ardent supporters of the more particularistic view of American identity (such as some of the Southern States Rights advocates) have been on the losing side of some of the nation's most defining struggles. The resulting trajectory of the American right has been toward a conservation of the natural rights tradition, and with it the appeals to an expansive freedom that comports well with an increasingly democratic electorate. Russell Kirk, better than any other American thinker, warned about this danger.

The danger to conservative principles is not the preservation of our nation's natural rights tradition but rather the defense of natural rights in their simple, axiomatic form, absent the complex view of human nature in the context of a providential plan dimly understood. But the cultural and philosophical context that has defined, refined, and chastened the American understanding of natural rights requires long cultivation and a willingness, rarely evident in democracies, to think beyond slogans. Russell Kirk's greatest gift to American political thought is his brilliant articulation and cultivation of a rich cultural patrimony that helps define the meaning of our most cherished ideals from within a context that is both historically textured and open to the transcen-

dental. Fifty years ago, near the middle of a century of dramatic, often violent, change, Kirk penned America's greatest work of political and cultural preservation.

The great task before Kirk then, and before us now, is the cultivation of conservative thoughts, dispositions, and, most of all, affections in conservatives. The appeal to liberty, so central to any construction of the American self, has, for contemporary "conservatives," increasingly come to mean liberation from the past (and the prescriptive role of tradition, habits, inherited culture) and a corresponding emphasis upon the power of human reason. While contemporary conservatives usually possess a fear of concentrated power, an enduring suspicion that the individual needs some form of restraint, and even a willingness to acknowledge a creator, their political appeals share in the utilitarian intellectual currency of our time. They have accepted the twin moral objectives of our age, equality and freedom, and they have embraced an increasingly global uniformity—a standardization in political culture and economic systems.

In short, contemporary conservatives do not possess the dispositions or the ideas of conservatives, simply understood. Of Kirk's original six canons of conservative thought, none sound so alien to contemporary ears as the second, which reads, in part: "Affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of human existence, as opposed to the narrowing uniformity, egalitarianism, and utilitarian aims of most radical systems."<sup>1</sup> Because this "affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of human existence" is so uncultivated while the "uniformity, egalitarianism, and utilitarian aims" of our own system are so unquestioned, we are in more desperate need of *The Conservative Mind* today than we were half a century ago. What was then more readily an act of preservation has become today an act of recovery.

The second canon begins with an affirmation, but one that stands in contrast to the others, for Kirk did not write that conservatives *believe* in (or even affirm) the variety and mystery of human existence, but rather that they have an *affection* for variety and mystery—conservatism is less ideology than aesthet-

ics, less about beliefs than the imagination that orders those beliefs.<sup>2</sup> Kirk understood this affection to be life-affirming, emerging out of an inherited and powerful vision about human nature and divine purpose, about life as it comes to us rather than the life that we might engineer. It is the love of a creature for the creation in which he participates and in the context of which he gets his purpose, his reason for being. It is the joy of the spiritual outdoors—boundless, beautiful, and incomprehensible—rather than the delusion of a materialist paradise where the creature has become creator of a rather pinched world.

Humans are complex, possessing natures that are alike across cultures and time, but shaped into unique persons. Each distinct, but none independent, these humans participate in a single story, a providential plan, while finding their roles in the smaller stories which they help write. They belong to a closed universe, with fixed universal ideals like beauty and truth, and yet they are free agents who live for themselves and act according to their own choices. They have dominion over the earth, and the things of the earth, but the earth is not their home. Kirk's anthropology depends on understanding both the universality of human nature and the variety of human culture.

If, as so many moderns affirm, we come to know what is most essential about humans by abstracting humans from any tainting or complicating social or political context and thereby isolating their desires and fears, then a rational, constructivist approach to building both social and political institutions is quite plausible and attractive. Humans, thus abstracted from their context, become more or less interchangeable, making possible a prescription for the best social and political institutions that is tailored to this stripped down human and universally applicable. But Kirk and the conservatives reject this reductive and rationalist construction of human nature. Humans are social. This is not merely a tendency toward being with one's own kind; it is rather the means of individual development of one's humanity. It might be more precise to think of humans as cultural beings rather than simply social beings, for it is not the working together toward common

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or communal ends or the pleasure of social intercourse that makes us distinctively humans. We are who we are as individuals (as humans) because of the cultural forms we inherit. We learn a language that structures our perceptions of our world and make possible deliberation about the Good. We inherit customs, rituals, and institutions that express symbolically the meaning for our individual and collective lives. It is not the natural man where one finds human meaning or human purpose—meaning and purpose are felt by the individual through his participation in a living culture. While the cultures vary and the customs, rituals, institutions, laws, and goods differ, it is through a particular culture that any human has access to the defining and universal characteristics of human nature. Unlike other animals, humans must express the meaning of their existence even as they struggle to understand the role they should play in the drama of existence. All humans do this through particular, concrete cultural forms since there is no “natural” or instinctual way to answer these basic human needs.

It need not follow, however, that a culture cannot be universal. If one stresses a set of universal principles, like natural rights, equality before the law, or any set of abstract principles that one proposes to be universally true, then one might hope to establish universal acceptance of the principles as well as the political and social institutions that foster or express these principles. Perhaps then we could live in a global village. But for Kirk and the conservatives the problems with this are many. First, while humans live under a universal or natural law, they recognize it dimly through very limited and necessarily particular experience. Any abstracting of these principles, shorn of their cultural context, leaves a very thin normative residue—too thin a foundation upon which to establish a universal culture. Second, even the truth that a culture universalizes has its articulation in a culturally encrusted idiom, blending the normative insight inextricably with the particular experience of a living culture. Third, and most important, humans gain their orientation, develop distinctive personalities, and understand their lives to have temporal and transcendent meaning, by participating in a rooted community

where they understand themselves to be part of a larger and yet tangible story.

On this subject Kirk's thinking borrows heavily from Edmund Burke. Too rich with subtleties to explore adequately in the space allowed us here, we might understand the sinews of Kirk's thought by examining briefly a few texts to which Kirk returned often to express his meanings. One is apt to find in Kirk's writings, sometimes without much elaboration or even attribution, affirmations of the "little platoons"—a reference to a passage in the *Reflections* where Burke wrote: "To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed toward a love of our country and to mankind."<sup>3</sup> Burke emphasized here at least two things. First, that affections or love, so important to a healthy society and polity, issues from belonging, from being attached or bound to, a small part (or subdivision) of society. A certain kind of love comes from being thus bound—it is the love of duty, the sense that the real, flawed people with whom one has continuous dealings, are yours. These affections are not fleeting since they are not products of preferences or agreement but spring from the continuous reminders that these people have shaped one's self. For all the distinctiveness of individual personality, living in the little platoons of society reminds the individual that he is not who he is by his own effort—that he owes his being, his tastes, affections, and his very personality to a complex social organism.

Second, Burke stressed that the love we have for more abstract entities like nation and humankind are properly cultivated through local affections. It is love of a real neighbor, with all his flaws and peculiarities, that makes it possible for one to love one's neighbor (understood abstractly) as one's self. It is affection for one's community that makes it possible to love one's nation, recognizing by participation in the part that it, in turn, participates in a greater whole. For Kirk, it is important to keep before us the understanding that it is THROUGH the part that we can

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understand and feel affection for the whole. Those who seek to reverse it, by proclaiming that they are citizens of the world, love an abstraction without feeling any kinship with the particular human standing next to them. To love mankind abstractly makes individual humans expendable. But more to the point here, to live among the peculiar people of one's own platoon, to grow by imperceptible degrees to have affections for those one may not like, is to cultivate a love of variety and difference and a particular kind of tolerance that springs from the real connectedness between real but unlike people. By contrast, to cultivate a love for an abstract concept of humans, human potential, and human community, is to breed intolerance for those who fit not the mould. To love the particular person, with his many idiosyncrasies, breeds less of a desire for wholesale change while to love the abstract "man" necessitates that transformation of real people to fit the ideal.

Of course these little platoons, to say nothing of the larger cultures of which they are a part, differ in important ways from other platoons, other cultures. In one sense, then, they are not natural. Each one is rooted in experiences, different in important respects from others, going back generations. Out of those experiences people have attempted to satisfy human desires and to secure natural rights through human "contrivance." Government is just such a contrivance as are the many institutions, habits, and prejudices that give a particular coloring to a culture. Their artificiality is hardly a deficiency. These cultural artifacts adorn a people—the best cultures craft artifices that make themselves more beautiful, that inspire virtue, that encourage gentleness and fair dealing toward their fellows. The naked self, the person utterly bereft of the customs and prejudices that govern exchanges between people, is a sorry animal indeed—small, selfish, and crude. Burke, while railing against the revolutionary forces then burying the chivalric code, wrote, famously that "all the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies

as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to a dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated.”<sup>4</sup>

The section in which this passage is located is complicated and rhetorically sophisticated, deserving an analysis extending many pages. What is important here is Burke’s understanding of human nature and human dignity. Human nature needs covering. The “decent drapery of life” is not, however, just for hiding, though it does that, but for elevating us. Our traditions, our prejudices—our culture—give a dignity to us that we cannot have in a state of nature or through the ideas of a single individual. Institutions, and the habits and ideas they cultivate, shape us into the little platoons and give us purposes higher than ourselves.

The higher purposes toward which these cultural forms point partake in both the variety and the mystery for which Kirk expressed such affection. One catches a glimpse of this point in a passage from Burke that Kirk quoted at length. I’ve provided a bit more of the passage than did Kirk to establish better the context.

Society is indeed a contract.... It is to be looked on with other reverence, because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place.<sup>5</sup>

Here is Burke’s universalism and his particularism wedded.



First, the social contract concerns not just the protection of individual rights but is an expression of a partnership among generations of a living culture. Among the peoples of the world there are many contracts and the nature of each contract, the look of their partnership, differs according to the peculiar circumstances and experiences of a given people. Because the specific contract reflects distinctive and unreproducible characteristics of a culture, any attempt to impose the specific forms of that contract on another culture would be, well, unnatural. However, “each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society.” Just as there is no understanding of the precise nature of the contract governing one’s own culture since the culture lives for many generations and faces many unforeseeable circumstances, so there is no full human comprehension of the eternal contract, the providential plan by which God links the visible and invisible world. By means of our moral imagination, which helps us understand in some limited fashion the whole of which we physically perceive a part, we recognize that the diverse stories of human history constitute, by means mysterious, a single story called History.

For Kirk the mystery of human existence is connected to his faith in Providence. We are struck by our very existence, by the fact of finite humans reaching out toward the infinite. The very scope of one’s own culture, the complexity of one’s own time, even the deep unfathomability of one’s own soul, leave one finally perplexed about the nature of the immediate story in which one plays a part. We cannot understand fully (and only partially with great effort) how the choices of distant ancestors shaped the kind of people we’ve become and the culture we embrace. But we embrace it, with its dark and mysterious origins and its tortuous progress, as ours. And when we are at our best we feel as though we have received a gracious gift of culture without knowing precisely who to thank. So much more is the sense of thanksgiving for the sensitive soul, like Russell Kirk, who recognizes that beyond these particulars which he can experience directly, there is an even greater grace dispensed by a God who turns staggering

diversity toward a common divine purpose. How could he who believes such a thing not express affection for the “proliferating variety and mystery of human existence?”

## II.

Because Kirk’s conservatism was reactionary, because the contours of his affirmations took shape out of confrontation with innovations and ideologies with which he contended, a proper examination requires a study of his aversions. Indeed, his second canon of conservative thought includes an affirmation (variety and mystery) followed by an aversion: “as opposed to the narrowing uniformity, egalitarianism, and utilitarian aims of most radical systems.” To understand better the contrast we might note a persistent dualism in Kirk’s work between complexity (which breeds diversity) and simplicity (which breeds standardization). These contrasting imaginations are most evident with foundational subjects like human nature. For Kirk humans are made in God’s image and are therefore good, while nonetheless suffering from a primordial fall that separated them from their God and planted evil in their hearts. As fallen creatures of great ingenuity, humans need the structure of a strong social and political order to instill habits and prejudices that inspire virtues. Moreover, as social and cultural beings, humans need the community, the city, the regime to actualize their moral and rational possibilities. For Kirk, following Aristotle, the community, the culture, is prior to the individual.

By contrast, most modern anthropologies are distinguished by a reductive clarity. Modern social contract theorists, for instance, sought the unalloyed individual as he would appear absent any institutions, and for the benefit of this individual—his wants, his fears, and his rights—they would construct a political system. This system has no higher purpose than the needs, so constructed, of the people. If human needs there are that cannot be deduced from this hypothetical individual in a state of nature, they have no status in modern political systems. Of course, most conspicuously, modern systems begin with the individual qua

individual. Beginning with this abstracted person, modern ideologues could readily discover “rights” belonging to the individual (anywhere and anytime) found in a state of nature but mostly abused through history by real political systems.

Kirk’s Burkean emphasis upon the person in context rather than the abstract individual made him concerned with the casual use of the language of natural rights. Kirk readily acknowledged that humans have natural rights so long as these applied to real humans, in the context of a rich moral economy in which rights (as well as liberties) find their particular expression consistent with circumstances. Kirk wrote that “natural rights do not exist independent of circumstances; what may be a right on one occasion and for one man, may be unjust folly for another man at a different time.”<sup>6</sup> What protections humans get from violations of the moral order come through institutions that have evolved over long periods. Indeed, Kirk noted approvingly Burke’s belief that “natural right is human custom conforming to divine intent.”<sup>7</sup> Such a claim has no place in modern definitions of natural right because it relies on something as non-rational as custom, which is not organized around an abstract ideal.

In the Anglo-American context the most vigorous simplifiers were the Utilitarians who, at least, displayed the virtue of rigorous consistency. Discarding all thoughts of a non-material world, of providence, of spiritual needs, the Benthamites could employ an analytical madness, reducing human life to a series of pleasurable or painful events. Because humans are more or less alike, excepting the distortions of an inherited superstition, the Utilitarians could design, by the dictates of reason, a society and polity best equipped to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. They made a fetish out of utility, out of function, discarding as rubbish all adornments that served no “rational” purpose, all technologies and ways of living they deemed inefficient. Kirk captured the utilitarian spirit, and the danger of its apparently benign affections when he wrote that “the Benthamites despised gothic irregularity and variety; they yearned after the utilitarian squares and boulevards of social planning. The Utilitarians projected long

and costly vistas; but at the end of every avenue, the Romantics spied the gallows.”<sup>8</sup>

Note Kirk’s emphasis upon what these social planners “despised” and what they “yearned after.” Theirs is a world modeled after a machine rather than a living organism. Machines are products of human ingenuity, requiring continuous tinkering, but possessing no mystery and pointing to nothing greater, to no higher ideal than production and efficiency. By contrast these planners despise that which eludes complete human comprehension, that which produces wanton variety at the expense of a controlled efficiency, and that which suggests a higher ideal than sterile pleasure. Kirk contrasted the planned community, the creation of public space as the planner would have it, with the uncontrolled variety that issues from piecemeal change where people seek to make something new without destroying completely the old. The spirit of the planners leads to “the gallows” because their abstract ideal tolerates no diversity and cannot make sense of the complexity of the human soul.

If a crude Benthamism is more or less dead, Kirk would argue that the utilitarian spirit lives on, often in more sophisticated garb. It has become part of the fabric of our culture. But the great danger to the American order is democracy, which threatens to undo the complex cultural and political mechanism designed to safeguard both order and liberty. Indeed, the American story fits too neatly the modern process of moving from complexity (which fosters variety) to simplicity (which fosters standardization and uniformity), in ideas and ideals, in institutional forms, and in political process. Kirk noted the pervasive fear among the nation’s founders of democracy, the dangerous impulses of which they sought to check. None were so concerned as the fearful and deeply conservative Fisher Ames. Kirk summarized Ames’ political thought by emphasizing that the proper object of government is “the protection of property and the tranquility of society. Democracy fails on both these essentials; for democracy—pure democracy, toward which he perceived America slipping—is founded upon the quicksand of idyllic fancy.”<sup>9</sup> Ames, Kirk empha-

sized, feared the desire for simplicity that he associated with democracy. Kirk agreed with Ames that simplicity in politics is despotism.

American leaders during the age of the nation's founding represented a good many views, including those deeply influenced by Enlightenment dreams and those, like Ames', which reacted to almost all innovation with dyspeptic consistency. But the institutional order this generation fathered was, to Kirk's mind, a remarkable accommodation of novel circumstances to both ancient wisdom and American experiences. And if this generation produced a "conservative" political order it also produced America's paradigmatic conservative, John Adams. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Adams that emerges from the pages of *The Conservative Mind* is much like Burke—indeed, Kirk sometimes found Burke's words the best means of expressing Adams' ideas. But their differences were also important: "Where Burke talked of prejudice, prescription, and natural rights, Adams attacked the doctrine of perfectibility and the idea of a unitary state."<sup>10</sup> The American national experiment very much depended on crafting and maintaining political and institutional complexity (focusing on checks and balances especially) while fighting the social tendency toward equality and uniformity.

Following Burke and John Adams, Kirk argued that:

Man being complex, his government cannot be simple. The humanitarian theorists who contrive projects of ingenious simplicity must arrive, before long, at the crowning simplicity of despotism. They begin with a licentious individualism, every man deprived of ancient sanctions and thrown upon his own moral resources; and when this state of things turns out intolerable, as it must, then they are driven to a ponderous and intolerant collectivism; central direction endeavors to compensate for the follies of reckless moral and economic atomism. Revolutionary idealists of this stamp are faithful to simplicity, though to nothing else in heaven or earth. They cannot abide any medium between absolute freedom and absolute consolidation.<sup>11</sup>

To the great credit of those who wrote the Constitution (a group that, conspicuously, included neither Jefferson or Adams), the United States possessed a government design that reflected a belief in the complexity of human nature, that supplied ingenious checks on all sources of power, that included no brief for radical equality or individualism, and aimed at protecting the ordered liberty of the American people. Such a Constitution, Kirk argued, “has been the most successful conservative device in the history of the world.”<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the United States was conspicuous by its relative absence of restrictive social classes, by its expansive suffrage, and by circumstances that encouraged an expansive view of both equality and individualism. How, in these circumstances, to guard against the tendency toward simplicity?

For Adams, probably more than for most of the other conservatives who populate Kirk’s book, one of the safeguards of a republican form of government is the cultivation of virtue in its citizens. Kirk leaves largely unexplored this component of Adams’ thought. Whatever else it includes, the cultivation of virtue requires social and local institutions that foster a recognition of interdependence, a devotion to inherited forms, a sense of honor that makes one responsible to the opinion of one’s community, and a desire to defer to those whose knowledge, experience, and character better fit them for political leadership.

Probably more important to Kirk, since he devotes more space to it, is Adams’ emphasis on “prescriptive liberties.” Adams championed liberties rather than Liberty. Recognizing the “diversity of human character [and] variety of human action”<sup>13</sup> Adams rejected a liberty that applies to the individual abstractly, emphasizing instead that liberty “is made of particular local and personal liberties.” Pushing further in his analysis of Adams, Kirk argued that the “prerequisite of just government...is recognition of local liberties and interests and diversities and their safeguarding in the state.”<sup>14</sup> These liberties, these particular and rooted (and therefore bound) liberties, are the real goals of a political system and it is “political complexity which shelters liberty.” Moreover, an emphasis upon local liberties, rather than inalienable rights,

forms part of the political complexity that prevents the tyranny so much associated by the founders with the idea of “democracy.” At its genesis, and for more than a generation, the United States had resisted the temptation toward an unmixed government, which Adams believed would lead to despotism. But from the beginning, and ever since, the greatest danger to both liberty and order has been the attraction of democracy shorn of the checks and balances of a republican form of government.

For Alexis de Tocqueville no checks can prevent the American democracy from forming a unitary power more ominous than anything found in Adams’ nightmares. He dismissed the checks in which others put such stock, claiming that no meaningful difference separates representative and direct democracy.<sup>15</sup> If Tocqueville was right, the American republic was, at heart, a democracy. But the unitary or singular quality of this democracy springs from the mild totalitarianism of a ubiquitous social order. The society had become unitary in this democracy, subsuming the political order. He wrote, for instance, that

Society acts by itself and on itself. Power exists only within its bosom; almost no one is encountered who dares to conceive and above all to express the idea of seeking it elsewhere. The people participate in drafting of laws by the choice of the legislators, in their application, by the election of the agents of the executive power; one can say that they govern themselves.... The people reign over the American political world as does God over the universe. They are the cause and the end of all things; everything comes out of them and everything is absorbed into them.<sup>16</sup>

Later, at the beginning of the chapter “On the Omnipotence of the Majority in the United States and Its Effects” he declared: “It is the very essence of democratic governments that the empire of the majority is absolute; for in democracies, outside the majority there is nothing that resists it.”<sup>17</sup>

Whatever Ames and Adams might have meant by the unitary state, one senses that they never thought to push their analysis to

such a Procrustean conclusion. Of course Tocqueville's classic, *Democracy in America*, is too rich a work to know only one interpretation, and indeed Kirk read perhaps more hope into Tocqueville's book than others might. But a few key arguments about both democracy as such and democracy in America are important relative to the fears expressed by Ames, Adams, and Kirk about the elimination of political and social complexity and the rise of a simplified order that fostered materialism, centralization, and standardization.<sup>18</sup>

The "generative fact" that shaped all social (and thereby political) relations in America, Tocqueville declared in a rather bold opening paragraph, was "equality of conditions."<sup>19</sup> The decisive change in history, looked at from a certain political perspective, is the rejection of inherent and meaningful inequalities. The belief inherent among democrats of equality has roots, no doubt, in the social contract theorists who stipulated that in nature all humans have equal rights and that no person may rightfully rule another without the consent of the person being ruled. In part, at least, Tocqueville meant to suggest that equality of conditions entail the right to self-rule. A belief in equality thus understood separates people who in earlier societies had intimate but hierarchical relationships involving ruling and being ruled, placing them together on an equal plane but having no obligations except those duly agreed upon. This social condition of equality leads to the other great principle of democracy, sovereignty of the people.

Given a belief in abstract equality, no person can accept as natural the rule of another. However, as an equal part of the "people" one recognizes in the majority a legitimate exercise of power since one is obeying one's self. Recognizing the limitations necessarily imposed on an individual to understand complex public matters, one is bound to trust public opinion as the surest guide. In a democracy, Tocqueville argued, there is no challenging of public opinion, which operates as an invisible but unchallengeable power in support of the regime. "As long as the majority is doubtful," Tocqueville wrote, "one speaks; but when it has irrevoc-



cably pronounced, everyone becomes silent and friends and enemies alike then seem to hitch themselves to its wagon.”<sup>20</sup>

The irresistible strength of the majority springs from the social power consequent of a belief in equality of condition. The consequences are many and complicated, but they include the tendency of an individual to see in the operation of the government his own will writ large and to, as a result, tolerate no independent entity. The people can tolerate a great many institutions that appear independent so long as the people have, in a sense, granted it the appearance of independence.<sup>21</sup> But a democracy cannot allow the ancient liberties of church or guild or any institutions that might have known, in an age of inequality, their own sphere. The trajectory of democracies is, therefore, toward ever greater centralization and standardization. A democracy eliminates variety in thought, sentiment, and action, though it does so without the external force of ancient tyrannies. The force that gives a democracy complete power is internal—social.

The equality and individualism of the democratic age bring psychic costs. Identity is a more tenuous matter in a society without fixed relationships and inherited roles. One is equal with one’s fellow, and one is like one’s fellow, but who precisely is the person in the mirror and what does his life mean? The anxiety of this life is heightened by a tendency in democracy to stress the material world and to reject the traditions, rituals, ceremonies that once expressed symbolically one’s relationship with realms visible and invisible. Cut off from traditions, and from any sense that the past has a purchase on one’s life or its meaning, the individual becomes preoccupied with success in the present. Material success is the only tangible marker of success in an age of equality, making one’s participation in the competitive market central to one’s sense of identity and purpose. The mysterious incorporation of the living, dead, and unborn before an all-powerful God had dissolved into atomistic pursuits for material goods that, like the owner, will turn to dust.

Kirk read in Tocqueville his own hopeful aspirations. “By force of ideas democracy may be arrested in its descent toward

despotism,” wrote Kirk.<sup>22</sup> If he saw in Tocqueville a tidal wave of history that would necessarily sweep away the old order and with it the sort of human who populated that order, Kirk chose not to accept this part of his thinking. Instead, Kirk stressed the role of religion in mitigating the materialism of the democratic regime, the importance of laws and customs to limit the power of the people, and constitutions to help protect local liberties. But in one matter Kirk and Tocqueville clearly concurred, the threat of a democratic regime is not its weakness, but its power. The great challenge for the democratic age was to supply a check on the only recognized sovereign, the people.

But with regard to the affections that Kirk associated with genuine conservatism, Tocqueville’s analysis poses even greater challenges than the ones already discussed. Tocqueville argued that democracies produce a taste for “general” or abstract ideas. Aristocratic societies, with their endless variety, produced, he argued, a distrust of general statements, finding so many particular exceptions. But in a democratic age, with its first abstract and universal claim to equality, the mind finds general propositions a very appealing way of understanding the world. “All the truths applicable to himself,” Tocqueville noted of the democratic man, “appear to him to apply equally and in the same manner to each of his fellow citizens and to those like him.” Moreover, “having contracted the habit of general ideas in the one study with which he most occupies himself and which most interests him, he carries this same habit over to all others, and thus the need to discover common rules of all things, to enclose many objects within the same form, and to explain a collection of facts by a single cause becomes an ardent and often blind passion of the human mind.”<sup>23</sup>

An attraction to the simple and universal truth is symptomatic of our own age, of those on the left, right, or center. If Tocqueville is to be believed, this fact it is not simply a matter of belief, but of what people desire to believe—what ideas attract them. An older order relished the variety of human cultures and of individual human personality, a disposition made possible by an unequal social order which fostered complex human relationships that

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entailed power, affection, duty, and areas of liberty. Now that order is effaced by a contractual order, which begins with the equality of conditions so central to Tocqueville's analysis.

There is hope. This is the great lesson of Kirk's book and his life. Every analysis of decay he penned came coupled with signs of renewal and hope. *The Conservative Mind* is the story of conservative sentiments and ideas surviving withering assaults from nearly every modern intellectual army. Tocqueville has long since passed, but conservative ideas still check the worst elements of democracy. The advocates of one form or another of naturalism have attacked religious sentiment in America, but the nation has not lost entirely its recognition that the visible world participates in a larger reality. Kirk would tell us today that love of variety and mystery still enlivens the souls and minds of an important few.

But we might legitimately ask whether self-proclaimed conservatives have affection for the variety and mystery of human existence or even if we have in public circulation the appropriate vocabulary for conceptualizing the social and cultural conditions for distinctive human personality. Too often the public conversation about universal truths divides along rather sterile ideological lines—between those who universalize a set of abstract “natural rights” and those who find humans in an open-ended universe without any providential purpose. Russell Kirk gave us a way of understanding the particular and the universal that maintains the tension. However, the great warning implied in Kirk's argument is that this is not really a battle of ideas, understood abstractly, but a battle of sentiments or affections. During the past 50 years we have cultivated many passions and have encouraged many loves, but we have not developed an “affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of human existence.” Kirk's book reminds us that we ought to not only be fighting over ideas but we ought to be shaping hearts.

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## NOTES

1. All references to Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* come from the Seventh Revised Edition (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1995) 8.

2. Any extensive discussion of Kirk's book, and his ideas, requires some discussion of his use of the word "imagination," which stands in some tension with his more reified label "mind." Among other sources, Kirk drew his understanding of this useful word from Irving Babbitt (see his *Democracy and Leadership* [Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1979]). Imagination is a human way of understanding just as is reason. Especially important, humans make sense of the whole, which they experience indirectly, in relation to the part, through the faculty of imagination. The whole is invisible to one's reason alone since reason is bound to existing things. With regard to the arguments I'm making in this essay about the relationship between the partial and the whole, the particular and the universal, one must understand the way Kirk used "imagination" to bridge the gap.

3. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987) 41.

4. *Ibid.*, 67.

5. *Ibid.*, 85; Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 17.

6. *Ibid.*, 54.

7. *Ibid.*, 50.

8. *Ibid.*, 124.

9. *Ibid.*, 82-83.

10. *Ibid.*, 88.

11. *Ibid.*, 102.

12. *Ibid.*, 110.

13. *Ibid.*, 104.

14. *Ibid.*

15. See, for instance, Tocqueville's comparison of ancient and modern democracies in *Democracy in America* translated and edited by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 201.

16. *Ibid.*, 55.

17. *Ibid.*, 235.

18. See Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 212.

19. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 3.

20. *Ibid.*, 243.

21. See, for instance, Tocqueville's discussion of the National Bank, *Ibid.*, 170.

22. Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, 218. Kirk clearly stressed Tocqueville's call for a new political science that could "instruct democracy" (see Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 7).

23. Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 413.