



RUSSELL

KIRK'S

CONCISE GUIDE TO

CONSERVATISM



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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RUSSELL KIRK'S CONCISE GUIDE TO CONSERVATISM

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CHAPTER I, THE ESSENCE OF CONSERVATISM

Why do conservatives distrust “abstractions?” What are abstractions and why are they dangerous?

Kirk lays out “chief principles” of American conservatism. What are they?

What do they share in common in terms of their assumptions regarding human nature and the requirements for a decent civil social order?

CHAPTER II, CONSERVATIVES AND RELIGIOUS FAITH

For the conservative, why is religion important to society? What does it provide?

What does it mean to say that “the brute lies just under the skin of civilization?” How does religion address the problem of our brutishness?

Kirk argues that “we are put here upon earth to struggle for the right” yet he also says that we should not seek utopia, that improvement in societies is hard to come by and can never be absolute. How can and in what ways can these both be true?

CHAPTER III, CONSERVATIVES AND CONSCIENCE

What is conscience? Why do critics of conservatism claim conservatives have no conscience? Why and how are they wrong?

Is it true that at their base all social questions are questions of private morality? How so?

What is lost when we stop talking about personal “conscience” and start worrying about “social conscience” or even “social justice?” Why are these latter terms problematic for good societies and good people?

CHAPTER IV, CONSERVATIVES AND INDIVIDUALITY

What is the difference between individualism and individuality? Why is it important?

What do we all have to share in order for each of us to be able to be meaningfully different? In particular, what role do common moral principles have to play in promoting individuality?

Kirk seems to argue that we can only be free if we control our own wants and desires. How can this be true?



CHAPTER V, CONSERVATIVES AND THE FAMILY

What is a family, for the conservative? Does it have a specific purpose?

According to Kirk, the conservative believes that the family is “the natural source and core of any good society.” But what does the family actually do to form and support a good society?

What forces have undermined the family in recent decades? Is it just a matter of changes in the law that undermine the family, or are there things about our economy and way of life that we need to change to reinvigorate the family?

What role can the government play in supporting the family? In undermining the family?

CHAPTER VI, CONSERVATIVES AND THE COMMUNITY

Why, and how, is local community important to free government? How can the conservative say that community is not the enemy of individuality? Isn't community “collectivist?”

Doesn't it force us to do things we don't want to do, join groups we may not want to join, and spend our time with people we may not like? How is that good for personal liberty?

What forces have undermined American community?

How much of the problem has to do with the federal government, and how much with the choices we make in our daily lives?

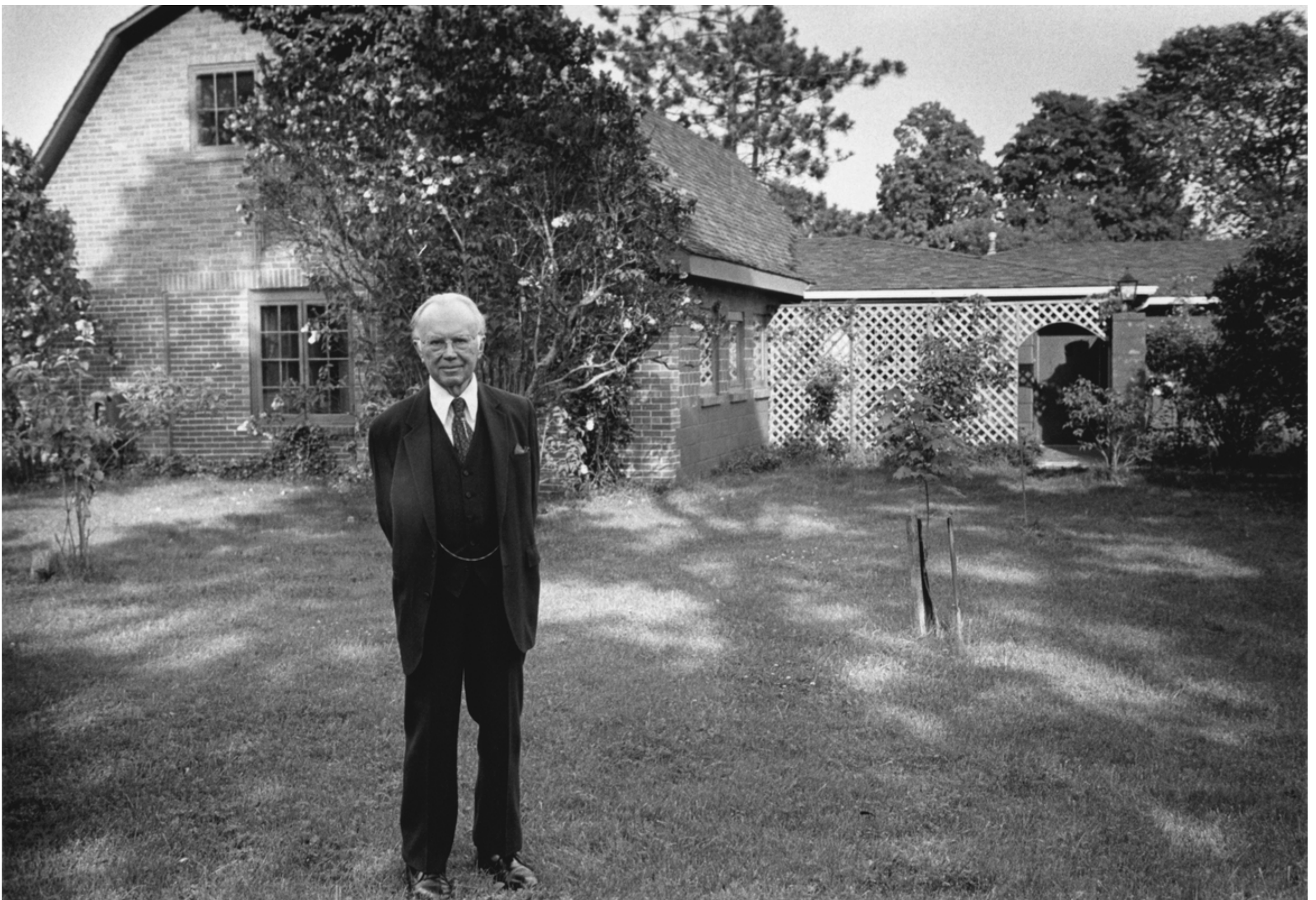
CHAPTER VII, CONSERVATIVES AND JUST GOVERNMENT

What is a “just” government? What does it look like and what does it strive to accomplish?

What are its limits, and how are they to be enforced?

Kirk argues that “by and large, the sound institutions of any nation are the product of historical experience.” How is this true of the United States Constitution?

What is “territorial democracy?” Why is it so important, especially in the United States?



CHAPTER VIII, CONSERVATIVES AND PRIVATE PROPERTY

Kirk argues that “property rights are human rights.” How and in what ways is this true?

The conservative believes that civilization depends on property rights and even that civilization grew out of property rights. How did property rights give rise to civilization? What would happen to civilization without property rights?

The conservative recognizes that the rights to life and liberty depend on property rights. How is this so?

Does property bring duties with it as well? What are these duties and why are they important?

CHAPTER IX, CONSERVATIVES AND POWER

“Power, politically speaking, is the ability to do as one likes, regardless of the wills of one’s fellows and neighbors.”

How is this observation important to America’s civil social order? To our Constitution itself?

Kirk observes that “many persons are much fonder of power than they are of wealth.” How can this be true? What does power bring with it that wealth does not?

How has the belief that all of us, including leaders of the world’s poorest nations, are motivated simply by the desire for more wealth hurt American foreign policy and our nation’s place in the world?

CHAPTER X, CONSERVATIVES AND EDUCATION

Kirk argues that education’s essential purpose “is to develop the mental and moral faculties of the individual person, for that person’s own sake.” What benefit is being given to that individual person? To society as a whole?

Kirk describes two visions of education, the first aimed at making people intelligent and good, the second at “indoctrinating the young with what the radical believes to be the concept of the good society.” Which vision seems paramount today? Why, and with what result?

How is “the natural function of formal education ... conservative”?



CHAPTER XI, PERMANENCE AND CHANGE

Why are conservatives sometimes called “the stupid party?” Why is this wrong?

Conservatives often are criticized for being “against” Progress. What kind of Progress do conservatives oppose?

According to Kirk, if one must choose between the two, a conservative should choose Permanence over Progression. What is “Permanence?”

What aspects of human nature and the social order are permanent and true for all time?

What happens when we abandon such truths?

CHAPTER XII, WHAT IS THE REPUBLIC?

What is a republic? How does it differ from a “pure” democracy—both in its structure and in its goals?

Kirk consistently writes of the importance in the United States of “order, justice, and freedom.” What are these great goods?

In particular, how is it that individual freedom does not undermine order and justice in the nation and among members of the community?

What role does a free economy play in maintaining a republic?

To what extent is it a matter of limiting government and to what extent one of teaching important virtues of self-reliance and discipline to the people?

For the American conservative, how does love of the Republic shelter all other loves?



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Community is essential to freedom, to private rights, and to the whole fabric of the civil social order. Without it, men and women become less than human—either the solitary beasts of Aristotle’s phrase, or the servile mass-people of the unitary state. The conservative does not pose as an anarchist, despising his duties toward other men. And he does not propose to exchange his birthright of community for the pottage of centralized Utopia.

- Russell Kirk -

Russell Kirk authored thirty-two books on political thought, the history of ideas, education, cultural criticism, and supernatural tales. Both *Time* and *Newsweek* have described him as one of America’s leading thinkers, and *The New York Times* acknowledged the scale of his influence when it wrote that Kirk’s 1953 landmark book *The Conservative Mind* “gave American conservatives an identity and a genealogy and catalyzed the postwar movement.”

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<https://kirkcenter.org/about-us/about-russell-kirk/>