

The Conservative Frame

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To be productive together in society, we must hold compatible premises. We can debate conclusions, whether to pass this law or that, but when our premises differ, debating conclusions amounts to talking past each other at best.

I believe these questions sit among the core premises of society:

- Is there truth, and can we know it?
- Are humans selfish and limited, or good and unlimited in nature?
- What is the standard of the good: what ought human life and society aim at?
- What should be prioritized?
- What is justice in society?

Every church, friend group, political party, and family holds answers to these questions, and the answers differ. The United Methodist Church answers them differently than the Southern Baptists. The modern Jesuit answers them differently than the Eastern Orthodox. The US Republican party answers them differently than the Democrats, and atheists differ among themselves as much as anyone. Questions of God and ultimate meaning are important, but for the task of living together, these five questions reign supreme.

There is a distinct set of conservative principles that answers these questions. These principles can be used to find commonality with other conservatives, even across disagreements about theism, atheism, or other fundamental beliefs. They can also reveal a sharp divide between people who would otherwise be lumped together: when two Christians divide over these principles, they are radically different from each other, and one is likely a wolf in sheep's clothing.

The 5 Principles

- Reality is real, knowable, and consequential. Truth is what corresponds to reality.
- Humans are limited and self-interested.
- Goodness must include human life continuing and human life thriving.
- Act with Self-Anchored Tiered Priority.
- Respond with Procedural Symmetry.

These 5 principles must not be taken apart. They work together and describe a single whole that is distinct from, and greater than, its parts. They can be ordered into 3 groups: our relationship to reality (Reality is Real, Humans are Limited), our relationship to self (Goodness), and our relationship to others (Tiered Priority, Procedural Symmetry).

Articulating these principles gives conservatives a common language and a common framework. By comparing ideologies against them, we can recognize parasitic ideologies before they take root, and identify and remove them where they already have. Parasitic ideologies do not announce themselves; they are found commingled with healthier ideologies. So these principles should be applied within churches, within atheist communities, and within universities.

Applied to society, these principles can also direct future decisions. They are also stated positively in what they are; these ideas can stand alone and are not reacting to conflicting ideas. That being said, they can still be used to test ideas, even ones that appear good by themselves. What we want to conserve is grounded in reality, in life, and in proper relationships to each other.

Relationship to Reality

We begin by acknowledging that reality is real. It is not a shadow on a wall. Reality is consequential: when one pool ball strikes another, the collision conserves momentum minus friction, whether or not anyone wishes otherwise. And reality is knowable: we observe it through senses that are generally self-consistent. Self-consistency is the key to confidence in our knowledge. My eyes may interpret blue differently than yours, but so long as our senses distinguish the differences in reality, and do so consistently, each of us can build an accurate model of the world.

LLMs (what we call AI today) demonstrate the same point from the other direction. They interpret pixels through a very different pipeline than human sight, yet so long as their training is consistent and their residuals resolve, they can read a picture and describe it much as a human would. The sensors differ; the self consistency is what matters.

We can then say that truth is what corresponds to reality. Some Christian sects and some Islamic sects disavow this explicitly. Scripturalism, as articulated by Crampton, excludes correspondence outright: "A Christian epistemology maintains that a proposition is true because God thinks it to be true." That is not compatible with these 5 principles. In Sunni Islam, Ash'arite occasionalism, still common today in various forms, holds that God (Allah) is the sole and direct cause of every event in the universe. The key word is direct: when fire is exposed to cotton, it is God who directly causes the cotton to burn, not the fire. That, too, is incompatible. Similarly modern postmodernism (Foucault, Derrida) rejects correspondence from another direction, claiming that all reality, knowledge, and truth are socially constructed. Each of these severs truth from reality, and each is incompatible with these 5 principles for the same reason.

At the same time, reason alone is not enough. You cannot reason your way to reality. Reason that is not grounded in reality is little more than hallucination or imagination. Reason can guide our ideas; reality has the final say on truth.

When we look inward, we find ourselves humbled by our own limitations. We have limited time, limited understanding, and limited reach. We must also admit that we are biologically selfish. This does not mean every act is calculated for personal benefit; we have genuine altruistic impulses. It means self-interest belongs to our nature. This stands in contrast to ideas that hold people ought not to be self-interested, and that our present self-interest is merely a product of social conditioning. Even a quick look through human development and human history tells a different story. Self-interest is protective and fundamental. It is not something to be worked around; it is something to be worked with.

Discussing reality also requires a distinction between discovered and constructed technology. Money is a form of technology. The exact form of money, be it an electronic ledger line, paper, gold, or shells, is indeed constructed. But money itself is a streamlined form of barter that arises

wherever people specialize. And specialization itself is forced on us: humans are limited in time and understanding compared to the work required to bring order to the world and to understand it. The farmer who spends all day tilling, planting, and harvesting has little time left to learn to sail and fish. So money is fundamentally a discovered technology, not a constructed one; it is the product of human limits meeting a demanding and complex world.

Language follows the same pattern. There are many languages, each with its own nuances, but all of them facilitate communication, and communication is what cooperation requires in a world that demands specialization. Language does not create reality. Language takes on common, limited meaning that refers to reality. In each individual language new words can be added and semantics altered over time, but the need to reference real things consistently in language is a fundamental need.

Relationship to Self

We can describe what is. But what should we bring about in this world? That question is fundamental to what we call Good. Accounts of the Good can vary, but to be compatible with these 5 principles, the Good must include human life continuing, and continuing well. In the Christian Bible this command appears twice in the book of beginnings: God tells Adam, and later Noah, to go into the world and multiply. It is not the only Good in Christian belief, but it must be a good that Christians take seriously. An atheist, by a different route, can arrive at the same place and value human life and human thriving.

These 5 principles are about ideas that can work together, and about separating them from ideas that cannot. This is not tolerance. Tolerance is not a virtue in any meaningful sense. The problem with tolerance is that you quickly find people who wish you harm, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly; this is sometimes called the paradox of tolerance. The solution to the paradox is plain: tolerance is not a virtue, and it cannot be. Actual virtue is a positive vision of what you believe, with clear boundaries marking what is, and what is not, compatible with it. In drawing those boundaries we should remember that humans are limited, and that seeking truth requires the ability to change our minds about what we understand reality to be. It is therefore in everyone's interest to set the compatibility boundaries wide. That does not mean truth itself is wide,

or that there are many realities. Absolutely not. Tolerance is not a virtue; humility, knowing our own limits, is.

For human life to continue and thrive, we must work within ourselves to align with truth and to seek excellence. These are the attributes that elevate our craftsmen, our stone workers, our metal workers, our machinists, our factories, and our factories that make factories. Thriving is a recognition of reality, and it demands our excellence in its pursuit.

True thriving is not cold, however. We must also admire and create beauty. What is beauty? Beauty is the conjunction of order, truth, and vitality. A vase is just a vase. But consider a vase with some wear: perhaps it was once broken and pieced back together with seams of gold. That vase now shows vitality. Or perhaps the vase holds fresh flowers, themselves the vitality of plants, joining order with propagation. The subjective element in beauty is the vitality we perceive in it. Beauty is subjective in that sense, but it is not without bounds.

When we form brick from the dust of the earth and water, we create a new form. The care and order that created the brick must continue with it: the brick must be cleaned, repaired, and kept dry. The ongoing work of keeping order corresponds to the order that created the thing in the first place. This correspondence is what ownership and responsibility name. Ownership has a social component: who gets to use the thing. But you can own something socially (hold the deed to a house) while lacking the actions that keep it ordered and useful as it was originally made. That second aspect of ownership we call responsibility. Responsibility is the act of maintaining, and it corresponds to the act of creating. You cannot create something without care and order, and you cannot have full ownership without the responsibility to continue that care and order.

That same care and responsibility extend to humanity's own survival. Just as our parents had children, and their parents before them, goodness includes having children. We are not atomic individuals. Our parents gave us life, and goodness includes life continuing; from this follows a fundamental responsibility to have children, or where that is not physically possible, to raise up children. And when you raise children, do not try to control them. Guide them and teach them, but allow them failure if they insist on it. Show them consequence, natural or imposed, but let

your children fail. Some may fail; others will learn and thrive. Have more than one child, and do not hold on to them too tightly.

Of all these things, only our own actions are within our control. We may bemoan society or politics, but our actions and our responsibility begin with ourselves.

Relationship to Others

We control ourselves, yet we must still relate to others in society. The first step, unless other factors intervene, is a general dispositional love toward others: a general good will toward the people around you. Dispositional love implies no particular action; it is an attitude. There is a second type of love, action-based love, and here we meet a problem. Humans are limited. We have only so much time and energy. This is where Self-Anchored Tiered Priority comes in.

Self-Anchored Tiered Priority dictates that we first care for ourselves, our spouse, and our family. Then come our neighbors and our community. Then come the strangers of our state and country. Last, there is a general priority toward the world and beyond. Tiered priority also recognizes that some people actively wish us harm. They are enemies, and enemies are real. Some enemies may come to assault you physically. Others work against your interests and seek to destroy the society you live in, to re-make it into what they see as a better image.

So when do we use action-based love? We act lovingly toward ourselves, our spouse, and our family first. Then we care for and act with love toward our neighbors, with a lesser but real priority. If your caring actions toward a friend exceed your caring actions toward your spouse, it is time to stop and rethink how you embody your relationships.

Forgiveness likewise comes in two types. Personal release is choosing to let go of, or simply set aside, a hurt or a wrong done against us, so that we can continue to move on. Social reconciliation is different: it requires the person who did the wrong to genuinely recognize that it was wrong and to commit to avoiding it in the future.

Generally, love is holding on and forgiveness is letting go. Both are useful in long-term personal and social relationships. But society is more than personal relationships. Beyond a limited number of people (a limit

sometimes called Dunbar's Number), society consists of what amounts to strangers.

The key to working with that broader society is Procedural Symmetry. Procedural Symmetry works together with Self-Anchored Tiered Priority: within a given tier, we offer the same procedures to each person. In a country, every citizen (the citizen tier) is bound by the same laws. We act toward others by the same procedures we would want them to use toward us.

Procedural Symmetry stands in contrast to Value Symmetry and Outcome Symmetry. Value Symmetry returns equal actions in kind: if someone chops off your hand, you get to chop off their hand; if someone hurts your child, you get to hurt their child. Some Islamic cultures still practice this type of symmetry. More common today is the practice and praise of Outcome Symmetry, in which the same outcome is desired for each person, and any outcome that differs is taken as proof of some deeper injustice. Outcome symmetry ignores that people differ and that situations differ. It ignores people's choices and creates perverse incentives. It fails to protect the innocent from their aggressors, and it breeds corruption.

Within procedural symmetry and reality, we recognize that power is real. An HOA president holds distinct power that can improve lives or make them harder. A parent has real power over their child. I have heard it said that liberalism is the practice of balancing a bat, where no one willingly picks up the bat of power and uses it to hit people. This is a foolish and dangerous idea. Power is real, and power is necessary. A teacher holds the power to preside over students, ideally to teach them what the teacher knows; teacher and student do not hold equal power. Here procedural symmetry pairs with Tiered Priority. The teacher follows the same procedures for every student, but teacher and student occupy different tiers. The same holds for parents and their children. Children should have a voice, but their voice does not carry the power of their parents' voice. Parent and child occupy different tiers, and parents rightly hold power over their children. That power is good and necessary; it is what protects and cares for children.

Encouragement

Memorize these 5 principles: reality is real, humans are limited, goodness is life and thriving, tiered priority, and procedural symmetry. When you hear an idea, break it down along these axes and see whether it lands fully within them. Guard yourself, your community, your church, and your ideas with care. Use these 5 principles as an anchor. Do not let yourself become subverted, or useful to parasitic individuals and parasitic ideas.

Live well.