



## NO ONE KNOWS WHAT “CHANGE” AND “EQUALITY” MEAN

October 1,  
2019

By Allen  
Mendenhall

As the elections of 2020 near, the left has weaponized two principles that are now prevailing orthodoxies on college campuses, in the mass media, and among activist blatherskites: change and equality.

Examples of change?

Senator Sanders and Senator Warren advocate differing forms of “free college” at public institutions of higher learning. Most of the Democratic presidential candidates have proposed eliminating the Electoral College. Andrew Yang backs a government-funded “universal basic income” program.

These are specific policies. What about large-scale models of government like socialism, openly embraced by Senator Sanders and Representative Ocasio-Cortez?

Which brings us to equality. “Equality,” today, refers to diverse causes: gender equality, marriage equality, income equality, transgender equality, racial equality, housing equality, healthcare equality, environmental equality—in short, you can affix the term “equality” to just about any hot-button political issue or mobilized interest group and find some politician supporting it.

Change and equality sound nice in theory, but what, exactly, do these words mean? The eminent thinker and man of letters [Russell Kirk](#) provides key insights into the nature and limitations of change and equality.

### THERE ARE MANY KINDS OF “CHANGE”

Is change always for the better? Isn't there regress, deterioration, degeneration, and decay? Wouldn't we need a conservative disposition—an understanding of history in its immeasurable complexity—to know the difference between change that's good and change that's bad?

“When a society is progressing in some respects,” Kirk warns, “usually it is declining in other respects.” The French Revolution certainly brought changes: widespread violence, corruption, the beheading of innocents, the massacring of clergy, looting, chaos, food shortages, and the destruction of churches. The Russian Revolution promised change and delivered it in the form of war, mass murder, riots, starvation, and dictatorship. The Chinese Communist Revolution successfully instituted changes that resulted in tens of millions of deaths.

If you want change for the sake of something different, the object is transformation itself, not a definitive outcome. What do you achieve? The creed of change implies that you can never get things right: the only correct state is that of perpetual flow and flux.

“You're on the wrong side of history,” we're told by those who demand change. They value progress as the *summum bonum*, as though the past were devoid of good people and useful data, as if it were a monolithic evil from which you must flee and hide your eyes. But you should not move forward—you should not change—without the past to guide you.

We must be mindful of the debts we owe our ancestors, without whom, after all, we wouldn't have the ideas, luxuries, technologies, and freedoms we enjoy. Kirk exemplifies a proper attitude toward change in his *Concise Guide to Conservatism*: “Change is essential to a good society,” but it must take place “within the framework of tradition.” He adds that “progress is possible only so long as it is undertaken upon the sure footing of permanence.”

I like asking progressives what society would need to look like for them to become conservatives. What is their teleology, their ultimate goal for culture and

governing institutions? What achievement would they preserve and defend?

Change can be dangerous. The wisdom of generations—the taking of the long view—acts as a check against those radical changes that lead to loss of life and violations of the dignity and bodily integrity of every human person.

## EQUALITY IS AN ILLUSION

Equality raises the questions: Equal to what? Equal in what sense? But this means it is a signifier without a signified. There's no such thing as equality in the tangible, phenomenal world.

Every lawyer knows on some level that differentiations between people are inevitable.

“Civilized society requires that all men and women have equal rights before the law,” Kirk writes, “but that equality should not extend to equality of condition: that is, society is a great partnership, in which all have equal rights—but not to equal things.”

Why? Because justice, in Kirk's view, demands “sound leadership, different rewards for different abilities, and a sense of respect and duty.” Moreover, “In the name of equality, the collectivist establishes a political and economic order which subjects a great mass of individuals to the will and whim of a new managerial elite.”

The law categorizes us: citizen and noncitizen, parent and child, minor and adult, alive and dead, employer and employee, buyer and seller, debtor and creditor, single and married, majority and minority, donor and donee, plaintiff and defendant, prosecution and defense, innocent and guilty, solvent and insolvent, offeror and offeree, payer and payee, promisor and promisee, landlord and tenant, agent and principal.

Nobody escapes labels under the law: human, mother, father, child, spouse, brother, sister, niece, nephew, cousin, aunt, uncle, descendant, heir, client, guardian, bystander, driver, owner, resident, patient, insured, devisee, witness, litigant, student, taxpayer, guest, signatory, broker, trustee, volunteer, testator, mortgagor, investor, author, licensee, victim, subscriber, decedent—the list goes on.

Everyone fits within more than one of these classifications, which are not necessarily hierarchical. The flesh-and-blood people to whom they refer, however, are not treated equally in all circumstances. They cannot be because no one can occupy an identical position in society, nor hold the exact same provisions in the exact same settings within the exact same jurisdiction.

We have different jobs, careers, ages, obligations, goals, talents, and familial statuses. The law treats people differently because of their different roles and responsibilities in specified contexts. Taxonomical differences are natural and inevitable, flowing from the diversity of human experience.

Laws by definition discriminate: they state who may or may not do something, who possesses or protects rights, who creates or enforces rules, who must or must not act in particular situations, which acts are proper or improper in light of unique circumstances. Discrimination is inevitable. The operative question, then, is *on what basis* laws discriminate. Some bases are acceptable, whereas others are not.

Aristotle maintained that the telos, or the purpose, of the law is to achieve goodness and virtue. Accordingly, laws discriminating on the grounds of race are presumptively invalid because they have no bearing upon human intent or action, on the *pursuit* of goodness or virtue. Rather, they involve an immutable characteristic, a trait people cannot help, an unchosen quality of the human body.

Goodness and virtue, by contrast, involve *choices*. A person acts morally by selecting one course of action over another. The law incentivizes good behavior and punishes crime or mischief. It shouldn't penalize people for acts they didn't or couldn't commit, for properties they are incapable of changing or affecting.

Except in the eyes of God, absolute equality, true equality, doesn't exist. Attempts to attain it necessitate coercion, perhaps even the annihilation of certain people or the destruction of certain places and things. Yet I wouldn't expect the government forcibly to remove someone else's good lung to replace my bad lung to equalize our conditions. Besides, no two lungs are alike.

Equality, as a concept, is the enemy of another concept the left purports to champion: diversity. Every human being is unique. Every person has distinct skills, aptitudes, weaknesses, and temptations. Diversity involves differences. It is real, not an ideal like equality.

“Variety and diversity are the characteristics of a high civilization,” Kirk says. “Uniformity and absolute equality are the death of all real vigor and freedom in existence.”

We should celebrate the fact that no two people are alike, that our variety as a species makes us wonderful and marvelous. We're in awe when musicians produce sounds we *cannot* produce, when artists render images we *cannot* render, when athletes leap or jump or run in ways foreign to our bodies, when writers arrange words on a page with a facility we lack.

Diversity is good and beautiful; seeking to eliminate it in the name of equality is cruel and misguided. We rightly fear societies in which one group uses political power and the apparatus of government to deprive individuals of their wealth and property in pursuit of hypotheticals like equality. Kirk reminds, after all, that the "aim of the collectivistic state is to abolish classes, voluntary associations, and private rights, swallowing all these in the formless blur of the 'general will' and absolute equality of condition—equality, that is, of everyone except the clique which rules the state."

## FOCUS ON PRINCIPLES, NOT JUST POLICY

Understandably, we focus on policy during election seasons. But maybe we should quiz candidates on their philosophical moorings. If we do, we might find that progressives have embraced quixotic concepts that lead, in practice, to violence and coercion rather than their intended outcomes.

Kirk cautioned against the siren songs of change and equality. We should listen.

---

*Allen Mendenhall is as an associate dean at Faulkner University Thomas Goode Jones School of Law and the executive director of the Blackstone & Burke Center for Law & Liberty. Visit his website at [AllenMendenhall.com](http://AllenMendenhall.com).*

share it  
on:

---

## FREE COLLEGE STUDENT'S GUIDE TO PHILOSOPHY

Are you studying the right things?

This free ebook introduces you to key thinkers and concepts and gives you a comprehensive reading list in just 54 pages.

Understand political philosophy in one sitting. Download the free ebook today!

Fields marked with an \* are required

**First Name \***

**Last Name \***

**Email Address \***

**Academic Standing \***

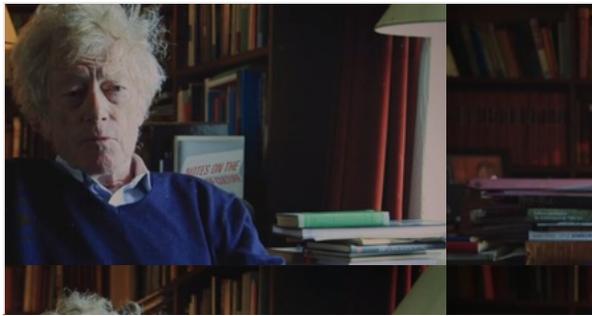
High School Student ▼

DOWNLOAD THE EBOOK

---

YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE

---



### A Thing Called Civilization

Is it really bigoted and narrow-minded to defend Western civilization?

[See the Rest](#)



### Read This Before You Study Political Philosophy

Do you know what political philosophy is for? Or what distinguishes political philosophy from political science?

[See the Rest](#)



### What American Conservatives Can Learn From This Polish Novelist

Sienkiewicz's lessons transcend both geography and history, and are distinctly suited to contemporary conservative thought.

[See the Rest](#)

About  
Team  
Board of Trustees  
Student & Alumni Spotlights  
Careers  
Financials  
Contact

Student Conferences  
Honors Program  
Campus Journalism  
Campus Groups  
Campus Directory  
Fellowships  
Intellectual Starter Kit

## FACULTY AND ALUMNI

Faculty  
Alumni

## CONTENT

Intercollegiate Review  
Modern Age  
Lecture Archive  
ISI Books

## GET INVOLVED

Join  
Donate  
Events  
Conservative Book of the Year Award  
Gala for Western Civilization

### Our Location

3901 Centerville Road Wilmington, DE 19807

### Contact Us

800-526-7022

### Intercollegiate Studies Institute

Inspiring college students to discover, embrace, and advance the principles and virtues that make America free and prosperous.

Sign up for our mailing list

SIGN UP



ISI is a 501(c)(3) organization under the Internal Revenue Code

[Contact](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)