
Russell Kirk: A Centennial Symposium

Reflections on Russell Kirk

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A century has passed since the birth of Russell Kirk (1918-94), one of the principal founders of the post-World War II conservative revival in the United States.¹ This symposium examines Kirk's legacy with a view to his understanding of constitutional law and the American Founding. But before we examine these essays, it is worth a moment to review Kirk's life, thought, and place in American conservatism.

Russell Kirk was born and raised in Michigan and obtained his B.A. in history at Michigan State University and his M.A. at Duke University, where he studied John Randolph of Roanoke and discovered the writings of Edmund Burke.² His book *Randolph of Roanoke: A Study in Conservative Thought* (1951) would endure as one of his most important

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² For more biographical information on Russell Kirk, see James E. Person, Jr., *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1999); W. Wesley McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004); Gerald J. Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007); John M. Pafford, *Russell Kirk* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); and Bradley J. Birzer, *Russell Kirk: American Conservative* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015).

contributions to conservatism.³ Kirk completed his master's degree at Duke in 1941, worked at the Rouge plant of the Ford Motor Company, and later entered the U.S. Army where he was stationed with the Chemical Warfare Service in the Great Salt Lake Desert. After his discharge, he became an instructor at Michigan State. In 1946, he took a leave of absence to research English and American conservative thinkers at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

The resulting manuscript, "The Conservatives' Rout," earned him his doctorate in 1952. It was published in 1953 as *The Conservative Mind*.⁴ The book received national attention and launched Kirk's career as a public intellectual. In *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk uncovered a conservative tradition in Anglo-American civilization that had begun with Edmund Burke's defense of liberty and rights and was continued by a group of varied thinkers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Adams, Alexis de Tocqueville, Orestes Brownson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Irving Babbitt, and T. S. Eliot. This view of conservatism would later be loosely referred to as "paleoconservatism," although that term has often been made to encompass biologicistic and naturalistic elements alien to Kirk, and combined with libertarianism and anti-communism to become the conservative movement in post-World War II America.

With the critical and financial success of *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk resigned from Michigan State and moved permanently to his ancestral home in Mecosta, Michigan. Although he would lecture on college campuses and accept teaching posts for short durations, he became an independent man of letters, writing twenty-six nonfiction works, three novels, three books of collected stories, approximately 2,000 articles, essays, and reviews, 2,687 short articles for his nationally syndicated newspaper column, "To the Point" (1962-75), and a monthly *National Review* column, "From the Academy" (1955-81).⁵ Kirk also founded the conservative journals *Modern Age* and *The University Bookman*, and he even entered into politics, campaigning for Barry Goldwater in 1964 and serving as the Michigan state chair of Pat Buchanan's presidential campaign in 1992. For his contributions to American intellectual, cultural,

³ Russell Kirk, *Randolph of Roanoke: A Study in Conservative Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

⁴ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953). For more about the reception of the book, see Henry Regnery, "Russell Kirk and the Making of the Conservative Mind," *Modern Age* 21:4 (Fall 1977): 338-53; W. Wesley McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology*, 21-33; Birzer, *Russell Kirk: American Conservative*, 110-20.

⁵ For more, see Charles C. Brown's *Russell Kirk: A Bibliography* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2011).

and political life, he was awarded the Presidential Citizens Medal in 1989 by President Reagan.

According to Russell Kirk, conservatism does not offer a universal pattern of politics for adoption everywhere. It is “not a political system and certainly not an ideology.” Rather, it is “a way of looking at civil social order” while applying general principles in a variety of ways depending upon the country and historical period.⁶ These principles are (1) a transcendent or enduring moral order, (2) social continuity, (3) prescription (i.e., “the wisdom of one’s ancestors”), (4) prudence, (5) variety, (6) imperfectability, (7) freedom and property closely linked together, (8) voluntary community, (9) prudent restraints upon power and human passion, and (10) the recognition that permanence and change must be reconciled in society.⁷

What for Kirk holds these principles together to form a conservative disposition is the “moral imagination,” a faculty of moral knowledge that enables humans intuitively to perceive “the right order in the soul and the right order in the commonwealth.”⁸ Imagination, not calculative reason, is what fundamentally defines human beings and society according to Kirk. The battle, therefore, is not among competing programs of material betterment but between differing imaginations: Rousseau’s “noble savage” and Bentham’s utilitarianism versus Burke’s defense of tradition and Eliot’s Christianity. For Kirk, the conservative moral imagination is the correct one in its acknowledgement of a transcendent moral order that is reflected in nature, human nature, and society. The moral imagination draws from important aspects of tradition and civil associations (e.g., piety, prudence, the family) and integrates them into a working moral knowledge that includes reason, sentiment, habit, and intuition.⁹ Although these values were universal for Kirk, they were mani-

⁶ Russell Kirk, “What is Conservatism?” *The Portable Conservative Reader* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), xiv.

⁷ Russell Kirk, “Ten Conservative Principles,” in *The Politics of Prudence* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1993), 15-29.

⁸ Russell Kirk, “The Moral Imagination,” in *Literature and Belief Volume I*, 37; also see *Enemies of the Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormality in Literature and Politics* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969), 39-41, 48-49; W. Wesley McDonald, “Reason, Natural Law, and Moral Imagination in the Thought of Russell Kirk,” *Modern Age* 27:1 (Winter 1983): 15-24.

⁹ Russell Kirk, *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning: An Episodic History of American University and College Since 1953* (South Bend: Gateway Editions, 1978), 260; *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 28, 39-41, 47; “Can Virtue Be Taught?” in *The Wise Men Know What Wicked Things are Written on the Sky* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1987), 68-69; *Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot’s Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (Peru,

fested in a variety of ways dependent upon the age, place, and culture.¹⁰

The two most important influences on Kirk's conception of the "moral imagination" were Edmund Burke and Irving Babbitt.¹¹ The phrase itself, the "moral imagination," was taken from Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which describes how the moral imagination gives dignity to human beings and allows them to see the highest qualities of human nature.¹² Burke influenced Kirk's view that humans are necessarily embedded within a web of tradition, continuity, and social institutions and therefore should follow their "moral imagination" instead of relying solely on individual reason. Kirk also agreed with Burke's defense of tradition as providing meaning and stability to people and with Burke's dictum that society is a contract between the dead, the living, and the yet to be born.¹³

Irving Babbitt also was instrumental in developing Kirk's thought about the moral imagination. Babbitt was an American writer, academic, and literary critic who was a leading figure of the New Humanism, a movement that emphasized the role of imagination—as represented in literature, culture, and education—in determining the perspective and actions of individuals and society.¹⁴ Kirk adopted Babbitt's understanding of the imagination's effect in shaping morality and agreed with Babbitt's condemnation of Rousseau's "idyllic imagination": undisciplined, sentimental dreams about reality that reject restraints provided by tradition.¹⁵ Later Kirk would focus on the "diabolic imagination," that which

IL: Sherwood Sugden and Company, 1988), 47; also see Mark Henrie, "Russell Kirk and the Conservative Heart," *Intercollegiate Review* 38:2 (Spring 2003): 20-21.

¹⁰ Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 20, 39-43; *The Roots of American Order* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1991), 22-38, 43, 109-113.

¹¹ W. Wesley McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology*, 62-65; also see Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1967). For a criticism of Kirk's understanding of Burke, see Seth Vannatta, "Pragmatic Conservatism: A Defense," *Humanitas* 25:1/2 (2012): 20-42.

¹² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 169-74. For more about imagination in Burke's writings, see David Bromwich, *Moral Imagination: Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

¹³ Burke, *Reflections*, 169-74, 183-84, 194-97; Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 12-70; also see Peter J. Stanlis, "Edmund Burke, The Perennial Political Philosopher," *Modern Age*: 26.3/4 (Summer/Fall 1982): 326-27; McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology*, 98-106.

¹⁴ Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959) and *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1979); also see Claes G. Ryn, "The Humanism of Babbitt Revisited," *Modern Age* 21:3 (Summer 1977): 251-62; "Babbitt and the Problem of Reality," *Modern Age* 28:2/3 (Spring/Summer 1984): 156-68; *Will, Imagination and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997).

¹⁵ Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 44, 137; Kirk, "The Moral Imagination," 38; also

was inspired by perverse and obscene ideals or visions maintained by the likes of the Marquis de Sade and Karl Marx, in contrast to the “moral imagination.”¹⁶

Kirk’s “moral imagination,” consequently, offers an integral explanation of social, political, and moral knowledge based in Christian humanist values. It seeks continuity, stability, and gradual reform in society.¹⁷ By contrast, ideology, which Kirk defined as “political fanaticism,” aims to transform society and human nature.¹⁸ The ideologue has “in his system no room left for Providence, or chance, or free will, or prudence” and therefore is “dogmatic and often utopian,” promising “the destruction of all things established and the creation of a terrestrial paradise.”¹⁹ The ideologue believes that human nature can be transformed, contrary to Kirk’s belief that human beings are flawed creatures comprising a mixture of good and evil, whose possession of original sin accounts for their proclivity towards selfishness. To restrain human appetites, the “moral imagination” is required: “this collective and immemorial wisdom we call prejudice, tradition, customary morality.”²⁰

Tradition—the “prescriptive social habits, prejudices, customs and political usages which most people accept with little question, as an intellectual legacy from their ancestors”—was indispensable in the moral education of individuals.²¹ Because previous generations preserved and transmitted the latter through the family, school, and church, tradition was perceived as a good among most people. However, tradition does not equate to nostalgia or a resistance to all societal reform. As Kirk writes:

Traditions do take on new meanings with the growing experience of a people. And simply to appeal to the wisdom of the species, to tradition, will not of itself provide solutions to all problems. The endeavor of the

see McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology*, 43; Gerald J. Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*, 55-57.

¹⁶ Russell Kirk, “May the Rising Generation Redeem the Time,” in *The Politics of Prudence* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1993), 287.

¹⁷ For more on Kirk’s account of the “moral imagination” and its contributions to conservative thought, see John Fairley, “Russell Kirk and the Moral Imagination,” Dissertation Submitted to Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia, September 2015.

¹⁸ Russell Kirk, *The American Cause* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), 2.

¹⁹ Russell Kirk, *Prospects for Conservatives* (Washington D.C.: Regnery, 1989), 6; *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 154; *The American Cause*, 2.

²⁰ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 44; Russell Kirk, *A Program for Conservatives* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 4, 41.

²¹ Russell Kirk, “What Are American Traditions?” *Georgia Review* 9 (Fall 1955): 283-89. For an account of the debate among conservative thinkers during his time concerning Kirk’s conception of tradition, see McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology*, 86-95.

intelligent believer in tradition is so to blend ancient usage with necessary amendment that society never is wholly old and never wholly new.²²

Tradition must “be balanced by some strong elements of curiosity and individual dissent” so that society can preserve its best elements while reforming its worst ones.²³ It is in the realm of politics that this task is accomplished.

For Kirk, politics ought to be led by an aristocracy of merit, statesmen who are qualified by their superior virtue and wisdom to lead society away from only material impulses to the spiritual and social aspirations of the “permanent things” reflected in religious dogma, tradition, culture, habit, custom, and prescriptive institutions.²⁴ Society should be the “harmonious arrangement of classes and functions” with justice consisting of each person’s receiving his or her due.²⁵ To achieve this good form of society, Burkean statesmen must mediate between the conflicting needs for order and liberty in society: the common good is never static but dynamic, always needing statesmen to balance between imposing order and permitting liberty.²⁶ Rather than occurring in a historical vacuum as an abstract reality, the right balance between order and liberty is found by statesmen in specific contexts and under concrete circumstances.²⁷ Individuals and societies are qualified for liberty in direct proportion to the degree of self-restraint they exhibit.

For Kirk, the principal threats to a well-ordered, free society were ideologies that rejected tradition and the “permanent things,” along with industrialization, urbanization, and mass consumer society, which uprooted people from their local communities and deprived them of spiritual purpose. Kirk specifically criticized the ideologies of Marxism, which treat individuals as identical units under a compulsory equality, and liberalism, a de-spiritualized worldview that promotes government

²² Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 181. For a different perspective on nostalgia, Andrew R. Murphy, “Longing, Nostalgia, and Golden Age Politics: The American Jeremiad and the Power of the Past,” *Perspective on Politics* 7:1 (March 2009): 125-41; Samuel Goldman, “The Legitimacy of Nostalgia,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 45:4 (2015): 211-14.

²³ Kirk, *A Program for Conservatives*, 305.

²⁴ Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 61; Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 142-43. For more about the influence of T.S. Eliot on Kirk’s understanding of the “permanent things,” see Birzer, *Russell Kirk*, 217-18.

²⁵ Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 287; Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, 83, 464-66.

²⁶ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 23, 35.

²⁷ Michael Federici, “The Politics of Prescription: Kirk’s Fifth Canon of Conservative Thought,” *Political Science Reviewer* 35:1 (2006): 159-78; Ted V. McAllister, “The Particular and the Universal: Kirk’s Second Canon,” *Political Science Reviewer* 35:1 (2006): 179-99.

growth and authority at the expense of voluntary community and tradition. Both of these ideologies he saw as threats to a society of “ordered liberty.”²⁸ Similarly, industrialization and urbanization endangered a healthy society by supplanting local communities for a proletariat that shared mass entertainment and material consumption at the expense of knowing one’s neighbors and family members.²⁹ Social ennui resulted as the “permanent things” were lost and devalued by society.³⁰ The “moral imagination” of the conservative had been replaced by conformity to the crowd’s materialist and vulgar tastes.

To help counter, or at least ameliorate, these threats, Kirk looked to the reform of contemporary education as a way to conserve the “permanent things” of western civilization and thereby preserve order in society. For Kirk, the foundation of society lay in the ethical, moral, and cultural character of its people. Therefore, political matters could only be resolved if people were educated according to the conservative principles Kirk identified. A key weakness of contemporary education for Kirk was its positivist nature: the predominance of the natural and social sciences, coupled with a progressive political perspective that neglected the arts and humanities along with the values of tradition.³¹ Higher education was even worse, suffering from “equalitarianism, technicalism, progressivism, and egotism”: an education for mediocrity rather than for leadership, putting practical and materialist knowledge above a theoretical and spiritual one, promoting learning as free of compulsion instead of fostering self-discipline, and following educational fads rather than understanding one’s own tradition.³²

Kirk proposed a primary and secondary education of moral “dog-

²⁸ Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 254, 287; *The American Cause*, 52-71; also see Bradley J. Birzer, “More than ‘Irritable Mental Gestures’: Russell Kirk’s Challenge to Liberalism, 1950-1960,” *Humanitas* XXI:1/2 (2008): 64-86. Kirk also criticized libertarianism, along with Marxism and liberalism. See McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology*, 153-63.

²⁹ Kirk, *Enemies of Permanent Things*, 98; *The Conservative Mind*, 367-74.

³⁰ Kirk, *A Program for Conservatives*, 105.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 64. For more on the problem of positivism, see Lee Trepanier, “The Recovery of Science in Eric Voegelin’s Thought,” in *Technology, Science, and Democracy*, ed. Lee Trepanier (Cedar City, UT: Southern Utah University Press, 2008), 44-54.

³² Russell Kirk, “A Conscript of Education,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 44 (January 1945): 82-90; also see *Academic Freedom: An Essay in Definition* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955); *Decadence and Renewal in Higher Learning; The Intemperate Professor: And Other Cultural Splenetics* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1956). For more about the challenges confronting higher education today, see Lee Trepanier, ed., *Why the Humanities Matter Today: In Defense of Liberal Education* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017).

mas” to be taught to children to counteract these threats: the traditional values of “special beneficence; duties to parents, elders, ancestors; duties to children and posterity; the law of justice; the law of good faith and veracity; the law of mercy; and the law of magnanimity.”³³ He also suggested instruction in political dogma within moderation: to affirm the dignity of humankind, support of representative government, recognition of the tension between order and freedom, and the assertion of a humane and free economy. These dogmas were to be taught in the arts and humanities so students could develop their own “moral imagination,” such that when they went to college, they would be prepared to study the Great Books under a tutor-student model, Kirk’s ideal form for the university.³⁴

Kirk’s enduring reputation as a major thinker of the twentieth century is assured by his resurrection of the conservative intellectual tradition in post-World War II America with the publication of *The Conservative Mind*. He also presented a strand of conservatism that was rooted in culture and community, in contrast to the individualism of libertarianism and the national greatness model of neoconservatism.³⁵ Unlike the thought of libertarians and neoconservatives, Kirk’s conservatism was chiefly nonpolitical in nature with its attention to morality, culture, and community. For conservatism to survive in the future, Kirk believed that conservatives had to rethink what they wished to conserve and, in doing so, must recognize that healthy politics and sustainable policies are ultimately rooted in a culture of the “permanent things.”

This understanding of conservatism creates the possibility for it to reinvent itself in ever-changing circumstances, while retaining its principles in each new context. By stressing the “moral imagination,” Kirk’s conservatism can be adopted in a variety of ways, whether in history, politics, literature, philosophy, religious studies, or other disciplines of knowledge.³⁶ It can also be open to a diversity of politics and policies, since it calls for both imagination and prudence in the statesman. The lack of rigid political doctrine in Kirk’s conservatism, unlike the libertar-

³³ Kirk, *Decadence*, 247-61. These dogmas were from C.S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man*, which Kirk acknowledged.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 307; 334-35.

³⁵ For more on these differing features of conservatism, see W. Wesley McDonald, “Russell Kirk and the Prospects for Conservatism,” *Humanitas* 21:1 (1999): 56-76; McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology*, 153-63, 204-19; Paul Edward Gottfried, *Conservatism in America: Making Sense of the American Right* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 8-58.

³⁶ An excellent example of this is Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*.

ian's fetishization of unbounded individual freedom or the neoconservative's democratic triumphalism and support of national government, makes his politics free to address concrete problems as the specific circumstances require.

Today, the conservative movement is confronting a crisis of confidence, not sure what it stands for after the 2016 election of Donald Trump to the presidency.³⁷ The election of Trump also highlights the failures of American political, civic, and social institutions to address the concerns of Americans who feel left behind.³⁸ Instead of the incoherent populism that Trump represents, conservatives have offered several different answers. For example, Samuel Goldman suggests a new fusionism of constitutionalism, free markets, and traditional education; Greg Weiner calls for a return to a national constitutional conversation with Congress asserting its power; Yuval Levin, Patrick J. Deneen, Bradley J. Birzer, and Jack Hunter propose a Kirkian conservatism that addresses the alienation that Americans experience by strengthening civic and social associations like the family, church, and schools.³⁹ On how to move forward under present circumstances, the responses of conservatives are varied and often conflicting.

This symposium continues the conversation among conservatives concerning the best way forward in the age of Trump with a close examination of Russell Kirk's account of conservatism. It explores Kirk's understanding of constitutional law and the American Founding as well as his myriad contributions to the conservative movement and how they can help conservatives understand their present situation and look to the future. By exploring these issues, this symposium not only deepens our understanding of Kirk's thought but also points to ways that conservatism can still be relevant.

Luke C. Sheahan's "The Chartered Rights of Americans: A Kirkian

³⁷ For example, *Modern Age* devoted its 2017 spring issue to "Being Conservative in the Year of Trump" (59:2: 11-74) and its 2018 spring issue to "Conservatism and Liberalism Beyond Trump" (60:2: 7-60). For more fundamental problems with the conservative movement, see Claes G. Ryn, "Debacle: The Conservative Movement in Chapter Eleven," *Humanitas* 21:1/2 (2008): 5-7.

³⁸ Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2013); Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015); Lee Trepanier, "The Resentful Politics of Populism," *VoegelinView*, July 20, 2018. Available at <https://voegelinview.com/the-resentful-politics-of-populism/>; F. H. Buckley, "Conservatism: Trump and Beyond," *Modern Age* 60:2 (Spring 2018): 7-15.

³⁹ For more about this discussion, see *Modern Age* 59:2 (Spring 2017). This possible return to a Kirkian conservatism as a way forward was predicted by McDonald, "Russell Kirk and the Prospects for Conservatism," *Humanitas* 12:1 (1999).

Case for the Incorporation of First Amendment Rights” shows the salience of Kirk’s constitutional thought by examining the incorporation of the First Amendment. While Kirk rejected the idea of incorporation and other aspects of the Supreme Court’s First Amendment jurisprudence, Sheahan argues that incorporation may be interpreted as defending conservative development on grounds more amenable to traditionalists. Conservatives therefore should not automatically be hostile to the doctrine of incorporation but see when and under what circumstances it would be compatible with their principles.

Luigi Bradizza’s “Moderation and Extremism in Russell Kirk’s *The Roots of American Order*” looks at Kirk’s comparison between the American and French Revolutions, arguing that the former is a conservative revolution and the latter an ideological and utopian one. However, Bradizza examines Kirk’s interpretation of the American Founding in greater detail with some reservations. Specifically, Bradizza believes that Kirk misinterpreted Locke and consequently was not able to provide a robust theory of politics because his interpretation lacked an account of natural rights.

Kirk’s conservatism differentiated itself from other forms with its emphasis on one’s spiritual nature, an acceptance of the mystery of human existence, and a recognition that innovation must be tied to existing traditions and customs. He was opposed to the rationalism and free-market doctrinarism of libertarians and the imperial ambitions of neoconservatives. Kirk believed, instead, that one had to resort to the “moral imagination,” one’s spiritual and creative powers, to discover ordered liberty within oneself and for society. Although his type of conservatism is rare in the corridors of power today, it still resonates in the works of scholars and the public and may provide a path forward for a genuine conservatism in the future.