

**A Truth in conservatism: Rescuing conservatism  
from the Conservatives<sup>1</sup>**

(Alternative title: Conservatism and Embodied Value)

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Attributed to Ludwig Wittgenstein: “I don’t mind what I eat, as long as it’s always the same”.

Uttered by Morrie Cohen, and as heard by me, many times, from around 1950 to 1985: “It’s not like it was”.

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**1. Introduction**

“Professor Cohen, how many Fellows of All Souls does it take to change a light bulb?”

“Change?!?”

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<sup>1</sup> I have a large debt to David Lloyd-Thomas, whose fascinating unpublished writing on particular value nudged me towards the present topic, and who has commented helpfully on drafts of this paper. I also thank Annette Barnes, Marshall Berman, Akeel Bilgrami, Kimberley Brownlee, Richard Christian, Michèle Cohen, Paul David, Jon Elster, Cécile Fabre, Dov Fox, Michael Freeden, Kerah Gordon-Solmon, Kent Greenawalt, Tom Hurka, John McMurtry, Kieran Oberman, Michael Otsuka, Shlomi Segall, Hillel Steiner, Jeremy Waldron, David Wiggins, and Andrew Williams.

The present paper defends the attitude that I just expressed in my answer to the chair's question. I have for decades harboured strongly conservative, that is, strongly small-c conservative, opinions, on many matters that are not matters of justice, and I here mount an exposition and defence of what I believe to be my widely, although perhaps not universally, shared, conservative attitude. (I do not have conservative views about matters of justice because what conservatives like me want to conserve is that which has intrinsic value, and injustice lacks intrinsic value<sup>2</sup> (and has, indeed, intrinsic disvalue). I shall say something in section 7 about the relationship between small-c conservatism and large-C Conservatives, many of whom are indeed devoted to conserving injustice.)

I am a kind of conservative not only in that I have the strong small-c conservative attitude that I shall describe, but also in that I endorse certain conservative factual assessments according to which a lot of valuable things have been disappearing lately. I join the ranks of the complainers down the ages who say: "Things ain't what they used to be."

Do not suppose that, because that lamentation is perennial, it's misplaced. Anti-conservatives say, "Oh, well, people have always said that things are getting worse", and anti-conservatives mean thereby to convey that the conservative lamentation expresses an illusion.<sup>3</sup> But it is entirely possible that at any rate certain kinds of things have always been worse than they were before.<sup>4</sup> Remember the wise Hungarian, who, upon being asked how things were going for him, said: "Oh, you know, things are about average. Not as good as yesterday, better than tomorrow." In fact, I think lots of good old things are being lost and lots of good new things are arriving. It is the conservative disposition, in the present sense of 'conservative', to lament the first fact more than non-conservatives do. (As I'll explain in section 3, it doesn't follow that a person who is conservative in the present sense welcomes the

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<sup>2</sup> It certainly sometimes has extrinsic value: slavery, which is an injustice, helped to build the (intrinsically valuable) pyramids.

<sup>3</sup> For a particularly intelligent elaboration of such skepticism about conservative factual assessments, see Bernard Williams, "Modernity and Ethical Life", in his In the Beginning Was the Deed.

second fact – that lots of good new things are arriving - less than non-conservatives do.) But there will be no defence of my conservative factual assessments in what follows.

Please bear in mind throughout that I am trying here to describe, in an attractive light, one kind of conservative disposition, that is, my own. It is indeed my own disposition, and if I did not have it I would not have been motivated to write this paper, but I think that this disposition of mine is not an eccentric one: I think everyone who is sane has something of this disposition, even if the people that I am today calling conservatives have a stronger form of it than others do. But let me add that I do not claim that the word “conservative” is more closely associated with the particular disposition that I shall describe than it is with some other disposition. The only claim that I make about the word “conservative” is that it applies without strain to the attitude that I shall describe. And even that claim isn’t decisive, for the purposes of evaluating what I offer here. All that matters here is the attitude itself, that is, whether it is coherent and attractive, or, at least, unabsurd, whatever the attitude that I’m calling “conservative” should be called.

This is my first foray into this territory, and I have thus far been unable to place the several themes that I treat in satisfactory connection with one another. The themes include personal value, tradition, identity, acceptance of the given, slowing down the rate of change and the idea of conserving what is valuable, in opposition, for example, to maximizing value. I hope and believe that all or at least most of my themes are connected, and, indeed, that the idea of conserving what is valuable is intellectually foundational to all of the other themes, but I haven’t yet tried to establish all the connections (and disconnections). I hope that uninhibited criticism from you in the discussion will help me to see better where I must go from here if I am to confer more unity on this paper.

You might find it presumptuous on my part for me to say what I hope from you in the discussion. Nevertheless, a few more such preliminary words.

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<sup>4</sup> See footnote 23 below for a reason why that possibility may obtain.

First, if it seems to you that I am making some huge mistake somewhere, or indeed throughout, then do not conclude that you are failing to see something. The probability is greater that it is I who am failing to see something. Making big mistakes happens to the best philosophers at early stages of research in philosophy. Therefore, a fortiori, it happens to me.

Also, and although there may be some people here who know me and/or my work well enough not to make this assumption, not everybody here knows me, so it is worth saying that no one should assume that I am reasonably familiar with conservative literature. If I say something that sounds to you similar to something that Alexander Hamilton said, or that sounds to you just like what the distinguished Italian Fascist thinker Giovanni Gentile said, then don't say: "Why haven't you commented on what Hamilton said, which, as you know was ...."? Say, rather: "Hey, you know what? Alexander Hamilton said the exact same thing!"

In short, this is a somewhat amateur product, and I beg you to help me to make it more professional, inter alia by pointing out amateurishnesses in it.

A final preliminary remark. In this paper I seek to identify something amply worth considering which I call a truth in conservatism and which I think is too often neglected in our practical deliberations and which is neglected even more often in our philosophical deliberations about our practical deliberations. But please do not expect me to say to what extent our practice should honour the truth I hope to expose, in comparison with other truths the honouring of which may sometimes conflict with honouring this particular conservative truth. Philosophers like me are not primarily, as philosophers, interested in what should be done in practice, all things considered. We are interested, instead, in what distinct things are worth considering. We care more about what ingredients should go into the cake than about the proportions in which they are to be combined.

Consider an analogy. A bunch of us are trying to decide which restaurant to choose. Suppose everybody talks a lot about how good the food is in various restaurants, how much it costs, and how long it takes to get there. Someone, hitherto silent, is uneasy. She feels that we are leaving something out of account. Then she realises what it is:

“Like, nobody”, she says, “is considering the décor!” This person has made a significant contribution to our practical discussion. But we shouldn’t expect her now also to say exactly how important a restaurant’s décor is compared to the other things that matter when we’re choosing a restaurant.

If there is a difference between political theory and political philosophy, then what you are going to hear is, mostly, political philosophy. If there is something called “political theory” that some people prefer to political philosophy, then those who are partisans of political theory, thus contrasted, are people who characteristically care more than their philosophical cousins do about the all-things-considered answer which tells you what to do, and sometimes they even care about the answer which tells you what to do here and now. Many political theorists are professionally interested in whether or not we should introduce proportional representation, or move to a greater use of judicial review. Philosophers aren’t so interested in such questions, except in so far as they are citizens, which most of them are, albeit in some cases reluctantly. Philosophers don’t think there’s anything special about either the here or the now, and they’re not professionally interested in what should be done all things considered.

## **2. Keeping All Souls, and Other Things, As they Are: Accepting the Given**

It is a gross truth that All Souls College is a self-funding institution, which lives on its own endowment, and which is consequently un beholden to any outside institutions.<sup>5</sup> For very much the most part, its Fellows, its member-scholars, rely on nothing but the College for the funding of their research and, indeed, their lives. No money comes into the College,<sup>6</sup> and, apart from modest charitable donations, almost no money goes out of it to anybody other than its Fellows (including its Visiting Fellows)<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The truth is thereby stated merely grossly, because, although not, strictly, a part of it, we have certain important relations with Oxford University. But, in our relation to Oxford University, we are, in Hegel’s words “at home with ourselves in our own otherness as such”, and that, Hegel said, is when spirit is free. (Phenomenology of Spirit, p. 780).

<sup>6</sup> A semi-exception to this generalization arises out of the fact that the College plays host to certain University posts: it quarters and feeds their occupants. Their salaries

Some Fellows have challenged both sides of our insularity. They have sought to bring the College into contact with outside sources of funding, such as the Ford Foundation, and also to create short-term research associations between Fellows and academics in other institutions, without admitting them to any sort of College Fellowship. These Fellows think that the chief aim of the College, which is the promotion of research, might be better realised under these less insular arrangements, in which we give more to and take more from the outside world.

My gut reaction to these proposals is negative on the Ford Foundation side and cautious on the institutional collaborations side. And my brain reaction, also negative, and/or cautious, is as follows. I do not disbelieve that research would be promoted by the proposed changes. Rather, I challenge a presupposition of the anti-insular argument, which is that everything that we justifiably decide may and must be justified as conducive to some good that our decision might produce. For, in addition to the consideration of what good we might do, which must of course affect our decisions, there is also the consideration of what we are, of our identity, and we may legitimately have regard to our desire to preserve that identity.<sup>8</sup> I believe that it belongs to our identity, to our central organizing self-conception, that we are an independent institution that is governed by its members without any appreciable outside influence. And I believe that it is worth preserving that status not only because it satisfies the legitimate desires of many of us but also because All Souls is a valuable social creation, partly because of its differentness in the stated respect from

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come from the University, but that does not count as alien money (see footnote 5) funding a college activity.

<sup>7</sup> Once again, there is the semi-exception created by a University of Oxford taxation scheme under which richer colleges subsidize poorer ones. The scheme makes us a bit less rich, but it doesn't prejudice our independence, and the money isn't exactly going out: see footnote 5.

<sup>8</sup> That is, not who we are, which is our identity in the austere metaphysical sense, but what we are, which is our identity in the vaguer but very important sociocultural sense that I try to formulate in the italicized words in the next sentence of the text.

I do not say that anything that has an identity has a reason to preserve it: I am happy to accept that if All Souls were a bad thing, there would be no good reason for anyone, including its members, to keep it going. But that is different from allowing that the whole reason to keep it going is the good that it produces.

other social creations. As a valuable social creation, it merits preservation, and a radical enough transformation would induce both deformation of our identity and, with that, a loss of (some of) the distinctive value that The College embodies. Vigorous engagement with external agents and agencies, on both the receiving and the giving ends, might cause or begin too radical a transformation.

Note that to believe that All Souls should be preserved in its distinctiveness is not to believe that it is the only beautiful flower in the garden. It is not to believe that an academic institution that maximizes what is to be got from foundations doesn't also have its own distinctive value. On the contrary: the conservative attitude is at least de facto congenial to variety, because much variety reflects accident, and conservatism is constitutively friendly to the results of accidents (because of its tenderness towards already embodied value: see section 3 below).

Two arguments are ingredient in what I have said in favour of All Souls keeping itself (more or less) as it is, in the stated respect. One is that it is the legitimate desire of its members to preserve their particular corporate identity. The other is that All Souls is a valuable creation which everyone, therefore, and not just the College's members with their particular desires, has reason to wish to see preserved.

The two arguments correspond to a distinction between two ways of valuing something other than solely on account of the universal value that resides in it. In the first way of valuing that I have in mind, a person values something because of the special relation of the thing to that person.<sup>9</sup> In the second way, a person values something as the particular valuable thing that it is, and not merely for the value that resides in it, but not, in this second case, because of her own special relationship to the thing in question. "Particular valuing" is discussed in section 3, and "personal valuing" in section 4.

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<sup>9</sup> The importance of personal valuing, in the stated sense, was brought to my attention by David-Lloyd Thomas. In a number of unpublished writings that were the original stimulus to my present reflections, he called what I am calling "personal value" particular value: I think "personal value" is a more appropriate name for it.

As I said, both of these valuing, valuing the personal and valuing the particular, as such, value a thing other than solely on account of the universal value that resides in the thing. But that is so for contrasting reasons in the two cases. It is true of valuing the personal, because what is then valued need not have any universal value,<sup>10</sup> or, if it does, it need have only little, in comparison to the amount of personal value that it has. And it is true of valuing the particular because, even though the particular indeed gets its value from a universal value, our valuing of it, the particular, is not merely a valuing of the universal value that it has.

Its personal value for us and its particular value for anyone are not the only considerations that should govern our decisions about the future direction of All Souls. But it must be wrong to omit them from consideration. Because the College is a valuable human creation, it is not right to treat it as a mere means for the production of good results, as we do if we ask only what is the best that can be got out of it, just as that is not the only question that we should ask about a human being, and there is additional reason for it not to be the only question when the human being is oneself. Not even nature should be conceived purely instrumentally, as a set of resources, because some natural things have intrinsic value, and we therefore violate them if we treat them purely instrumentally.<sup>11</sup>

Just as you may love somebody because of who and what they are, rather than for the value of what they produce, so you may love a loveable institution because it is the

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<sup>10</sup> See the eraser example at the beginning of section 4 below.

<sup>11</sup> Paul David protests, incisively: “All Souls, contrary to the impression you convey, does not exist in a social vacuum. The institution is protected by countless societal conventions, legal structures that allow it autonomy, preserve its assets from seizure or despoliation. Would you justify those societal policies, too, on the principle that ‘indiscriminate zoo-keeping’ is a worthy social purpose? In that case, let us suppose (horrors) that All Souls were to lose its endowment through mismanagement of its portfolio: would you advocate taxing the population at large and transferring the funds to the College so that it could maintain its independence? Or is the virtuous status of preserving unique creations reserved only for those “uniques” that can finance it with the resources that society’s legal institutions have allowed it to retain?” I reply that the question who should support institutions like All Souls indeed goes unaddressed here but that it is distinct from my theme, which is the question why All Souls merits support at all.



institution that it is and it possesses the character that it has. It is not then valued merely for what it achieves, though it is of course valued in part for what it achieves, and I need not deny – or affirm – that, if it achieves nothing, then it cannot be valued just for what it is. So if you seek to set the agenda for an institution, you must ask not only what its goals are and should be, and how it may best achieve them, but also what it, the institution, is. And you have, once again, additional personal reason to do so, reasons of specifically personal value, when you, collectively, constitute the institution in question.

Conservative conviction, as I understand it, thereby implies that something must<sup>12</sup> be accepted as given, that not everything can, or should, be shaped to our aims and requirements; the attitude that goes with seeking to shape everything to our requirements both violates intrinsic value and contradicts our own spiritual requirements.<sup>13</sup> It is a deep question whether some things are valuable just because they are given (and are not of negative value) or whether all things that should be treated as given should be treated that way only because of their (independently standing) value. I don't know the answer to that question. It is on the horizon of the present paper. My present conjecture about the given is that some forms of it warrant preservation other than because they are valuable: the conjecture is consonant with what is said in the penultimate paragraph of this section about keeping bad human features.

That we must accept some givens, not any and all givens, but plenty of givens, is well illustrated by my daughter Sarah Cohen's wise reaction to the title of Jonathan

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<sup>12</sup> The constraint is normative, not causal: I do not mean that the given is immovable, that we must accept it in the way that we must accept the law of gravity, or (as some think) the Laffer curve. For another case in which a conservative normative truth might tend not to be discerned because it gets conflated with a structurally similar causal truth, see the second paragraph of section 6 ("Paradoxes of Change") below.

<sup>13</sup> For a sensitive treatment of how unchoosing acceptance of the specifically cultural given may be reconciled with the liberal valuation of autonomy and choice, see Samuel Scheffler, "Conceptions of Cosmopolitanism", in his Boundaries and Allegiances, esp. pp. 126ff. As Scheffler says, the liberal "state merely disallows the coercive enforcement of cultural affiliations; it does not offer a voluntaristic theory of their ultimate moral import" (p. 128).

Glover's book of 1985 called What Sort of People Should There Be? Sarah, then ten years old, noticed the book and its title on my desk and exclaimed: "That's div!<sup>14</sup> They should be like us." Certain things are to be accepted from nature, and that includes aspects of ourselves. That wisdom is part of the wider conservative thought that certain things are to be taken as they come: they are not to be shaped or controlled.<sup>15</sup>

Consider this allegory. Quite far along a certain continuum there sits a man who is surveying his own fleshly parts, that is, those of his parts which are still made of flesh, which includes some of his brain-flesh parts, and he's replacing defective bits of his flesh by perfect artificial substitutes, made out of whatever best serves, such as silicon, tungsten, and so forth. The man has been doing this for some time, and a lot of him is already artificial. That is surely a ghastly scenario. But it spells out the attitude that many people manifest towards human frailty and deficiency, or, more

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<sup>14</sup> I think this word is obsolete. So far as I was able to tell, it meant "doltish".

<sup>15</sup> As the point is sometimes expressed: we should not "play God". Jonathan Glover is mistaken when he opines that "When the objection to playing God is separated from the idea that intervening in this aspect of the natural world is a kind of blasphemy [against God Himself – GAC], it is a protest against a particular group of people, necessarily fallible and limited, taking decisions so important to our future" (Ibid, somewhere in early chapters). But one may also object on a ground more fundamental than the latter and at which I gesture in the sentence to which the present footnote is attached. To be sure, many, and almost certainly Glover, will regard that "ground" as obscure and confused, but let us acknowledge that impasse, and not obliterate the distinctive conservative position.

One thing that we should not play God with is ourselves. The point is made eloquently enough by David Wiggins: "If we cannot recognize our own given natures and the natural world as setting any limit at all upon the desires that we contemplate taking seriously; if we will not listen to the anticipations and suspicions of the artefactual conception of human beings that sound in half-forgotten moral denunciations of the impulse to see people or human beings as things, as tools, as bearers of military numerals, as cannon-fodder, or as fungibles; if we are not ready to scrutinize with any hesitation or perplexity at all the conviction (as passionate as it is groundless, surely, for no larger conception is available that could validate it) that everything in the world is in principle ours or there for the taking; then what will befall us? Will a new disquiet assail our desires themselves, in a world no less denuded of meaning by our sense of our own omnipotence than ravaged by our self-righteous insatiability?". Sameness and Substance Renewed, CUP, 2001, p. 242.

accurately, the attitude that they defend. That phrasing is more accurate because no one really has the artificial man's attitude in practice: in practice, everybody is conservative to some degree.

One commentator on the foregoing objects that the example is biased, because the deficient fleshly parts are replaced in the example by undeficient unfleshly artificial parts, and, to test for the presence of the conservative attitude that I extol, we should consider the replacement of bits of our bodies by artificially produced bits of flesh in particular, which have been genetically modified to match our own, save for the elimination of the undesired imperfections.

I reply that it is hard to see why, in the absence of the conservative impulse, we should prefer flesh to other materials that ex hypothesi do whatever we had expected flesh to do.<sup>16</sup> The alternative scenario is indeed less ghastly, but precisely because it at least retains the medium (that is, flesh) in which our capacities have traditionally been embodied.

There is a particular kind of slippery slope in these matters that commands attention, and I do not mean one that relates to the difficulty of drawing a line between what we find acceptable and what we find unacceptable. Suppose we face no such difficulty at all, and we think that the right limit to plasticization is given by precisely this amount and type of plasticization. But we also know that, once thus plasticized, people would favour more plasticization, and, perhaps, unending plasticization, as each successive plasticization renders people insensitive to the extra plasticness of the next one. Then we have strong reason to bring about less plasticization than we think optimal (not, of course, than we think it optimal for us to bring about, all things considered). The problem that we face is not, "where shall we (now) draw the line?", but "if we draw the line here, where will they, or, for that matter, we, later, draw the line, given what our desires and tolerances have come to be?".<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I allow here, what might be challenged, that the manufactured flesh is flesh. Nicer minds than mine might protest that it ain't flesh if it didn't come to be the way (natural) flesh does.

<sup>17</sup> A slippery slope of this structure can also give non-conservatives pause. If, for example, such a slope in respect of the time after which abortion is forbidden leads to

Partly because of fear of such a slippery slope I am wary of certain forms of stem-cell research even as a way of finding a cure for horrible diseases. A culture in which such research is routine practice will smile on the next stage of the use of living beings for research in the way we, who may find current forms of stem-cell research acceptable, do not. We then have strong reason to prevent that successor culture from supervening. We have reason not to bring into being people for whom what we regard as acceptable practice is the accepted practice because they may go beyond us in what they find acceptable, perhaps beyond their existing practice just to the extent that we went beyond our existing practice, and therefore, further than we would have gone and than we think anyone should go. If there is such a propensity in human nature, to go just that bit beyond where we are now in a dangerous direction, then we might owe it to the future of humanity, though not to the desires of what threaten to be future humans and quasi-humans, not to start the journey.<sup>18</sup>

And don't say, "If your child's life depended on it ...." There are all kinds of awful things that I wouldn't otherwise dream of doing that I might do if my child's life depended on it. When people say: "If you had cancer ...", one can sometimes reply – "Yes, of course, that predicament unbalances one's judgment". Making people imagine that they are in dire straits in order to cause them to agree with something is an attractive resort for those whose arguments aren't (otherwise) strong.

I said that I was wary of certain forms of stem-cell research: I did not say that I would prohibit them. My philosophical opponent is not one who says, "Yes, there's something unattractive about using human life like this, but when you consider the gains ...". My philosophical opponent is rather one who says, "There's nothing wrong with using these life-forms in this way, and since the gains are so great ...". The word "that" is subject to different interpretations when it appears in the protest, "How can you deny us a cure for x for the sake of that?" "That", here, might be thought by the speaker to denote something that is nothing, but it might also be thought by her to

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tolerance of infanticide, then it leads to an evil on which conservatives have no monopoly of aversion.

<sup>18</sup> See, further, section 6 below, on "Paradoxes of Change".

denote not nothing but something that isn't enough. I have no philosophical quarrel with the speaker who means the latter.

If I want us to continue as we are, do I want us to retain our negative features? What if a genetic manipulation could, for example, eliminate envy? One might fear, of course, that with the elimination of envy there would also disappear certain possibilities of virtue: most straightforwardly, the virtue of rising above one's own envy, but also, perhaps, less evident ones, that are tied to envy, or to its possibility, in the economy of the human psyche. But even once we have set that collateral consideration aside, I would not want to eliminate all of our bad features. I conjecture that that is because the negative traits are part of the package that makes human beings the particular valuable creatures that we personally cherish, and are therefore worth preserving as part of that package.

I proceed forthcomingly to distinguish between particular valuing (section 3) and personal valuing (section 4). Correspondingly, one might distinguish between the reason to preserve human beings – that they are creatures that exhibit a certain form of value, and our (additional) reason to do so, which is that they are us.<sup>19</sup>

### **3. Conservation and Destruction: The Truth in Conservatism**

The conservative attachment that I endorse is to particular things, as such, which means that the attachment is not to the external purposes that the things serve, or to the principles that they exemplify, which might be better served or exemplified by other things, by which we would nevertheless not replace the things to which we are attached.<sup>20</sup> (I do not mean that we would not replace them no matter what the cost of keeping them may be: the bias that I assert in favour of existing value is not absolute).

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<sup>19</sup> Franklin Roosevelt once said about right-wing Latin American dictators: “Well, yes, they're bastards, but they're our bastards”. And I say, ad (some of) our negative characteristics: “Well, yes, we're bastards, but we're our bastards”.

<sup>20</sup> Note that things are, as it were, only retrospectively particular. Prospectively, they are abstractions. Hence conservative favour of the past, what exists, and lack of attraction to Utopias (quite apart from skepticism about their feasibility).

Even if it is worth keeping something only if it satisfies some purpose or principle, it doesn't follow that the weight of the reason for keeping it is limited to the extent to which it satisfies that purpose or principle.

The conservative impulse is to conserve what is valuable, that is, the particular things that are valuable. A salient, though not the only, alternative to conserving what is valuable is to maximize value, but clear-thinking conservatives are resolved to conserve the valuable at the expense of maximizing value: what we distinctively value are the particular bearers of value. A commitment to the conservation of what has value is at the centre of the specific conservative attitude that I am seeking to describe, and I hope to show, later, but not in this paper, that conservatism about identity and tradition follow from that highly general, and even metaphysically identified, attitude. I do not say that the metaphysically characterized attitude is causally primary in the story of how people typically come to be conservative, but I hypothesize that it confers a certain conceptual unity on all the themes of this paper.

“Conservation of what has value” is the canonical phrase here, not “conservation of value.” For, if we take the phrase “conservation of value” in the standard way, on the model, that is, of “conservation of energy”, or “of matter”, a conservation of value policy is entirely unconservative. Conservation of what has value is not in that sense, in the conservation of energy sense, conservation of value, for you lose no value, value itself is conserved, when you destroy something valuable and replace it by a thing of the same value.<sup>21</sup> The conservative policy is not to keep the value rating high but to keep the things that now contribute to that rating.

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<sup>21</sup> The value/what has value distinction is a generalisation of the distinction between exchange-value and what has it that I use in the course of my (so I would claim it is) demolition both of the labour theory of value and of the claim that the said theory supports a charge of exploitation. In some contexts, “value” and “what has value” are innocently different stylistic variants. In the present context the difference between them makes all the difference. (See my “The Labour Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation”, Philosophy and Public Affairs, 1979, reprinted with revisions as Chapter 11 of my History, Labour and Freedom.)

You might think that it doesn't distinguish conservatives that they want to conserve what has value, because everybody wants to conserve what has value. I have two responses to that objection. First, while, so I would myself insist, it is indeed true that everybody has some desire to conserve what has value, it distinguishes conservatives of the present stripe that they want to conserve what has value more than other people do. Secondly, and more importantly, and, even though it is true that everyone wants to conserve what has value, not all who reflect on value and our relation to it notice the truth that I am defending: many philosophers, and most non-philosophers when they philosophize, ignore the truth in conservatism that everyone who is sane in fact recognizes and honours in practice, to some degree.

Utilitarians, for example, purport to see nothing wrong with destroying value, if more value results. To seek to maximize value is to see nothing wrong in the destruction of value, as opposed to in a reduction in the total amount of value. Unlike the conservative, the utilitarian is indifferent between adding to what we've now got, at no cost, something that has five units of value, and adding something worth ten units of value at the expense of destroying something worth five. The utilitarian says: "Let's have as much value as possible, regardless of what happens, as a result of that policy, to existing bearers of value: they don't matter, as such." Conservatism sets itself against that maximizing attitude, according to which the things that possess value, by contrast with the value they possess, don't matter at all.<sup>22</sup> My hostility to a radical change in the nature of All Souls does not depend on a belief that what would thereby supervene would be less valuable than what would thereby be lost.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> It follows that, unless we are to say that utilitarians have no values, we must interpret what Samuel Scheffler says here creatively, in order not to judge it to be false: "...it is difficult to understand how human beings could have values at all if they did not have conservative impulses. What would it mean to value things but, in general, to see no reason of any kind to sustain them or retain them or preserve them or extend them into the future?" If we take Scheffler literally, the answer to his question is easy: it would mean, for example, to be a utilitarian. (The passage appears at p. 106 of Scheffler's magnificent essay on "Immigration and the Claims of Culture", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 35 (2007), 93-125.)

<sup>23</sup> Recall the claim on p. 2 that things are getting worse. Given that sheerly existing confers (in Scandinavian terms: see p. 22 below) a value bonus, the new things have to be better (judged universalistically) than the old ones for the balance to be non-negative. And that makes it more likely that things are indeed getting worse, when they are not-merely-universalistically judged.

Conservatism is an expensive taste, because conservatives sacrifice value in order not to sacrifice things that have value.

A non-utilitarian pluralist maximizing consequentialist, who believes in maximizing the aggregate of irreducibly different forms of value, might regret destroying one kind of value as part of a project which produces more value overall. But, once again, and given that she is indeed a maximizing consequentialist, she cannot regret its destruction as such, as opposed to the non-appearance of anything that has that value within the set of things that are there when day is done: she has no more reason to regret the destruction of something which has a specific kind of value than she has to regret no such thing being there now, and/or no such thing having been there in the first place.

The conservative propensity is to conserve, to not destroy, and, therefore, to not replace, even (within limits) by something more valuable. But it is not a propensity against creation of new things, save, perforce, when their creation requires or causes a destruction of existing value. There is no conservative objection, in my sense of conservatism, to things of new kinds, as long as they leave the old kinds of things intact. A conservative is not against the creation of a Picasso painting, but she forbids destroying a Filippo Lippi to make the creation of a Picasso possible, artistically superior though she might think the Picasso would be. I said in section 1 that the mark of a conservative is that she laments the loss of the good old things more than a non-conservative does. It does not follow, and it is not necessarily true, that a non-conservative welcomes the good new things more than conservative does. You can adore both Byzantine icons partly because of their oldness<sup>24</sup> and Frank Gehry architecture partly because of its newness.

When conservatives lament what has been lost, say, for example, traditional craftsmanship, when they lament, William-Morris-like, that now everything is made by machines, then some anti-conservatives scornfully reply that the world we have

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<sup>24</sup> To be sure, a thing's being especially valuable because it is new is not the opposite of its being especially valuable because it exists. I acknowledge the important distinction between oldness and existence in the paragraph after the one that follows.



lost was a world of poverty and toil, and that conservatives are irresponsible romantics. But the fact, and I agree that it is one, that humankind is a net beneficiary of modernization, is not a reason for not lamenting what has been lost, unless you're a non-conservative evaluator. A conservative can believe that what rises from the ashes is the greatest building ever and that it was right to build it, yet still feel distraught that the old building was destroyed.

Note that the truth that I purport to identify does not endorse, or does not manifestly endorse, longevity as such. The special claim is of the value that exists, regardless of how long it's been around. Even if the picture was painted only five minutes ago, there's a reason not to destroy it in order to use the pigment and so forth to produce a better one. Richard Christian<sup>25</sup> characterizes a preference for what I call, here, "longevity", as embodying a thesis about the behaviour of value, which says that it increases over time. He says that the stated thesis is wholly independent of my own central claim that existing value is to be favoured, which, he illuminatingly says, is a thesis not, like the longevity thesis, about the behaviour of value, but about the correct response to value. If Christian's independence claim were true without qualification, then that would be a pity, because it would mean that there is a lack of connection between my metaphysically defined conservatism and more traditional conservative ideas, and that would make my distinctive claim less interesting than it would otherwise be. The question of whether the two themes are in some way connected requires further study. (We have reason to keep on retaining what's valuable, and longevity will be a byproduct of doing so, but that doesn't stamp value on longevity itself.)<sup>26</sup>

Maximizing consequentialism stands in especially sharp contrast with conservatism as I have defined it, but a view need not be maximizing to be unconservative. Maximizing consequentialism, as understood here, is only one species of conception

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<sup>25</sup> Private communication.

<sup>26</sup> Something might first be valuable because it is new, gradually lose that value, and pari passu gain the value of longevity. Its peak value would depend on the sort of thing that it is. (Maybe it's possible for me to be delighted both that the Seagram's Building is only forty years old and that it's as much as forty years old.)

in which the bearers of value, as opposed to the value they bear, don't count as such, but matter only because of the value that they bear, and are therefore, in a deep sense, dispensable.<sup>27</sup> That is the essential contrast: all such conceptions are rejected by the principle that valuable things warrant conservation. Thus, if one may be a "sufficientarian" with respect to the promotion of value (as opposed to, very differently, with respect to distributive justice), if, that is, it is possible to think that all that matters is that the world be made good enough, then conservatism in the present sense opposes that, too, as a sole normative principle about value.<sup>28</sup>

It follows from the essential contrast that, as Michael Otsuka has shrewdly observed, a Cohen-conservative might be a maximizer, in a certain sense: "... we might have a [Cohen-]conservative who thinks we should, above all else, maximize the quantity of preserved value by, for example, destructively throwing one of Michelangelo's Slaves into the path of the oncoming trolley so that it causes the trolley to come to a halt before it builds up enough speed to run over and destroy the other five Slaves".<sup>29</sup> Indeed, what reason could he have not to do it? The doctrine of doing and allowing

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<sup>27</sup> That negative characterization is the canonical description of what my conservatism opposes. Many would also identify the opposing view as consequentialism, but that hydra-headed monster gets defined in different ways, and it would be a distraction to adjudicate among its definitions here.

<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the choice of maximizing as a distinctive contrast to my conservatism is not an accident. For there is perhaps a pressure towards maximization in a thinking about value that disregards its bearers. For what reason could one have, for example, for producing merely sufficient value if one could produce more value at no sacrifice of anything that matters? It is because there is a sacrifice of something that might be thought to matter, to wit, the interests of those who have more than a sufficiency, that sufficiency makes initial normative sense with respect to distributive justice.

But that train of thinking might be too swift. For consider: while there may not be a reason to stop at some sort of sufficient value overall, there may yet be sufficiency within given dimensions of value: such as enough good literature, enough natural beauty, and so on. And someone who believes all and only in such "enoughs" would qualify as an anti-conservative, in the present sense, as much as a maximizer does. If, moreover, there can be sufficient value within a dimension, then that might be true of every dimension of value, and therefore of aggregate value itself. So the suggested contrast between maximization and sufficiency might indeed be misplaced: there might well exist a coherent sufficientarian position about value (that contradicts conservatism).

<sup>29</sup> Michael Otsuka, private communication, August 2005.

has purchase with respect to the treatment of human beings, but maybe not to the treatment of things.

Return to the Lippi/Picasso example. I said that a conservative doesn't oppose new creation, as long as the new creation leaves the old creation intact. But someone might object: if people look at Picasso, there's that much time spent not looking at Lippi, so that, in a sense, there is a replacement implied by creation, and my conservatism therefore can't be so sanguine about new creation. But then I am in trouble, because I surely do not want to prohibit or restrict access to Picasso.

But the propounder of that argument mistakes the nature of my conservatism with respect to particular value. For I do not celebrate, in the primary instance, our experience of the valuable things, but, instead, the valuable things themselves. And the only way that the value inherent in the Lippi can be destroyed, the particular value that I have in mind, is by destroying, or mutilating, the Lippi. Surrounding it by a distraction of Picassos doesn't do that.

Is attachment to the value of particular things, in opposition to maximizing value, or, indeed, to value satisficing, or to any view that fails to put a premium on embodied value, irrational?<sup>30</sup> Ex hypothesi the attachment is not justified by the contribution that the thing makes to the general value account. But it doesn't follow that the anti-maximizing (anti-etc.) stance is irrational, and I don't believe that it is: it is an error nourished by much academic work, especially in economics, but no doubt the error is of deeper than merely academic origin – it is an error to think that being rational about value requires the sort of abstract accounting of it that denies the value of particular things as such. And even if you think that I am wrong to call that an error, even if you think that there is never a reason to honour an embodiment of value, as such, I am sure that you cannot think of a non-circular argument for that conclusion: for to what could you appeal, to judge between the claims of abstract value and the claims of particular value? (Some are quick to suppose that favouring existing value must

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<sup>30</sup> In their interesting article on “The Reversal Test” (Ethics, 2006), Nick Bostrom and Toby Ord scout what they call the “status quo bias”. Caveats in the second paragraph of their article exclude its application against this one.

reflect a fear that what would replace it would be less good, in universal terms. I cannot refute that hypothesis. But I see no reason to believe it, unless it is already groundlessly decided that a preference for existing value is irrational and therefore in need of some such explanation as that the preference reflects anxiety about loss of abstract value.)

But can I give any positive argument for my main claim, which is that there is a justified bias towards existing value? I believe that the following three-premiss argument is a strong argument for it:

1. A thing that has intrinsic value is worthy of being revered or cherished.
  2. We do not regard something as being worthy of being revered or cherish if we have no reason to regret its destruction, as such.
  3. If we care only about their value, we never have reason to regret the destruction of valuable things, as such.
- ∴ 4. We are right to be biased in favour of existing embodiments of value.

A word about the first premiss of the argument. Note that it does not say, what would be false, that if I regard something as possessed of intrinsic value, then I must myself revere or cherish it. It might be something that I cannot integrate into my life in that way, like, for example, certain art objects that belong to a foreign culture. But I can still recognize them as worthy of being cherished, and I claim that I do if I think that they possess intrinsic value.

The argument appears to me to be valid, and premiss 3 seems analytically true. But let me offer a defense of the argument's second premiss. One can say, quite properly, upon acquiring a valuable thing, "I shall value this until something better comes along", but one cannot in the same way say "I shall cherish this until something better comes along": that could happen to be a correct prediction, but it could not express a decision to cherish. When premiss 2 says that we do not cherish that whose destruction we have no reason to regret, as such, the contrast is with regretting its destruction simply because of the loss of value that is entailed by it. So, for example,

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you do not cherish a Tintoretto if you happily replace it by a slightly better Picasso: you thereby treat the Tintoretto as something that has the merely instrumental value of being a vessel of aesthetic value.

Now, the truth of premisses 2 and 3 is consistent with the falsehood of 1. If 1 is false, then the only things that might be (worthy of being) cherished are ones that have personal value (unless some subset of things with intrinsic value would warrant being cherished and some not: but that strikes me as unlikely). David Wiggins has proposed a counter-example to 1, namely a rosebush in his garden, which served no external purpose, and which he therefore valued intrinsically, but one which he says he quite reasonably did not cherish, under the explication of “cherish” that is provided by premiss 2. When he was dismayed to see that his gardener had removed it, he was fully assuaged when the gardener said that she was replacing it by a more beautiful one.

I can think of three saving responses to the Wiggins counter-example, but I am not sure which, if any, is sound. First, one might conclude that Wiggins must have valued the bush not for its intrinsic value but merely for the pleasure it gave him: but he might protest that the stated response rides roughshod over the phenomenology of his experience. Second, one might conjecture that, despite his protest to the contrary, he did cherish the rose-bush, but not very much, so that any regret at its destruction was swamped by the good news that a better one was coming. And, third, one might hold that the requirement to cherish kicks in only once a certain threshold of intrinsic value has been passed, and that the value of a single rosebush falls below that threshold. The second and third responses might be said to gain a certain plausibility from the reflection that Wiggins’s rosebush example works better than would an otherwise parallel one in which a complete and luxuriant garden is replaced by an even better one.

Whether or not premiss 1, and, therefore, the argument on offer, are sound, a philosopher, perhaps one from Scandinavia, might ask: “But isn’t a Cohen-conservative also a kind of maximizer, namely one who simply sets a particular value on preserving value? There must be a function that takes each of existing value and abstract value as arguments, even if it is a function that is as wildly unlinear as any

function could ever be. A Cohen-conservative seeks to maximize that function.” My answer: I’m not sure that that form of book-keeping is coherent. Speaking briefly (and, I apologize, cryptically) I think it confuses the good and the right. But, if it is coherent, and it works for you, then so be it. The distinction between caring and not caring about preserving embodied value remains intact. If what is in question is the value of preserving value, that does not enhance the value of what gets preserved.

A brief digression. I said, in reply to the Lippi/Picasso objection, that what we value in the first instance is the Lippi, not our experience of it. But, someone might say, if it has value independently of its contribution to our experience, doesn’t it follow that it would be good to preserve it even if it were no longer to be perceived, and even in a perceiverless world? And aren’t those consequences absurd?

In order to address that pair of questions, let us distinguish between a world of blind people and a world of no people, or other relevant perceivers. In the first case I think the blind people could value the fact that their world contained such beauty, even though no one could appreciate it. So it might indeed follow from my position that it is good that unperceived aesthetic value exists. But I do not find that embarrassing. And if it also follows from my position that aesthetic value would be valuable in a wholly perceiverless and conceiverless world, then some will no doubt get off the bus there, but I would ride on even then.

If we have a thousand paintings and we know that one hundred will never be looked at again, but we don’t know which ones, would we say: “If only we knew which are the hundred that no one will ever look at. Then we could harmlessly destroy them, and use the space that they now occupy for something useful”? If more space were imperative, would we just as soon throw those never-again-to-be-experienced hundred paintings into the fire as we would some nondescript logs of wood?<sup>31</sup> **(Those two paras need repair, for it is not clear that the challenge in the paragraph above**

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<sup>31</sup> The position defended above, that aesthetic value is inherent in aesthetically valuable things, is consistent with an account of aesthetic value as a secondary quality, one, therefore, which is constitutively apt to stimulate or enable experiences of certain kinds. I here neither endorse nor reject that account.

**them is specifically to my conservatism, as opposed to the very concept of intrinsic value).**

I return to my main claim, which is that it is right to value valuable things as such, and not, therefore, merely for their contribution to total (or sufficient, or whatever) value. The idea is very simple, and to me it seems compelling, but I am not aware that it has been aired before. (There is, of course, a literature on whether it is justifiable to replace defective existing children by superior ones, or superior ones by ones that are even more superior, but that is not the same issue: see the Addendum at pp. 28-30 below. Since I don't think I'm a very original thinker, it puzzles me that I should have stumbled upon what seems to me to be an important new idea.<sup>32</sup> So, maybe I'm just confused.

However that may be, notice that the irreplaceability of which I have spoken of some valuable thing A by some more valuable thing B does not reflect incommensurability between the value of the A thing and the value of the B thing. On the contrary, some form of commensurability must obtain between their values for us to be able to declare the B thing superior in value to the A thing, which is a presupposition of the formulation of the conservative point. Yet although irreplaceability and incommensurability are manifestly different things, in some of the literature on incommensurability the two are quite routinely conflated. So, for example, it is said to show the incommensurability of friendship and money that one would not give up a friendship for money.<sup>33</sup> But while it may be true that one should not give up a particular existing friendship for money, it does not follow that the values of money and friendship are incommensurable. I might have to choose between a job in Tulsa and a job in Milwaukee, and I might reason that in Tulsa I'll make more money but in Milwaukee I'll make more friends, and I might non-corruptly, with my soul intact, weigh those desiderata on some sort of common scale. But no one without moral

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<sup>32</sup> There is an incomplete anticipation of the argument presented at p. 21 above in Joseph Raz's remark that "reasons of respect enjoin us not to destroy, and possibly to preserve, but not to create new objects of value" (Value, Respect, and Attachment, p. 162).

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Raz, The Morality of Freedom, pp.

defect gives up an existing friendship for money, or, indeed, for another friendship that promises to be more valuable even from the point of view of what is deepest in the value of friendship.<sup>34</sup>

### **Addendum: Particular Valuing and Deontology**

Is my thesis “just” a generalization of the familiar point, pressed by critics of utilitarianism, that it is wrong to kill a sad person if a happy person can thereby be produced? There is, of course, an affinity here. But the stated familiar point is normatively overdetermined. For there is, first, the point that human beings have a right not to be destroyed, by contrast perhaps, with cathedrals, sunsets (and colleges)? So binding is that right that there is, as it were, little room left for the undoubtable truth, which is indeed a special case of my claim, that the value embodied in a human being warrants protection because it is embodied. Nor would one happily say, in respect of the more familiar point, that it justifies a mere bias in favour of existing human value is indicated. So there are similarities and differences to explore.

Now, restrictive deontological obligations need not reflect rights on the part of the items whose treatment they govern. A deontological bar on destroying something need not acknowledge a right that the thing in question possesses. Tom Hurka has helped me to see that the bias that I defend against destroying what is of value is nevertheless not deontological, in the contemplated wide sense of that term. The paragraphs that close this addendum are an edited version of his remarks.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Here are some good questions that were raised by Kimberley Brownlee and that I do not address: (i) What if conserving it requires repairing it, or even modifying it? Does Cohen-conservatism include an active component of cultivation and development of that which has value (in the way that art conservation sometimes includes the active component of restoration through cleaning and stabilization)? What is more conservative, to repair the old pot with new clay, or to let it crumble? (ii) Some things have inherent value only in a certain context. Are they to be conserved once that context has disappeared?

Also neglected here are further questions about how cultural values can only persist if they are allowed to change that are discussed with great subtlety by Samuel Scheffler at pp. 106 et seq. of his “Immigration and the Significance of Culture”.

<sup>35</sup> In a letter to me of May 23, 2007.



My (that is, GAC's) view gives priority to preserving existing goods over creating new ones. A familiar deontological view gives priority to not oneself destroying goods, or more generally, to not choosing against them, over promoting goods. (Causing evils gets a treatment analogous to that of destroying goods.)

These views yield the same verdict in the principal case that I have discussed, where one has the option of destroying one good in order to replace it with another slightly better good. But the views come apart in more complex cases.

Imagine that you can either prevent an existing good from being destroyed by natural forces or create another slightly better good. My view says that you should preserve the existing good, but the deontological view doesn't: it treats preserving and creating as two forms of promoting and allows you to create the new good. It may do this even when the first good is threatened with destruction by some other person's wrongful act, since what it prioritizes is your not destroying goods, not not destroying in general.

For a possible case on the other side, imagine that someone else is in the process of creating a new good and that I could intervene to sabotage his project, preventing his good from being created and thereafter creating another and greater good myself. My view might not forbid this, since there is not now an existing good that has priority. But the deontological view may forbid it, because the sabotage is aimed directly at preventing a good from being realized.

#### **4. Personal Value**

I have a pencil eraser (what in British English is called a "rubber") which I have used ever since I became a lecturer forty-four years ago. It started out square, but now it has rounded edges, yet although it is small, most of it is still there. It is not because I make very few mistakes that most of it is still there, but because (a) I don't use pencils very much; (b) it takes only a little bit of rubbing to eliminate a mistake; and (c) I don't notice all my mistakes. I would hate to lose this eraser. I would hate that even

if I knew it could be readily replaced, not only, if I so wished, by a pristine square one, but even by one of precisely the off-round shape and the same dingy colour that mine has now acquired. There is no feature that stands apart from its history that makes me want to keep this eraser. I want my eraser, with its history. What could be more human than that?

If I had a paint brush that once belonged to Monet, I would value it as such, that is, because it once belonged to Monet, and if it were removed and replaced by a more elegant brush, one that belonged to Manet, by a well-wisher who knew that I think Manet greater than Monet, and that I care about elegance in brushes, then I would know that the well-wisher would have failed to understand something, and I don't mean that he would have failed to understand the sanctity of private property. He would have failed to understand that wanting to keep what one (already) has is a special sort of wanting.

It is not true that I am attached to the particular thing because I value attachments, and this particular old thing serves well as something to be attached to. Rather, I am attached to the thing itself, as such, and not for any general reason, such as the general reason that it is good to have attachments (which it certainly is). Thus, if my would-be benefactor had said: oh, but I know that in time you will grow even more attached to the Manet brush, I should remain unmoved. It's the Monet brush that I want, not some quantity of attachment to something or other.

Consider the resistance to suburban supermarketization, on behalf of neighbourhood shops. People who seek to protect neighbourhood shops point out their many advantages, the many purposes that they serve so well: local effects like their accessibility to old and infirm people, a meeting place that stimulates community, eccentric product lines, and also macro-effects like reducing motor traffic, and better life-chances for people from deprived minorities who get an opportunity to rise on the social scale, through self-, and even other-, employment.

But we deceive ourselves if we think that it is only because they deliver specifiable economic and social benefits that we cherish our local shops. It is not only the purposes they serve that justify our resistance to their destruction. It is also because in

all their vagariouly caused uniqueness they are part of a social and cultural landscape to which we belong. I do not want you or, for that matter, me, to knock down part of my house and replace it by something bigger and better, even if it truly is bigger and better. I want my home to remain what it is and I want my neighbourhood to remain what it is. (Of course, if either were really lousy, I would welcome, I might crave, change. But if each is good enough, or quite good, then I want them substantially as they are, despite their deficiencies on a generalization of the criteria that would make me judge them to be unacceptable if they were a lot less good, by those criteria, than they actually are.)

Both the economic market and state planning tend towards the destruction of the particular, and therefore towards the destruction of both particular and personal value. (By “tend” I mean “tend”, not “always do”.) To be sure, some people are happy to pay over the odds, that is, to pay more than what they buy is worth to them, for stuff from the local shop, in order to help keep it going. But that’s clearly counter-market behaviour: game-theoretically speaking, those buyers are suckers. And some planners might accept its being there as a reason to keep something there. But usually they will prefer a general consideration, something that the thing does well, or even the general consideration that a majority want it kept there – which is not, of course, the reason for keeping it there that the members of that majority themselves have.

Market and planning logics tend against the truth that people want particular valuable things, not just satisfaction of general desiderata. If everything is added to or subtracted from the environment in neglect of the value of particularity and variety as such, then everything will tend to be the same everywhere, because serving the same requirements: every quarter will have its Starbucks.<sup>36</sup> But market choice is relentlessly general in the grounds of its preference, so market mania is deeply anti-conservative and Thatcherist Toryism is a great betrayal of conservatism (about which I shall say more in section 7). If you want everything to be optimal, nothing will be good. Some things have to just be, they have to just be there, if anything is to be good.

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<sup>36</sup> And every conservative diatribe like this one will badmouth Starbucks. In fact, Starbucks has things that recommend it, but I am regretting sameness, not how bad each of the members of the repetitive set is. To regret that there’s only one flower in the garden is to say nothing about how beautiful that flower is.

We are attached to particular things because we need to belong to something, and we therefore need some things to belong to us.<sup>37</sup> We can't belong to something abstract. We do not keep the cathedrals just because they're beautiful, but also because they are part of our past. We want the past to be present among us. We don't want to be cut off from it. We rejoice in our contact with the culture of our past. We of course value our particular past in the respectful way that we value any past culture, but we also value it in a more personal way. We want to be part of what Edmund Burke (famously) called "the 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."<sup>38</sup> When people ask me how I can bear to think of my destiny, which is death, I tell them that I find great consolation in the American poet Carl Sandburg's line: "Something began me and it had no beginning; something will end me and it has no end."

Is it wrong to destroy something that possesses personal value, other than because doing so would distress the person or people for whom it has that value? I'm inclined to say "yes", but that answer is not so evident here as it is in the case of particular value.

The relations between personal and particular valuing warrant investigation.

And consider, too, an instructive example, which was raised by Kent Greenawalt: "Suppose a member of an institution has never really liked the setting or his colleagues. He attaches no personal value to keeping things as they are. But does he,

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<sup>37</sup> That love is of the particular explains the discordance in the fourth line of "You, You, You", an Ames Brothers hit of 1953, by Peter Shelley:

You, you, you,  
I'm in love with you, you, you,  
I could be so true, true, true,  
To someone like you, you, you.

<sup>38</sup> Reflections on the Revolution in France, 1790. I know that everybody quotes that: I'm not trying to be original here, just trying to hit the nail on the head, which Burke did.

as a member of the institution, have a responsibility to give a weight to preservationist arguments greater than the weight an outsider should give?”<sup>39</sup>

I believe that the answer to Greenawalt’s question is “Yes”, but that answer might be explained in more than one way. It might reflect an obligation to his co-workers, with whom he has a certain obligation of reciprocity, even if he doesn’t like them, an obligation that generates this sub-obligation to have some regard to what they value. More interestingly, one might want to say that you have more obligation to preserve things of objective value with which you have something to do, in various ways, even if they don’t mean much to you in particular.

## **5. Identity and Tradition**

In section 2 I contrasted using All Souls to produce independently desirable goods with the different aim of ensuring that All Souls remains what (but not therefore exactly as) it is. There is a conceptual complication about that second aim, that is, the preservation of identity, that I now want to explore. I also hope thereby to show how the theme of identity relates to some other conservative themes.

Our identity<sup>40</sup> is not the sort of value that is characteristically preserved as a result of a successful attempt to preserve it. Our identity is characteristically preserved not as a result of our aiming to preserve it but simply as a result of our not aiming to change it, and of lack of exogenous convulsion in our lives. And when it is necessary to aim to preserve our identity, then our identity is in question. The preservation of identity is for the most part essentially a byproduct, in Jon Elster’s sense, something that won’t be achieved by someone who strives to achieve it.<sup>41</sup> One can certainly say: “I’m attached to it because it’s part of my tradition.” But the more you have to say that, the more you have to reaffirm the tradition, the more likely it is that the grip of tradition is

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<sup>39</sup> Personal communication, October 6, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> For what I mean by “identity”, please see footnote 8 above.

<sup>41</sup> See his

relaxing. Tradition is such a fellow that you only have to hold on to it when it has relaxed its hold on you.

When the All Souls fellows who favoured change made their recommendations, they were not only recommending what could contribute to a change of the identity of the College, but also manifesting a transformation of its identity: that their suggestions were not immediately greeted with derision says something about how the identity of the College had changed. In an earlier age no one would have raised such suggestions, and no one, moreover, would have refrained from raising them as a result of some reasoning about the identity of All Souls.

That our identity represents something that we mostly live rather than conceive nourishes noxious politically big-C Conservative and even big-F Fascist conceptions. The lived nature of identity connects with the Conservative celebration of the unfathomable unarticulable truths that underlie social existence. Michael Oakeshott, indulging, as he often did, a tendency to put truth in the service of oppression and reaction, treated the depth that defies articulation as a reason for having a hereditary ruling class, one that is capable of transmitting the unarticulable wisdom about what we are to the next generation of rulers. I'm saying that there's something in the thought that Oakeshott perverted to his reactionary purpose. (Just as there is something in his thought that any sound proposal for social change is the "pursuit of an intimation", of something already in the society. I agree with that, but I don't think that it disqualifies the Russian Revolution, which is the sort of thing that it's supposed to disqualify.)

And the fact that our identity represents something that we live rather than conceive also nourishes Fascist conceptions, because thinking with the blood, valuing passion over reason, are perversions of truths about the impossibility of bringing everything to the ratiocinative surface.

It is a familiar thought that a belief or an attitude is irrational if it would fail to survive an explanation of why one holds it, if, in other words, a condition of holding it is ignorance why one does so. If he were to lose his love for her upon coming to know that his love for her is explained by her resemblance to his mother, then his love for

her, so many would say (and whatever they might say if his love did not now decline), is misplaced. Suppose it is true that if the oppressed realised that they defer to their oppressors because they can't bear to think of themselves as victims of injustice,<sup>42</sup> they would, as a result, cease to defer to their oppressors. If that were so then there is a case for saying that their present deference is irrational.<sup>43</sup> And since I have said that adherence to tradition depends on a certain unawareness, might this not suggest that there is indeed something not merely non-rational but irrational in the desire to preserve tradition? If tradition derives its value from our need for tradition, then becoming aware of the genesis of our attachment to tradition might loosen that attachment. If so, should we conclude that tradition is not in itself valuable, and is beautiful only because we love it? We want it to be the case, our love says that it is the case, that we love it because it is beautiful. (That reflection belongs with the question about value and the given that I said (p. 11) was on the horizon of the present paper).

Maybe we value tradition only because we take comfort from the familiar, because we know how to negotiate it. Maybe we are like kids who like the same story over and over again. But is that explanation necessarily reductive? Perhaps children are not just infantile. Perhaps they have some wisdom. Perhaps there always has to be a good dose of familiarity, and adults get the balance more right than children do, because we are less afraid.

## **6. Paradoxes of Change**

If we are conservatives in my sense, then we have reason to change slowly because we have reason to be what we are and to carry on with what we have, and, perhaps

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Paul Veyne.

<sup>43</sup> Note that the relevant claim is not that it's a necessary condition, but just, perhaps, a sufficient one, of a belief's being irrational, that you lose it when you know its source.

moreover,<sup>44</sup> because we cannot erase our background. A conservative regulation gives life continuity. We cannot reinvent ourselves, or our language, or anything that really matters, every day according to what our resources now are and what our opportunities now are. We cannot keep everything “under review”.

Conservatives often make a point about the unforeseeable consequences of large and rapid change, a point about looking before leaping, and about the difficulty of seeing what’s coming, and so forth. But the l’imprévu point isn’t my point<sup>45</sup>: I recommend changing slowly for no such strategic reason. We have reason to change slowly even when we know very well what is coming next (and after that).

In the brilliant climax of his 1980 critical notice of two books by Anthony Kenny (Will, Freedom and Power and Freewill and Responsibility), Ted Honderich wrote:

There is also the sad fact that our author, who might be thought to have an obligation in these matters, has joined those users of English who take concepts to include some that are voted for, driven, lived in, and installed. You can’t do any of that to a concept, and you can’t morally justify one either (II, p. 68). No doubt the time will come when you can, but we needn’t rush toward it.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Whether what follows is an independent reason for a conservative posture depends on the answer to the “horizon” question that was posed on p. 11.

<sup>45</sup> For a fine treatment of it, see Geoffrey Brennan and Alan Hamlin, “Analytic Conservatism”, British Journal of Political Science, vol. 34, 2004, pp. 675-691.

<sup>46</sup> Mind, Volume 89, No. 353 (January, 1980, pp. 121-33), p. 133. I make no comment on whether Honderich is right, or was right in 1980, about the word “concept”. I praise not the substance but the form of his admonition of Kenny.

It might seem ironical that an intransigent opponent of conservatism (see his Conservatism) should have given so powerful a formulation to an essential conservative thought. But maybe it’s not really ironical, because, so Honderich says at pp. 1-2 of the book, his topic is not small-c conservatism.

Even so, Honderich might be thought to be taking a swipe against small-c conservatism when he writes that “if Conservatism were at bottom a defence of the familiar, in the plain meaning of the term, we should have a mystery on our hands, the mystery of how an egregious idiocy could have become a large political tradition.” (Ibid., p. 2). To be sure, it would be an egregious idiocy to defend everything that is familiar, but it would also be an egregious idiocy to reject, for that reason, a characterization of conservatism according to which a conservative is more disposed to defend the familiar than others are.



I have ruminated on the implications of that wise remark many times in the more than twenty-five years that have passed since I read it. They include these: that (1) the first stage of linguistic evolution, or, rather, of one pervasive kind of linguistic evolution, is linguistic error; but that (2) once the error has become common enough, it ceases to be an error, and it may become even required usage, so that an older usage now qualifies as merely fussy, or at any rate quaint, but that (3) we who are attached to what is now correct usage may reasonably seek to decelerate the process of change, by avoiding deviation ourselves, which we ought to do anyway, quite apart from our particular tastes, because deviations are errors. (Maybe, since deviations are errors, there shouldn't be any linguistic change of this type, even when it's beneficial in the end. Maybe, if it's wrong for it to start happening, it's wrong for it to happen.)

There are, of course, parallels in non-linguistic behaviour and style, in what is "the done thing". Do the thing that's not done often enough, and it becomes the done thing.

But, returning to language, we must here remember the point made in section 3 above, which is that the disposition to protect the old can coexist, as it does in my own case, with a welcoming attitude to those new things that don't displace the old things. There's nothing wrong with expansion of the vocabulary stock, or with neologisms, like "like", as such. (Like, I really, like, like, "like".) The Honderich resistance that I endorse is against making errors that are in time self-legitimizing and that thereby destroy old meanings.

## **7. Conservatism and the political right**

Wanting to conserve what has value implies no tenderness towards exploitation and injustice, since they lack value. Wanting to conserve what has value is consistent with wanting to destroy disvalue.

Of course, something that is unjust can have value, and even in a fashion that is linked to the very thing that makes it unjust. Certain practices of deference, for example, which embody injustice, also facilitate forms of exchange that are deeply mutual in a

distinctive way. But you can be both egalitarian and conservative by putting justice lexically prior to (other) value<sup>47</sup> (whether or not – a further question - one could say that something that merits destruction because it is unjust might nevertheless be of great value, all things considered). (Lack of in-) justice, such egalitarians might say, is the first virtue of things.

This deference to justice does not trivialize the “we want to conserve what is valuable” thought. For conservation of the valuable still sometimes trumps value maximization (and so forth) and it needs something as momentous as justice to trump the (non-justice) value that we seek to conserve.

Note, further, that wanting to conserve the valuable, even wanting to keep things that have increased in value as a result of tradition, is not “wanting to keep things as they are”,<sup>48</sup> as such, where that means “wanting to preserve the status quo, the existing socio-political situation”. That is too indiscriminating a characterization to be the name of a proper object of conservative concern. And, in order to preserve valuable things in the status quo, we might have to revolutionize our situation. To keep the pictures safe, we might have to tear down the damp and draughty old museum and

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<sup>47</sup> I do not say that I am myself so uncompromising an egalitarian, so lexically pro-justice. I am not sure that we should regret the production of all the wonderful material culture that we have inherited and that was produced at the expense of gross injustice. Fortunately, there is no need to face the music prospectively. (I propose a resolution of the tension between the Marxist commitment to advancement of productive power and the Marxist commitment to those at whose expense that advancement occurs in Section V of “Peter Mew on Justice and Capitalism”, which uses materials assembled at History, Labour, and Freedom, pp. 303-4.)

<sup>48</sup> Shlomi Segall (private communication, May 30, 2007) remarks: “We certainly often regret something, say a beloved old oak tree, dying. But if old oaks could be kept alive forever, the conservative might say: ‘I miss the time when trees used to grow to maturity and then wither away slowly. Nothing ever dies around here no more. Things are not like they used to be’. The two sentiments put together project a status quo bias, which is difficult to justify. For, what then is the optimum according to the conservative? Having oak trees prosper and die naturally. But if that is so, what the conservative is interested in is not value (whether in preserving it or enhancing it), but simply in keeping things as they have been, independently of their value (whether instrumental or intrinsic). That seems a difficult position to justify.” The conservatism that Segall describes is not the conservatism that I am seeking to defend.

build a new one.<sup>49</sup> One thing Karl Marx said about the socialist revolution was that that revolution was necessary to preserve the fruits of civilization against the ravages of capitalism.<sup>50</sup>

Classical British Conservatism combined conservatism with a small “c” with preservation of wealth and inequality:

The rich man in his castle  
The poor man at his gate  
God made them, high or lowly,  
And ordered their estate.

(‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’, 1848, by Cecil Alexander.)

The combination of conservatism with wealth and inequality was relatively easy to sustain in a pre-capitalist society, but, when inequality became capitalist inequality, the combination of conservatism with wealth and inequality became untenable, among other reasons because capitalism so comprehensively transforms everything, including itself: in the phrase of the Communist Manifesto,<sup>51</sup> under capitalism, “all that is solid melts into air”. As Marx also said, “all earlier modes of production were essentially conservative,”<sup>52</sup> by contrast with capitalism. When the rich morphed, fully, into capitalists, the British Conservative Party became the anti-conservative market party. As a matter of history, the bottom line of Conservatism with a capital “C” turned out to be not conservatism with a small “c” but preservation of wealth and inequality. With fierce international competition, conserving old ways is too costly to the maintenance of wealth. And with historical working class gains in place, small-c conservatism becomes a buffer against inequality. For the sake of protecting and extending the powers of wealth, big-C Conservatives regularly sacrifice the small c-conservatism that many of them genuinely cherish. They blather on about warm beer

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<sup>49</sup> Compare the questions raised by Brownlee that are noticed in footnote 32 above.

<sup>50</sup> As John McMurtry points out to me, my comment here may represent a misappropriation of Marx, because Marx might have meant that what was to be preserved was, the level of development of the productive forces, and that is a non-conservative desideratum, because of its indifference to the value of the particular.

<sup>51</sup> Which Marshall Berman has made more famous by using it as the title of his magnificent book.

<sup>52</sup> Capital, FLPH, Volume I, p. 486.

and old maids cycling to church and then they hand Wal-Mart the keys to the kingdom. They are thereby in tune with the propensity of capitalism, which is to maximize a certain kind of value, in sovereign disregard of the value of any things.

### **8. Nationalism and ethnic conflict**

In an essay called “Reconsidering Historical Materialism” that was first published in 1983, I criticized Marxism for its neglect of the powerful human need for identity. I referred to religion and nationalism, which, so I believed, and believe, have exercised a causal power that challenges certain historical materialist theses. I spoke of the “social manifestations of the interest in self identification”, and I said that

human groupings, whose lines of demarcation are not economic ... are as strong and as durable as they evidently are partly because they offer satisfaction to the individual’s need for self identification. In adhering to traditionally defined collectivities people retain a sense of who they are.<sup>53</sup>

I also said that “Marxist philosophical anthropology”,

in its exclusive emphasis on the creative side of human nature ... neglects a whole domain of human need and aspiration, which is prominent in the philosophy of Hegel.<sup>54</sup>

A person does not only need to develop and enjoy his powers. He needs to know who he is, and how his identity connects him with particular others. He must, as Hegel saw, find something outside himself which he did not create, and to which something inside himself corresponds, because of the social process that created him, or because of a remaking of self wrought by later experience. He must be able to identify himself with some part of objective social reality: spirit, as Hegel said, finds itself at home with itself in its own otherness as such.<sup>55</sup>

I am not disposed to abandon any of that, and I believe that it links with the truth in conservatism that I have tried to identify in this essay. That truth shows that ethnic conflict has not only certain socio-economic and social-psychological bases, but also

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<sup>53</sup> Karl Marx’s Theory of History, Expanded Edition, p. 347.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 346.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., pp. 347-8, Quoting the Phenomenology of Spirit, p. 780.

deep normative roots, and it is a major and disastrous error of the Enlightenment and therefore of the socialist tradition that it fails to appreciate those roots, which drive down to the conservation of personal and particular value.

The foregoing diagnosis is intended to be neutral with respect to the comment that it prompted from the progenitor of this article, David Lloyd-Thomas<sup>56</sup>:

.... nationalist identification is .... a false attempt to capitalize on the characteristics we have which dispose us to form personal values. Thus the neighbourhood in which I was brought up has genuine personal value for me, but something as large as Australia does not, as there is no genuine personal attachment to the whole of that continent (very little of which I have even seen). Nationalist identification is a perversion of the capacity we have to form personal values, for the purpose of underwriting a political agenda, which in this example is the creation of Australian nationalism. Nationalism may appeal particularly to those who have been unfortunate in not having been able to form much in the way of things that are genuine personal value to them, and who seek for a substitute (Example: the life of Adolf Hitler.).

I don't fully agree with that,<sup>57</sup> but what I quoted above from my old article doesn't forbid me to. What is said in the exhibited passages of my old article is consistent both with celebration of nationalism and with repudiation of it as an imposture.

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<sup>56</sup> Private communication and see footnote 1 above. In the quoted passage I rewrite Lloyd-Thomas's "particular value" as "personal value": see p. 7 above.

<sup>57</sup> Principally because I don't think "genuine personal attachment" requires immediate contact with that to which one is attached.