What is Conservatism?

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The voice of conservatism is not much heard in contemporary political philosophy. There is no shortage of conservatives, but there is a shortage of systematic, articulate, and reasonable attempts to defend conservatism. The aim of this paper is to provide the outlines of such a defence. It is not possible, in a paper, to provide more than an outline.[1]* The argument proceeds by identifying several features of what is taken to be the strongest version of conservatism. These features jointly define it and distinguish it from other versions of conservatism, as well as from other political outlooks.

A Political Morality

Conservatism is a political morality. It is political because it is a view about the political arrangements that make a society good; where society means roughly a contemporary nation-state that has been in existence for at least several generations. Conservatism is also moral because it takes it to be the justification of these arrangements that they foster good lives. Lives are good if they are on the whole both satisfying and beneficial. The pertinent satisfactions are derived from the enjoyment people find in the most important activities of their lives. The appropriate benefits are those that people confer on others. Lives are good then if the balance between the satisfactions enjoyed and the benefits conferred, on the one hand, and the dissatisfactions suffered and the harms inflicted, on the other, is strongly in favour of the former. The fundamental aim of conservatism is to conserve the political arrangements that have shown themselves to be conducive to good lives thus understood.[2]

* It is odd but necessary to begin with a note about the Notes. In several of the notes conservative views will be attributed to various people. This is not meant to imply that the people who hold these views are conservatives. They are conservative in respect to these views, but they also hold other views, and they may or may not be conservative. It is often very difficult to say whether or not a person is conservative, especially since few of the people referred to were concerned with formulating an explicit political morality.

[1] This discussion is provided in the author's *Conservatism: A Moral Basis for a Good Society,* work-in-progress.

[2] This conception of good lives is described and defended in John Kekes, *Moral Wisdom and Good Lives*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), see especially chapter 2.

Conservatism is not alone in being a political morality, aiming at a good society, and judging the goodness of a society by its contribution to the goodness of the lives of the people who live in it. Liberalism and socialism are the most widely favoured current alternatives to it. These and other political moralities are pitted against each other as a result of their disagreements about the specific political arrangements that a good society ought to have. The case for conservatism is that the political arrangements it favours are more likely than any other to lead to good lives.

Conservatism is not a unitary position: it has different versions, and their advocates disagree with each other about what political arrangements ought to be conserved.[3] There is no disagreement among them, however, about where to look for reasons for or against particular political arrangements. The reasons are to be found in the history of the society whose members seek the arrangements. A common ground among conservatives is that the political arrangements that ought to be conserved are discovered by reflection on why, how, and for what reason they have come to hold. The conservative view is that history is the best guide to understanding the present and planning for the future because it

[3] Reliable accounts of some of these disagreements may be found in Noel O'Sullivan, *Conservatism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976) and Anthony Quinton, *The Politics of Imperfection* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978).

For general surveys and bibliographies of conservative ideas, see Kenneth Minogue, 'Conservatism,' *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Paul Edwards, (New York: Macmillan, 1967), Anthony O'Hear, 'Conservatism,' *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, edited by Ted Honderich, (Oxford University Press, 1995), Anthony Quinton, 'Conservatism,' *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, edited by Robert E. Gooden & Philip Pettit, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), and Rudolf Vierhaus, 'Conservatism,' *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, edited by Philip P. Wiener, (New York: Scribner's, 1968).

Two useful anthologies of conservatives writings are Russell Kirk, *Conservative Reader*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) and Roger Scruton, *Conservative Texts*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

Some of the classic works that have influenced the development of conservatism are Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Politics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and *Rhetoric*, Machiavelli's *The Prince* and *Discourses*, Montaigne's *Essays*, Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Hume's *Treatise*, *Enquiries*, *Essays*, and *History of England*, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, Stephen's *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, Bradley's *Ethical Studies*, Santayana's *Dominations and Powers*, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty*, and Oakeshott's *Rationalism in Politics* and *On Human Conduct*.

indicates what political arrangements are likely to make lives good or bad.

The significance of this agreement among conservatives is not merely what it asserts, but also what it denies. It denies that the reasons for or against particular political arrangements are to be derived from a contract that fully rational people might make in a hypothetical situation; or from an imagined ideal society; or from what is supposed to be most beneficial for the whole of humanity; or from the prescriptions of some sacred or secular book. Conservatives, in preference to these alternatives, look then to history. Not, however, to history in general, but to *their* history, which is theirs because it is a repository of formative influences on how they live now and how it is reasonable for them to want to live in the future. Yet their attitude is not one of unexamined prejudice in favour of political arrangements that have become traditional in their society. They certainly aim to conserve some traditional political arrangements, but only those that reflection shows to be conducive to good lives.

Conservatives turn to their history not only for possibilities that make lives good, but also for limits that good lives must observe. They reflect on their history in order to understand what deserves their allegiance and what is inimical to having a good society. To conserve good political arrangements and to avoid bad ones often requires the adaptation of traditional arrangements to changing circumstances. Conservatism, therefore, does not involve strict adherence to a rigid pattern, but a flexible rearrangement of the relative importance of the elements that constitute such complex wholes as political arrangements are.

Conserving political arrangements is like making one's house a home. It requires constant repair, refurbishment, additions if circumstances warrant it, anticipating problems and coping with them if they occur unexpectedly, being on good terms with neighbours, having trustworthy people to do the upkeep, and generally making and keeping it a comfortable framework conducive to living as one wishes. But throughout all the necessary changes it remains the house that, for better or worse, one lives in. The reason for taking pains with it is to make living in it better.

All this is common ground among conservatives, and even among conservatives and some of their opponents. More needs to be said, therefore, to explain the source of the obvious disagreements among conservatives and between conservatives and others. This explanation focuses on the different kinds of reasons that may be given to decide what specific political arrangements a good society ought to have. The nature of these reasons emerges from a con-

sideration of four distinctions, which force choices on those who reflect on them. It will be found that the best case for conservatism depends on choosing, in preference to either of the extremes, an alternative that is intermediate between them. The four intermediate alternatives, taken jointly, make possible a preliminary identification of the strongest version of conservatism and a preliminary way of distinguishing it from other conservative and non-conservative views.

Metaphysics or Scepticism

The first distinction poses the question of whether or not conservatives should look beyond their history for the reasons that determine what political arrangements they ought to favour. Some conservatives think so, others do not. To be sure, all conservatives agree that history is the appropriate starting point for their reflection, but some of them believe that it is not a contingent fact that certain political arrangements have historically fostered good lives, while others have been detrimental to them. Conservatives who believe this think that there is a metaphysical explanation for the historical success or failure of various political arrangements. They believe that there is a rational and moral order in reality. Political arrangements that conform to this order foster good lives, those that conflict with it are bound to make lives worse.

These metaphysically inclined conservatives are willing to learn from history, but only because history points beyond itself toward more fundamental considerations. That these considerations centre on a rational and moral order is agreed to by all of them. But they nevertheless disagree whether the order is providential, as it is held to be by various religions; or a Platonic chain of being at whose pinnacle is the Form of the Good; or the Hegelian unfolding of the dialectic of clashing forces culminating in the final unity of reason and action; or the one reflected by natural law, which, if adhered to, would remove all obstacles from the path of realizing the purpose inherent in human nature; or some further possibility. Such disagreements notwithstanding, conservatives of this persuasion are convinced that the ultimate reasons for or against specific political arrangements are to be found by understanding the nature and implications of the order in reality. Disagreements, whether metaphysical, moral, or political, are due to human fallibility. They believe that there is an absolute and eternal truth about these matters. The problem is finding out what it is, or, if it

has already been revealed, finding out how the canonical text ought to be interpreted.[4]

The belief that metaphysics is the clue to what political arrangements foster good lives is held not only by some conservatives, but also by some left and right-wing radicals who otherwise disagree with these conservatives. These radicals believe that the laws that govern human affairs have been discovered. Some say that the laws are those of history, others that they are of sociology, psychology, sociobiology, or ethology. Their shared view is, however, that a good society is possible only if its political arrangements reflect the relevant laws. Human misery is a consequence of ignorance or wickedness, which leads people to favour arrangements contrary to the laws. History, as they see it, is the painful story of societies banging their collective heads against the wall. They have found the key, however, the door is now open, history has reached its final phase, and from here on all manner of things would be well, if only their prescriptions were followed.

The historical record of societies whose political arrangements were inspired by metaphysical or Utopian schemes is one of unmitigated disaster. They all made it a habit to break countless eggs and they all failed to produce any omelettes. They imposed their certainties on unwilling or duped people, they made their lives miserable, all the while promising great improvements just after the present crisis, which usually turned out to be permanent. If the present century has a moral achievement, it is the realization that it is morally and politically unacceptable to proceed in this way.

Opposed to these metaphysically inclined conservatives and non-conservative Utopians are sceptical conservatives. Their scepticism. however, may take either a radical or a moderate form. Radical scepticism is a repudiation of reason. Conservatives who are radical

[4] This is the view of many religious conservatives mainly, but not exclusively, in the Catholic tradition. Perhaps the most uncompromising representative of this view is Joseph de Maistre, *Works*, selected, translated, and introduced by J. Lively, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965). For surveys and bibliographies divided along national lines, see O'Sullivan, *Conservatism*, chapter 2 for France and chapter 3 for Germany; Klemens von Klemperer, *Germany's New Conservatism* (Princeton University Press, 1957) for Germany; Quinton, *The Politics for Imperfection* for England; Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, for England and America; Charles W. Dunn & J. David Woodward, *The Conservative Tradition in America* (Lanham, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), John P. East, *The American Conservative Movement* (Chicago: Regnery, 1986), George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), and Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), second revised edition for America.

sceptics reject reason as a guide to the political arrangements that a good society ought to have. It makes no difference to them whether the reasons are metaphysical, scientific, or merely empirical. They are opposed to relying on reason whatever form it may take. Their opposition is based on their belief that all forms of reasoning are ultimately based on assumptions that must be accepted on faith and that it is possible to juxtapose to any chain of reasoning another chain that is equally plausible and yet incompatible with it.

Their rejection of the guidance of reason, however, leaves radically sceptical conservatives with the problem of how to decide what political arrangements they ought to favour. The solution they have historically offered is to be guided by faith or to perpetuate the existing, arrangements simply because they are familiar. The dangers of either solution have been made as evident by the historical record as the dangers of the preceding approach. Faith breeds dogmatism, the persecution of those who reject it or who hold other faiths, and it provides no ground for regarding the political arrangements it favours as better than contrary ones. Whereas the perpetuation of the status quo on account of its familiarity makes it impossible to improve the existing political arrangements.

A via media between the dangerous extremes of metaphysical or Utopian politics and the repudiation of reason is moderate scepticism. Conservatives who hold this view need not deny that there is a rational and moral order in reality. They are committed only to denying that reliable knowledge of it can be had. Moderately sceptical conservatives are far more impressed by human fallibility than by the success of efforts to overcome it. They think that the claims that some truths are revealed, that some texts are canonical, that some knowledge embodies eternal verities stand in need of persuasive evidence. The regard these claims only as credible as the evidence that is available to support them. But the evidence is no less fallible than the claims are that it is adduced to support. According to moderately sceptical conservatives, it is therefore far more reasonable to look to the historical record of various political arrangements than to endeavour to justify or criticize them by appealing to metaphysical considerations that are bound to be less reliable than the historical record.[5]

[5] The roots of sceptical conservatism are to be found scattered in Montaigne's *Essays*, Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Hume's *Treatise, Enquiries, Essays*, and *History of England*, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Santayana's *Dominations and Powers*, and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty*.

On Montaigne's conservatism, see John Kekes, *The Examined Life*

Moderate scepticism, however, does not lead conservatives to deny that it is possible to evaluate political arrangements by adducing reasons for or against them. What they deny is that good reasons must be metaphysical, absolute, and eternal. The scepticism of these conservatives is, therefore, not a global doubt about it being possible and desirable to be reasonable, to base beliefs on the evidence available in support of them, and to make the strength of beliefs commensurate with the strength of the evidence. Their scepticism is about deducing political conclusions from metaphysical or Utopian premises. They want political arrangements to be firmly rooted in the experiences of the people who are subject to them. Since these experiences are unavoidably historical, it is to history that moderately sceptical conservatives look for supporting evidence. They will not try to deduce from metaphysical premises which orifices of the body are suitable for sexual pleasure or explain voting patterns by the extent to which various segments of the electorate swim with the current of History. Moderate scepticism thus avoids the absurdity of basing political arrangements on speculation about what lies beyond experience or of being equally suspicious of all political arrangements because of a global distrust of reason.

(University Park: Penn State Press, 1992), chapter 4; on Hobbes's conservatism, see Michael Oakeshott, *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974); on Hume's conservatism, see Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Pursuit of Certainty*, (Cambridge University Press, 1965), part I, Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), chapter 12, and Sheldon S. Wolin, 'Hume and Conservatism,' *American Political Science Review*, vol. 98 (December 1954), pp. 999–1016; on Tocqueville's conservatism, see Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), Frohnen, *Virtue and the Promise of Conservatism*, and Alan S. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); on Santayana's conservatism, see John Gray, 'George Santayana and the Critique of Liberalism,' *The World and I* (February 1989), pp. 593–607; on Wittgenstein's conservatism, see Charles Covell, *The Redefinition of Conservatism*, chapter 1 and J. C. Nyiri, 'Wittgenstein's Later Work in Relation to Conservatism' in *Wittgenstein and His Times*, edited by Brian McGuinness, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

Some contemporary sceptical conservative works are Lincoln Allison, *Right Principles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), John Gray, *Liberalisms* (London: Routledge, 1989), *Post-liberalism*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), and *Beyond the New Right* (London: Routledge, 1993), Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Gentleman in Trollope* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1982); Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* and *On Human Conduct*.

Absolutism or Relativism

Good lives are good because they are satisfying to the agents and beneficial to others. Satisfactions that contribute to the goodness of the agents' lives and benefits that contribute to the goodness of other people's lives represent values. Lives are made good by these values, and they are made bad by their lack or by being filled with dissatisfactions suffered and harms inflicted on others. Values, however, are diverse. There are countless satisfactions and benefits, there are countless ways of combining them and evaluating their respective importance, and so there are countless ways in which lives can be good. If conservatives are committed to political arrangements that foster good lives, then they must have a view about what lives are good, what satisfactions and benefits are worth valuing. They must have a view, that is, about the values that make lives good. The second distinction that poses questions for conservatives is between two views about the diversity of values. These views have a fundamental influence of the kinds of reasons that their defenders offer for or against particular political arrangements.

Absolutists believe that the diversity of values is apparent, not real. They concede that there are many values, but they think that there is a universal and objective standard that can be appealed to in evaluating the respective importance of all these values. This standard may be a highest value, and all other values then can be ranked on the basis of their contribution to its realization. The highest value may be happiness, duty, God's will, a life of virtue, and so forth. Or the standard may be a principle, such as, for instance, the categorical imperative, the greatest happiness for the greatest number, the Ten Commandments, or the Golden Rule. If a choice needs to be made between different values, then the principle will determine which value ought to take precedence. Absolutists, then, give as their reason for preferring some political arrangements over others that the preferred ones conform more closely to the universal and objective standard than the alternatives to it.[6]

[6] For historical surveys of absolutist conservatism, see Note 4 above. Some contemporary absolutist conservative works are John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980) and *Fundamentals of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), Germain Grisez, *Beyond the New Morality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), Henry B. Veatch, *Human Rights* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), and Eric Voegelin, *Order in History*, 5 vols, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954–87).

Absolutism, of course, often has a metaphysical basis. For the most frequently offered reason in favour of the universality and objectivity of the standard that absolutists regard as the highest is that it reflects the rational and moral order of reality. This is the inspiration behind the attempts to establish ecclesiastical polities, on the right, and egalitarian, Utopian, or millennial ones, on the left. Nevertheless, the connection between absolutism and metaphysics is not a necessary one. Standards can be regarded as universal and objective even if they are not metaphysically sanctioned. If, however, their advocates eschew metaphysics, then they must provide some other reason for regarding some particular standard as universal and objective. One such reason will be considered shortly.

It is a considerable embarrassment to absolutists that the candidates for universal and objective standards are also diverse, and thus face the same problems as the values whose diversity is supposed to be diminished by them. Absolutists acknowledge this, and explain it in terms of human shortcomings that prevent people from recognizing the one and true standard. The history of religious wars, revolutions, left and right-wing tyrannies, and persecutions of countless unbelievers, all aiming to rectify human shortcomings, testifies to the dangers inherent in this explanation.

Opposed to absolutism is relativism. Relativists regard the diversity of values as real: there are many values and there are many ways of combining and ranking them. There is no universal and objective standard that could be appealed to in resolving disagreements about the identity and importance of the satisfactions and benefits that form the substance of values. A good society, however, requires some consensus about what is accepted as a possibility and what is placed beyond limits. The political arrangements of a good society reflect this consensus, and the arrangements change as the consensus does. What counts as a value and how seriously it counts depends, then, according to relativists, on the consensus of a society. A value is what is valued in a particular context; all values, therefore, are context-dependent.

This is not to say that values and the political arrangements that reflect them cannot be rationally justified or criticized. They can be, but the reasons that are given for or against them count as reasons only within the context of the society whose values and political arrangements they are. The reasons appeal to the prevailing consensus, and they will not and are not meant to persuade those who are not part of the consensus. The ultimate appeal of relativists is to point at their arrangements and say: this is what we do here. If relativism takes a conservative form, it often results in the romantic

celebration of national identity, of the spirit of a people and an age, of the shared landscape, historical milestones, ceremonies, stylistic conventions, manners, and rituals that unite a society.[7]

Just as absolutism is naturally allied to a universalistic metaphysical orientation, so relativism is readily combined with a historicist radical scepticism. If there is no discernible rational and moral order in reality, then the best guide to good lives and to the political arrangements that foster them is history. But the history of one society is different from the history of another. It is only to be expected therefore that good lives and favoured political arrangements will correspondingly differ.

Relativists appear to have the advantage of avoiding the dangers of dogmatism and repression that so often engulf absolutism. This appearance, however, is deceptive. Relativism is no less prone to dogmatism and repression than absolutism. From the fact that the political arrangements of the relativist's society are not thought to be binding outside of it, nothing follows about the manner in which they are held within it. In fact, if the world is full of people and societies whose values are often hostile to the values of the relativists' society, then there is much the more reason to guard jealously their own values and political arrangements. If the justification of the political arrangements of a society is the consensus that prevails in it, then any value and any political arrangement becomes justifiable just so long as sufficiently large number of people in the society support the consensus favouring them. Thus slavery, female circumcision, the maltreatment of minorities, child prostitution, the mutilation of criminals, blood feuds, bribery, and a lot of other political arrangements may become sanctioned on the grounds that that is what we do here.

These pitfalls of the universalistic aspirations of absolutism and the historicist orientation of relativism make them unreliable

[7] The historical origins of relativistic conservatism are to be found in Giambattista Vico, *New Science*, Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 18 vols, (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner and Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1914–77), and, a step removed, in Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. This tradition is most illuminatingly treated by Karl Mannheim, 'Conservative Thought,' in *Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology*, edited by Paul Kecskemeti, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), and by Isaiah Berlin, 'The Counter-Enlightenment' in *Against the Current*, edited by Henry Hardy, (New York: Viking, 1980) and *Vico and Herder*, (London: Hogarth, 1976). See also Michael Earmarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

sources of reasons for evaluating political arrangements. It is with some relief then that conservatives may turn to pluralism as an intermediate position between these dangerous extremes. Pluralists are in partial agreement and disagreement with both absolutists and relativists. According to pluralists, there is a universal and objective standard, but it is applicable only to some values. The standard is universal and objective enough to apply to *some* values that must be recognized by all political arrangements that foster good lives, but it is not sufficiently universal and objective to apply to *all* the many diverse values that may contribute to good lives. The standard, in other words, is a minimal one.[8]

It is possible to establish with reference to it some universal and objective values required by all good lives, but the standard does not specify all the values that good lives require. It underdetermines the nature of good lives. It regards some political arrangements as necessary for good lives, and it allows for a generous plurality of possible political arrangements beyond the necessary minimum. The standard operates in the realm of moral necessity, and it leaves it open what happens in the realm of moral possibility. The standard thus accommodates part of the universalistic aspiration of absolutism and part of the historicist orientation of relativism. Absolutism prevails in the realm of moral necessity; relativism prevails in the realm of moral possibility.

The source of this standard is human nature.[9] To understand human nature sufficiently for the purposes of this standard does not require plumbing the depths of the soul, unravelling the obscure springs of human motivation, or conducting scientific research. It does not call for any metaphysical commitment and it can be held without subscribing to the existence of a natural law. It is enough for it to concentrate on normal people in a commonsensical way. It will then become obvious that good lives depend on the satisfaction of basic physiological, psychological and social needs: for nutrition, shelter, and rest; for companionship, self-

[8] Contemporary works of pluralistic conservatism by and large coincide with those of sceptical conservatism, see Note 5 above. For an account of pluralism in general, see John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism* (Princeton University Press, 1993) and Nicholas Rescher, *Pluralism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

[9] For a general account of the political significance of human nature for politics, see Christopher J. Berry, *Human Nature* (London: Macmillan, 1986). For the specific connection between human nature and conservatism, see Christopher J. Berry, "Conservatism and Human Nature" in *Politics and Human Nature*, edited by Ian Forbes and Steve Smith, (London: Frances Pinter, 1983).

respect, and the hope for a good or better life; for the division of labour, justice, and predictability in human affairs; and so forth. The satisfaction of these needs is a universal and objective requirement of all good lives, whatever the social context may be in which they are lived. If the political arrangements of a society foster their satisfaction, that is a reason for having and conserving them; if the political arrangements hinder their satisfaction, that is a reason for reforming them.

If absolutists merely asserted this, and if relativists merely denied it, then the former would be right and the latter wrong. But both go beyond the mere assertion and denial of this point. Satisfying these minimum requirements of human nature is necessary but not sufficient for good lives. Absolutists go beyond the minimum and think that their universal and objective standard applies all the way up to the achievement of good lives. Relativists deny that there is such a standard. And in this respect, pluralists side with relativists and oppose absolutists. Pluralists think that beyond the minimum level there is a plurality of values, a plurality of ways of ranking them, and a plurality of conceptions of a good life embodying these values and rankings. This is why they think that human nature underdetermines the content of good lives. According to pluralists, then, the political arrangements of a society ought to protect the minimum requirements of good lives and ought to foster a plurality of good lives beyond the minimum.

If pluralism takes a conservative form, it provides two important possibilities for its defenders. In the first place, it provides a universal and objective reason in favour of those political arrangements of the conservative's society that protect the minimum requirements and against those political arrangements that violate them. It motivates, gives direction to, and sets the goal of intended reforms. It makes it possible to draw reasonable comparisons among different societies on the basis of how well or badly they protect the conditions all good lives need. Pluralistic conservatism thus avoids the objection to relativism that it sanctions any political arrangement so long as a wide enough consensus supports it.

In the second place, pluralistic conservatism is most receptive to the view that the best guide to the political arrangements that a society ought to have beyond the minimum level is reflection on the history of the society. It is that history, rather than any metaphysical consideration, that is most likely to provide the relevant considerations for or against the political arrangements that present themselves as possibilities in that society. It is thus that pluralistic conservatism avoids the dangers of dogmatism and repression that beset absolutism.

Individual or Society

The question posed by the third distinction is about the relationship that ought to hold between individuals and the society in which they live. This has a strong claim to being the central question that all political thought aims to answer. It is common ground among various versions of conservatism, liberalism, and socialism that human beings are essentially social in their nature. In good lives, therefore, the individual and social constituents are essentially and inextricably connected. That, however, still leaves the question of which constituent should be dominant. It has far-reaching political consequences how it is answered. If it is said that the individual constituent should dominate over the social one, then the desirable political arrangements will be those that foster individual autonomy at the expense of social authority. If, on the other hand, the social constituent is thought to be ultimately more important, then the favoured political arrangements will have the strengthening of social authority as their primary purpose.

The answer that favours individual autonomy over social authority is typically given by many liberals, especially those under the influence of Kant. The one that holds that social authority is more important than individual autonomy is characteristically championed by metaphysically oriented absolutist conservatives, on the right, and by communitarians, socialists, and Marxists, on the left. This leaves room for yet another—better—answer, to be considered shortly, offered by conservatives who are moderate sceptics and pluralists.

Putting individual autonomy before social authority faces two very serious problems. First, it assumes that good lives must be autonomous and cannot involve the systematic domination of their individual constituents by some form of social authority. If this were so, no military or devoutly religious life, no life in static, traditional, hierarchical societies, no life, that is, that involves the subordination of the individual's will and judgment to what is regarded as a higher purpose, could be good. This would require thinking of the majority of lives lived outside of prosperous Western societies as bad. The mistake is to slide from the reasonable view that autonomous lives may be good to the unreasonable view that a life cannot be good unless it is autonomous. This way of thinking is not only mistaken in its own right, but it is also incompatible with the pluralism to which liberals who think this way claim themselves to be committed.

Second, if a good society is one that fosters the good lives of the individuals who live in it, then giving precedence to autonomy over authority cannot be right, since autonomous lives may be bad. That the will and judgment of individuals take precedence over the pro-

nouncements of social authority leaves it open whether the resulting lives will be satisfying and beneficial enough to be good. Autonomous lives may be frustrating and harmful. The most casual reflection on history shows that social authority often has to prevail over the individual autonomy of fanatics, criminals, fools, and crazies, if a society is indeed dedicated to fostering good lives.

The problems of letting social authority override individual autonomy are no less serious. What is the reason for thinking that if social authority prevails over individual autonomy, then the resulting lives will be good? Lives cannot be good just because some social authority pronounces them to be such. They must actually be satisfying and beneficial, and whether they are must ultimately be judged by the individuals whose will is unavoidably engaged in causing and enjoying the satisfactions and the benefits. Their will and judgment may of course be influenced by the prescriptions of a social authority. But no matter how strong that influence is, it cannot override the ultimate autonomy of individuals in finding what is satisfying or beneficial for them. As the lamentable historical record shows, however, this has not prevented countless religious and ideological authorities from stigmatizing individuals who reject their prescriptions as heretics, infidels, class enemies, maladjusted, or living with false consciousness, in bad faith or in a state of sin. The result is a repressive society whose dogmatism is reinforced by specious moralizing.

How then is the question to be answered? Which constituent of good lives should be regarded as the decisive one? The answer, as before, is to eschew the extremes and look for an intermediate position that accommodates the salvageable portions of both. There is no need to insist that either individual autonomy or social authority should systematically prevail over the other. Both are necessary for good lives. Instead of engaging in futile arguments about their comparative importance, it is far more illuminating to try to understand the connection between them. That connection is that they are parts of two interdependent aspects of the same underlying activity. One aspect is as indispensable as the other. The activity is that of individuals trying to make good lives for themselves. Its two aspects are the individual and the social; autonomy and authority are their respective parts; and the connecting link between them is tradition. The intermediate position that is reasonably favoured by conservatives may therefore be called traditionalism.[10]

[10] Traditionalism is an expression that does not appear in any of the works listed below, but the position defended in them is very close to traditionalism so it is perhaps justified to claim affinity with them. See Francis Herbert Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, second edition, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), essays 5–6; John Kekes, *Moral Tradition and*

A tradition is a set of customary beliefs, practices, and actions that has endured from the past to the present and attracted the allegiance of people so that they wish to perpetuate it. A tradition may be reflective and designed, like the deliberations of the Supreme Court, or unreflective and spontaneous, like sports fans rooting for their teams; it may have a formal institutional framework, like the Catholic Church, or it may unstructured, like mountain-climbing; it may be competitive, like the Olympics; largely passive, like going to the opera; humanitarian, like the Red Cross; self-centred, like jogging; honorific, like the Nobel Prize; or punitive, like criminal proceedings. Traditions may be religious, horticultural, scientific, athletic, political, stylistic, moral, aesthetic, commercial, medical, legal, military, educational, architectural, and so on and on. They permeate human lives.[11]

When individuals gradually and experimentally form their conceptions of a good life what they are to a very large extent doing is deciding which traditions they should participate in. This decision may be taken from the inside of the traditions into which they were born or in which they were raised, or from the outside of traditions that appeal to, repel, bore, or interest them. The decisions may be conscious, deliberate, clear-cut yes-or-no choices, they may be ways of unconsciously, unreflectively falling in with familiar patterns, or they may be at various points in between. The bulk of the activities of individuals concerned with living in ways that strike them as good is composed of participation in the various traditions of their society.

As they participate in them, they of course exercise their autonomy. They make choices and judgments; their wills are engaged; they learn from the past and plan for the future. But they do so in the frameworks of various traditions which authoritatively provide them with the relevant choices, with the matters that are left to their judgments, and with standards that within a tradition determine what choices and judgments are good or bad, reasonable or unreasonable. Their exercise of autonomy is the individual aspect of their

[11] For an account of tradition in general, see Edward Shils, *Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, 1981). See also John Casey, 'Tradition and Authority,' in *Conservative Essays*, edited by Maurice Cowling, (London: Cassell, 1978), Thomas Steams Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, edited by Frank Kermode, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975) and MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapter 15.

Individuality (Princeton University Press, 1989); Alastair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, and Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism*.

conformity to their tradition's authority, which is the social aspect of what they doing. They act autonomously *by* following the authoritative patterns of the traditions to which they feel allegiance. When a Catholic goes to confession, a violinist gives a concert, a football player scores a touchdown, a student graduates, a judge sentences a criminal, then the individual and the social, the autonomous and the authoritative, the traditional pattern of doing it and a particular agent's doing of it are inextricably mixed. To understand what is going on in terms of individual autonomy is as one-sided as it is to do so in terms of social authority. Both play an essential role, and understanding what is going on requires understanding both the roles they play and what makes them essential. Traditionalism rests on this understanding, and it is a political response to it. The response is to have and maintain political arrangements that foster the participation of individuals in the various traditions that have historically endured in their society. The reason for fostering them is that good lives depend on participation in a variety of traditions.

Traditions do not stand independently of each other. They overlap, form parts of each other, and problems or questions occurring in one are often resolved in terms of another. Most traditions have legal, moral, political, aesthetic, stylistic, commercial, and a multitude of other aspects. Furthermore, people participating in one tradition necessarily bring with them the beliefs, values, and practices of many of the other traditions in which they also participate. Changes in one tradition, therefore, are most likely to produce changes in others. Traditions are, as it were, organically connected. That is why changes in one tradition are like waves that reverberate throughout the other traditions of a society.

Some of these changes are for the better, others for the worse. Most of them, however, are complex, have consequences that grow more unpredictable the more distant they are, and thus tend to escape from human control. Since these changes are changes in the traditions upon which good lives depend, the attitude to them of conservative traditionalists will be one of extreme caution. They will want to control the changes in so far as it is possible. They will want them to be no greater than what is necessary for remedying some specific defect. They will be opposed both to experimental, general, or large changes and to the unhindered operation of what has been called 'the invisible hand' by classical liberals because of their uncertain effects on good lives. Conservatives, therefore, do not share the faith of classical liberals that if social and economic conditions are allowed to change and be changed without control, then serendipity will reign.

Changes, of course, are often necessary because traditions may be vicious, destructive, stultifying, nay-saying, and thus not conducive to good lives. It is part of the purpose of the prevailing political arrangements to draw distinctions among traditions that are unacceptable, suspect but tolerable, and worthy of encouragement—traditions like slavery, the Ku-Klux-Klan, and university education. Traditions that violate the minimum requirements of human nature are prohibited. Traditions that have historically shown themselves to make questionable contributions to good lives may be tolerated but not encouraged. Traditions whose historical record testifies to their importance for good lives are cherished.

The obvious question is *who* should decide which tradition is which and *how* that decision should be made. The answer conservatives give is that the decision should be made by those who are legitimately empowered to do so through the political process of their society and they should make the decisions by reflecting on the historical record of the tradition in question. From this three corollaries follow. First, the people who are empowered to make the decisions ought to be those who can reflect well on the historical record. The political process works well if it ends up empowering these people. They are unlikely to be ill-educated, passionate about some single issue, inexperienced, or have qualifications that lie in some other field of endeavour. Conservatives, in a word, will not favour populist politics. Second, a society that proceeds in the manner just indicated will be pluralistic because it fosters a plurality of traditions. It will do so because it sees as the justification of its political arrangements that they foster good lives, and fostering them depends on fostering the traditions participation in which may make lives good. Third, the society will be tolerant because it is committed to having as many traditions as possible. This means that its political arrangements will place the burden of proof on those who wish to proscribe a tradition. If a tradition has endured, if it has the allegiance of enough people to perpetuate it, then there is a prima facie case for it. That case may be, and often is, defeated, but the initial presumption is in its favour.

All this means that a conservative society that is moderately sceptical, pluralistic, and traditionalist will be in favour of limited government. The purpose of its political arrangements will not be to bring heaven on earth by imposing on people some conception of a good life. No government has a mandate from heaven. The political arrangements of a limited government will interfere as little as possible with the many indigenous traditions that flourish among people subject to it. This is not to say that there will be no interference, only that there will be no more interference than what is necessary

to protect the tried and true existing arrangements. The purpose of its arrangements will be to enable people to live as they please, rather than to force them to live in a particular way. One of the most important ways of accomplishing this is to have a wide plurality of traditions as a bulwark between individuals and the government that has power over them.

Optimism or Pessimism

One of the safest generalizations about conservatism is that conservatives tend to be pessimists. In some conservatives writings—in Montaigne's, Hume's, and Oakeshott's, for instance—cheerfulness keeps breaking through, but even then, it does so in spite of their doubts about the possibility of a significant improvement in the human condition. Conservatives take a dim view of progress. They are not so foolish as to deny that great advances have been made in science, technology, medicine, communication, management, education, and so forth, and that they have changed human lives for the better. But they have also changed them for the worse. Advances have been both beneficial and harmful. They have certainly enlarged the stock of human possibilities, but the possibilities are for both good and evil, and new possibilities are seldom without new evils. Conservatives tend to be pessimistic because they doubt that more possibilities will make lives on the whole better. Their doubt is based on what they believe are permanent conditions that stand in the way of a significant improvement in the human condition.

Conservatism has been called the politics of imperfection.[12] This is an apt characterization in some ways, but it is misleading in others. It rightly suggests that conservatives reject the idea of human perfectibility. Yet it is too sanguine because it conveys the idea that, apart from some imperfections, the human condition is by and large all right. But it is worse than a bad joke to call world wars, the genocide of numerous peoples, tyrannies, systematic torture, and other horrors imperfections. Conservatives are much more impressed by the prevalence of evil than this label implies. They think that its prevalence is a permanent condition that cannot be significantly altered.

Another respect in which the politics of imperfection is a misleading label is its suggestion that the imperfection is in human beings. Now conservatives certainly think that human beings are

[12] By O'Sullivan, *Conservatism*, chapter 1 and Quinton, *The Politics of Imperfection.*

responsible for much evil, but to think only that is shallow. The prevalence of evil reflects not just a human propensity for evil, but also a contingency that influences what propensities human beings have and develop, and thus influences human affairs independently of human intentions. The human propensity for evil is itself a manifestation of this deeper and more pervasive contingency, which operates through genetic inheritance, environmental factors, the confluence of events that places people at certain places at certain times, the crimes, accidents, pieces of fortune and misfortune that happen or do not happen to them, the historical period, society, and family into which they are born, and so forth. The same contingency also affects people because others, whom they love, depend on, and with whom their lives are intertwined in other ways, are as subject to it as they are themselves.

The view of thoughtful conservatives is not one of hopeless pessimism, according to which contingency makes human nature evil rather than good. Their view is rather a realistic pessimism that holds that whether the balance of good and evil propensities and their realization in people tilts one way or another is a contingent matter over which human beings and the political arrangements they make have insufficient control.[13]

This point needs to be stressed. Conservatives do not think that the human condition is devoid of hope. They are, however, realistic about the limited control a society has over its future. Their view is *not* that human beings are evil and that their evil propensities are uncontrollable. Their view is rather that human beings have both good and evil propensities and neither they nor their societies can exercise sufficient control to make the realization of good propensities reliably prevail over the realization of evil ones. The right sort of political arrangements will help, of course; just as the wrong sort will make matters worse. But even under the best conceivable political arrangements a great deal of contingency will remain, and it will place beyond human control much good and evil.

The chief reason for this is that the human efforts to control contingency are themselves subject to the very contingency they aim to control. And that, of course, is the fundamental reason why conservatives are pessimistic and sceptical about the possibility of significant improvement in the human condition. It is thus that the mod-

[13] This sort of pessimism may be found in the tragedies of Sophocles, especially in *Antigone*, Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Machiavelli, *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, Montaigne, *Essays*, Stephen, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, essay VII, and Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*. A recent statement of it is John Kekes, *Facing Evil*, (Princeton University Press, 1990).

erate scepticism and realistic pessimism of conservatives reinforce one another.

It does not follow from this, and conservatives do not believe, that it is a matter of indifference what political arrangements are made. It is true that no political arrangement can guarantee the victory of good over evil. They can nevertheless influence how things go. Whether that will prove sufficient at a certain time and place is itself a contingent matter insufficiently within human control.

The resulting attitude will have a negative and positive component. The negative one is acceptance of the fact that not even political arrangements that best reflect the requirements of reason and morality guarantee good lives. The positive one is to strive nevertheless to make the political arrangements as good as possible. The impetus behind the latter is the realization that bad political arrangements worsen the already uncertain human condition.

If the choice of political arrangements is governed by this conservative attitude, it will result in arrangements that look in two directions: toward fostering what is taken to be good and toward hindering what is regarded as evil. Conservative political arrangements that aim to foster the good are committed to a familiar list of values: justice, freedom, the rule of law, order, prosperity, civility, peace, and so forth. There need be no significant difference between the values on the conservative list and the ones that liberals, socialists, or others may draw up. There will still be two significant differences, however, between conservative politics and the politics of liberals, socialists, and a great many others.

The first of these differences is that conservative politics is genuinely pluralistic, while the alternative approaches are not. This claim is perhaps surprising, but there is a good reason for it. Liberals, socialists, and others are committed to regarding some few values on the list as overriding. It is their essential claim, the claim that makes them liberals, socialists, or whatever, that when the few values they favour conflict with the less favoured ones on the list, then the ones they favour should prevail. Conservatives reject this approach. Their commitment is to all the values on the list and their essential claim is that what is important is the conservation of the whole system of values. Its conservation sometimes requires favouring a particular value over another, sometimes the reverse. And they hold this to be true for each of the values on the list. Conservatives thus differ from liberals, socialists, and others in refusing to make an a priori commitment to the overridingness of any particular value or small number of values.

The second significant difference between conservative politics and most current alternatives to it is the insistence of conservatives

on the importance of political arrangements whose purpose is to hinder evil. This difference is a direct result of the pessimism of conservatives and the optimism of others. Their optimism is revealed by the assumption that the prevalence of evil is due to bad political arrangements. If people were not poor, oppressed, exploited, discriminated against, and so forth, they optimistically suppose, then they would be naturally inclined to live good lives. The prevalence of evil, they assume, is due to the political corruption of human nature. If political arrangements were good, there would be no corruption. What is needed, therefore, is to make political arrangements that foster the good. The arrangements that hinder evil are unfortunate and temporary measures needed only until the effects of the good arrangements are generally felt.

Conservatives reject this optimism. They do not think that evil is prevalent merely because of bad political arrangements. They think, to the contrary, that one reason why political arrangements are bad is that those who make them have evil propensities. Political arrangements, after all, are made by people and they are bound to reflect the propensities of their makers. Since the propensities are subject to contingencies over which human control is insufficient, there is no guarantee whatsoever that political arrangements can be made good. Nor that, if they were made good, they would be sufficient to hinder evil.

Conservatives will insist, therefore, on the necessity and importance of political arrangements that hinder evil. They will stress moral education, the enforcement of morality, the treatment of people according to their moral merit or demerit, the importance of swift and severe punishment for serious crimes, and so on. They will oppose the prevailing attitudes that lead to agonizing over the criminal and forgetting the crime, to perpetuating the absurd fiction of a fundamental moral equality between habitual evil-doers and their victims, to guaranteeing the same freedom and welfare-rights to good and evil people, and so forth.

This leads to one of the major differences between conservatism, on the one hand, and various forms of liberalism and socialism, on the other. Conservatives are not egalitarians, whereas their opponents are. Conservatives are opposed, not to political and legal equality, but to the idea that on some basic level all human beings have equal worth. How could good and evil, morally better and worse people have equal worth? What could be the point of the hypocritical pretence that permeates liberal and socialist rhetoric that decent people living decent lives deserve the same concern, respect, and resources as murderers, torturers, terrorists, and other criminals who endanger the conditions of good lives?

Conservatives, therefore, will favour political arrangements that hinder evil. Such arrangements are liable to abuse. Conservatives know and care about the historical record that testifies to the dreadful things that have been done to people on the many occasions when such arrangements have gone wrong. The remedy, however, cannot be to refuse to make the arrangements; it must be to make them, learn from history, and try hard to avoid their abuse. Conservatives know that in this respect, as in all others, contingency will cause complete success to elude them. But this is precisely the reason why political arrangements are necessary for hindering evil. Their realistic pessimism will lead conservatives to face the worst and try to deny scope to it, rather than endeavour to erect the City of Man on a far from quiescent volcano.

Conservatism: A First Approximation

The central concern of conservatism is with the political arrangements that make a society good. Since conservatism takes the goodness of a society to depend on the goodness of the lives of the people who live in it, it is a moral view. Good lives, of course, require much more than what political arrangements can secure. The right political arrangements, however, do secure some of the conditions necessary for them. These arrangements, according to conservatives, are to be discovered by reflecting on the history of the actual political arrangements that prevail in one's society. This will disclose that one's society is partly constituted of various enduring traditions in which individuals participate because they conceive of good lives in terms of the beliefs, values, and practices that these traditions embody. The reasons for or against particular political arrangements are then to be found by reflection on their success or failure in fostering the traditions and the participation of individuals in them. This line of thought makes evident two essential aspects of conservatism: the moral and the reflective.

It is an implication of these two aspects that conservatism is not a mindless defence of whatever happen to be the prevailing political arrangements by those who benefit from them. Political arrangements must be good to merit conservation, and what makes them good is that they enable the people of a society to make good lives for themselves. The defence of such arrangements is in everyone's interest in a society. Conservatives therefore are committed to the good of everyone in their society, not just to their own. Nor are conservatives led to defend the prevailing political arrangements by instinct, natural affection, habit, custom, or a priori commitments.

They defend them because they work; that they work is shown by their history; and it is through reflection on their history that the reasons for them are found.

The moral and reflective aspects of conservatism, however, are as yet insufficient to permit the distinction between different versions of conservatism and between conservatism and other political moralities. A further specification of the content of morality and the nature of reflection is required for that purpose. This is provided by the moderately sceptical, pluralistic, traditionalist, and realistically pessimistic features of conservatism.

Moderate scepticism combines the acknowledgment that political arrangements must be based on reason and the recognition that the process of finding reasons is fallible. This leads conservatives to be cautious in accepting reasons, to want reasons to be concrete, tried and true, attested to by experience, without pretending to a quixotic pose of the wholesale rejection of the effort to be as reasonable as possible. Conservatives will thus distrust both forms that the nightmare of reason may take: the horrors of making political arrangements the expression of the latest metaphysical certainties and of irrational visions inspired by some form of faith, revelation, instinct, passion, glory, or sentimentalism.

The pluralism of conservatives deepens the understanding of their moderate scepticism. There is a plurality of political arrangements, traditions, and conceptions of a good life that may be conducive to good lives. Human nature provides a universal and objective standard by which reasons for or against specific political arrangements, traditions, and conceptions of a good life can be evaluated. But the appeal to this standard yields only reasons that fall far short of determining the nature of good lives. For these reasons provide only their minimum requirements, and beyond this level good lives may take a plurality of forms. The minimum, however, is sufficient to justify moderate scepticism regarding the absolutistic attempt to identify the one good form that all lives must strive to approximate and the relativistic attempt to leave good lives merely at the mercy of the conventions that happen to hold in particular societies. At the same time, the minimum established by human nature is an insufficient source of reasons for or against political arrangements, traditions, and conceptions of a good life that conform to and go beyond it.

The traditionalism of conservatives excludes both the view that political arrangements that foster individual autonomy should take precedence over those that foster social authority and the reverse view that favours arrangements that promote social authority at the expense of individual autonomy. Traditionalists acknowledge the

importance of both autonomy and authority, but they regard them as inseparable, interdependent, and equally necessary. The legitimate claims of both may be satisfied by the participation of individuals in the various traditions of their society. Good political arrangements protect these traditions and the freedom to participate in them by limiting the government's authority to interfere with either. Their protection will involve making necessary changes in them, but it will aim to keep these changes as small and specific as possible.

Their realistic pessimism leads conservatives to reject both the optimistic belief that good political arrangements and human perfectibility would jointly guarantee good lives and the extreme pessimism that foresees wretched lives regardless of what political arrangements are made. Realistic pessimists recognize that the contingency of life renders human control insufficient, that reason and morality do not guarantee good lives, and that the prevalence of evil is an ineliminable feature of the human condition. Realistic pessimists, however, think that although human control is bound to be insufficient, it is also necessary to have as much of it as possible, since more of it can make the human condition better and less can make it worse. Realistic pessimists are committed to making it better without the false hope that they will succeed in making it good.

The strongest version of conservatism is then moral, reflective, moderately sceptical, pluralistic, traditionalist, and realistically pessimist. It is that version that has a better chance of creating a good society than any other conservative or non-conservative alternative to it.[14]

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[14] The author gratefully acknowledges the Editor's comments that helped to strengthen the argument.