Conservatism, Epistemology and Value

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Abstract: A series of recent papers has discussed whether conservatism has a distinct set of values (substantive), or whether it consists in an attitude to shared values (adjectival). This paper argues that adjectival conservatism is a genuine type of conservatism, consistent with the Burkean tradition, in accordance with the idea that conservatism is concerned with change, and arguable using public reason. A version of adjectival conservatism derived from epistemological scepticism, consisting of a knowledge principle and a change principle, is presented. It is shown to (a) be resistant to arguments that adjectival conservatism is not a genuine type of conservatism, and (b) contain a distinct ideological programme, and not be restricted to a mere commentary on the activities of other ideologues.

Introduction

Although many conservatives claim that they are 'above', or possibly 'below,' ideological questions and are purely practically focused, many commentators agree that an ideological core can be located, even if there is a debate as to where it lies. Some prominent conservatives have admitted as much, even if they do not believe that there is much point in locating it. Michael Oakeshott remarked that "the common belief that it is impossible … to elicit explanatory general principles from what is recognized to be conservative conduct is not one that I share",[1] although he then went on to pursue the different project of discussing conservative dispositions. O'Hear argued that although one might indeed articulate conservatism into a set of principles, the conservative himself dislikes that exercise which carries with it the danger of erecting "principle and dogma over practice and habit."[2] Yet in a world in which the death of conservatism, or at least the impossibility of being a successful conservative politician, has been trumpeted for some time, a definition will at least give some focus to that existential question.

Many of the controversies about the nature of conservatism, particularly inconsistencies between conservatives, can be dispelled by noting, following Huntington,[3] that it is a situational ideology whose content in any specific setting

[1] Michael Oakeshott, 'On being conservative', in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991, 407-437, at 407.
[2] Anthony O'Hear, 'Conservatism', in Edward Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1998.
[3] Samuel P. Huntington, 'Conservatism as an ideology', *American Political Science Review*, 51 (1957), 244-268.

makes essential reference to contingent aspects of that setting, and so it should not be expected that conservatives in different contexts agree on policy matters. For example, a written constitution codified in a single document is the bedrock of American political life, while this would be an innovation in the United Kingdom. Hence conservatives in these two polities are likely to disagree over whether a written constitution is a good thing.

In this paper, I wish to comment on recent interesting contributions to the debate about conservatism's nature.[4] In these papers, conservatism is stripped down to basic components to try to recover its philosophical foundations. My aim is threefold. First, I wish to focus the debate on conservatism broadly defined as "an ideology predominantly *concerned* with the problem of change: not necessarily proposing to eliminate it, but to render it safe,"[5] while making sense of it in the context of at least some of the important political philosophers in the tradition of Burke and Oakeshott (I shall focus on Burke in this paper). Given the promiscuity with which politicians and thinkers describe themselves as 'conservative,'[6] this is intended to return the idea of conservatism to something like its dictionary definition while being descriptive of the tradition. I will argue that it is possible to define conservatism in such a way, and further that this can be done using only the resources of public reason. To this end, I will set out and defend a specific view of conservatism that covers these three bases.

Secondly, I will discuss the question of the relationship between conservatism and value. Is conservatism characterised by adoption of particular values, as some have argued, or does its situated nature entail that a conservative's values are essentially culture-bound? The definition I put forward takes the situated aspect as a major first-order property, and I argue only the latter of those two claims is correct, against commentators such as Beckstein, who argue for the former, and Brennan and Hamlin, who claim both may be correct. Finally, I argue, *contra* Brennan and Hamlin, that a genuinely situated and value-independent conservatism is not reduced to being a mere commentary on other ideological traditions, but can produce lively and even aggressive policy platforms.

Conservatism and public reason

It might be asked at this stage why conservatism should be amenable to public reason; it may be adopted for more self-interested reasons. Considering the heterogeneous nature of the conservative tradition, Müller set out a characterisation that respected its multifaceted nature, suggesting it be defined across a set of four dimensions[7] which would pay heed to conservatives' own claims to be uncharacterisable by a single set of dispositions or beliefs. This included a sociological dimension, which "is simply the ideology or the specific political program of a particular social group trying to

[4] Geoffrey Brennan & Alan Hamlin, 'Analytic conservatism', *British Journal of Political Science*, 34 (2004), 675-691; Jan-Werner Müller, 'Comprehending conservatism: a new framework for analysis', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11(3) (2006), 359-365; Geoffrey Brennan & Alan Hamlin, 'Conservatism, idealism and cardinality', *Analysis*, 66(4) (2006), 286-295; Geoffrey Brennan & Alan Hamlin, 'Comprehending conservatism: frameworks and analysis', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 19(2) (2014), 227-239; Martin Beckstein, 'What does it take to be a true conservative?' *Global Discourse*, 4 (2014).

[5] Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 332.

[6] Cf. Brennan & Hamlin, 'Analytic conservatism', 676.

[7] Müller, 'Comprehending conservatism', 361.

hold onto its privileges."[8] In a reply, Brennan and Hamlin rejected these dimensions as irrelevant to the philosophical task of understanding the rational force or otherwise of the underlying conservative ideas.[9] In particular, the attachment of a person to a political ideology, they argued, is no doubt interesting for all sorts of reasons, but says nothing about the conceptual structure to which he adheres. Hence the sociological dimension is an expression of self-interest only contingently connected to the concepts involved.[10]

This is somewhat contentious. At least one commentator has accused conservatives of being no more than selfish,[11] while another argued that they are concerned solely with preserving inequalities (from which they may benefit).[12] Worsthorne opined that conservatism is "about satisfying the strong"[13] and in an early paper Wolfe suggested that "there is no such thing as disinterested conservatism."[14] At least some thinkers over the past century have considered that contingent social structures and self-identification with particular groups is important, and some (Wolfe, like Müller several decades later) thought that understanding interests essential to understanding conservatism.

However, even if we call this self-interested view 'conservatism', conservatism can't simply be self-interest. After all, it may be that the self-interested view of a manufacturing worker is best represented by socialism, or that the self-interested view of an occupant of a low-lying Pacific island is best represented by environmentalism.[15] To qualify as conservatism, surely the self-interest must involve problematizing or suppressing change (which Honderich, for example, denies conservatives do).[16] Yet the values that Müller associates with this self-interested philosophy – hierarchy and inequality – may or may not be supported by conservatives in context, depending on what change will entail. For example, in a relatively egalitarian society without a hierarchical structure, a conservative position would be to defend *against* hierarchy and inequality. Even in a hierarchical and unequal society, a conservative's line might be that social stability will be promoted by ensuring that power or resources were shared a little more widely.

Furthermore, understanding rational force is surely one of the aims of philosophical investigation. If we abstract away from conservatives' interests, we get a sense of whether, and if so how, conservatism might appeal to other groups. Assuming that the privileged social group is a minority (either within an electorate, or across a political class), then they must have at hand some publicly-accessible arguments as to why that would be a good thing for a wider section of society. For instance Honderich argues that they do not have such arguments available, but if he is correct, he lacks an

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[8] Müller, 'Comprehending conservatism', 361.
[9] Brennan & Hamlin, 'Comprehending conservatism'.
[10] Brennan & Hamlin, 'Comprehending conservatism', 233.
[11] Ted Honderich, *Conservatism: Burke, Nozick, Bush, Blair?* London: Pluto Press, 2005.
[12] Robert Eccleshall, 'Conservatism', in Robert Eccleshall, Alan Finlayson, Vincent Geoghegan, Michael Kenny, Moya Lloyd, Iain MacKenzie & Rick Wilford (eds.), *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, 3rd edition, London: Routledge, 2003, 47-72.
[13] Peregrine Worsthorne, 'Too much freedom', in Maurice Cowling (ed.), *Conservative Essays*, London: Cassell, 1978, 140-154.
[14] A.B. Wolfe, 'Conservatism and radicalism: some definitions and distinctions', *The Scientific Monthly*, 17(3) (1923), 229-237.
[15] That is not to say that these other ideologies are only based on self-interest.
[16] Honderich, *Conservatism*.

account of how and why conservatism, at various times, has flourished.[17] After all, not all people are selfish, and those who are can find it difficult to band together because their individual self-interests are not easily aligned. At the very least, we need an account of how the "particular social group" explains and defends its privileges to other social groups in order to spread their appeal more widely. An account amenable to public reason meets this condition.

My point is not that conservatism is necessarily defensible using public reason – someone with sufficient power could simply prevent change happening. Neither is it that conservatism cannot flourish in the absence of a public defence; it could for example monopolise the media and other public forums of debate.[18] It is that if we follow Brennan and Hamlin in investigating the rational force of conservatism, then that force has to be located in the public arena. If there is no public reason defence of conservatism, then its rational force is restricted only to those in whose self-interest it operates, and its interest as a political philosophy (as opposed to a descriptive political sociology) is at best limited.

Hence the three desiderata for an account of conservatism to be considered in this paper are that it is (i) concerned with change, (ii) consistent with the philosophical tradition, and (iii) amenable to public reason. No doubt a different set of desiderata would subtend a different account.

Testing positive for conservatism

Brennan and Hamlin identified "three distinct ways in which a conservative can relate to underlying values or reasons for action."[19]

> First, a conservative might recognize the same values as the non-conservative but have a different attitude or posture relative to those values. We term such a conservative an adjectival or postural conservative …
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> Second, a conservative might identify a value (or values) that is (are) not recognized by non-conservatives. We term such conservatives substantive conservatives, since their conservatism builds on a substantive claim about values. …
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> Third, a conservative might … differ from the non-conservative in relation to empirical beliefs about the world. In this case the distinctly conservative disposition reflects beliefs about the way in which the agreed values fall in the world. We term such a conservative a practical conservative. …
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> These three forms of conservatism, the postural, the substantive and the practical, may operate in any combination, so that rather than just three types of conservative, we may identify a total of seven … .[20]

In the remainder of this paper, I will consider the distinct relations of adjectival and substantive conservatism, as ways of understanding an ideology that problematises change in terms of public reason. Certainly, many conservatives do adopt values in common with others. Burke and Oakeshott, for example, were enthusiastic defenders

[17] Honderich, *Conservatism*.
[18] A point made by an anonymous reviewer, although Honderich doesn't make that argument and so still lacks an account of conservatism's apparent attraction.
[19] Brennan & Hamlin, 'Comprehending conservatism', 234.
[20] Brennan & Hamlin, 'Comprehending conservatism', 234-235.

of many aspects of Britain's liberal politics, while in the retreat from the high water mark of British collectivism, many arguments against Thatcher's policies, from Labour politicians and trade unionists as well as the Tory 'wets', problematized the changed from the post-war settlement.

The notion that a practical conservative may have a different empirical picture of the world is an interesting one, but I will not explore it here.[21] My focus in this paper is whether conservatism is, or can be, adjectival or substantive. Brennan and Hamlin are neutral on the topic, while Beckstein has argued that adjectival conservatism "is an insufficient basis for claims to true conservatism,"[22] and so substantive conservatism is all we have left for a genuine conservative position. In contrast, I will claim the opposite, that adjectival conservatism is the only sufficient basis.

Beckstein argues that conservatism has to be substantive with its own distinct value set, and that conservatives cannot merely share the values of their fellow citizens (unless they are all conservatives, of course). This immediately raises two problems. Firstly, our desideratum that we are looking for a conservatism amenable to support using public reason looks a little trickier; a conservative may find it more difficult to produce arguments that will persuade others who do not share those values. More importantly, conservative arguments, from Burke and others, about the importance of sharing the common capital of reason of wider society[23] are somewhat marginalised by substantive conservative thinking, given that the common capital is precisely what is shared and recognised by all.

On the other hand, Beckstein suggests that issues such as uncertainty and worries about unintended consequences of policy drive the adjectival conservative's suspicion of change, and argues that these are not sufficient to produce a conservatism worth the name, because the uncertainty is contingent: "A person who had not been inclined to promote innovation in a situation characterized by conditions of uncertainty related to policy goals or outcomes, and is equally disinclined to promote innovation once those conditions have become much more favourable, cannot be an adjectival conservative only. He or she must be a [substantive] conservative too."[24] Placed in a sufficiently welcoming epistemological environment, our risk-averse 'conservative' would, or could, start innovating radically – ruling himself out as a genuine conservative.

Beckstein is absolutely correct that conservatism must be more than mere risk aversion. Yet can this analysis provide a test for the adjectival conservative who denies that the epistemological conditions ever will be more favourable? According to such a conservative, uncertainty is endemic, so his propensity for conservatism cannot be tested by pitting it against a substantive conservative's disposition, because – according to the adjectival conservative – the relevant conditions of certainty and foreseeability will never obtain.

However, a simulacrum of the test can be imagined, and the adjectival conservative will pass it. Suppose the status quo is lousy (Syria 2016, say). Then the risk posed by innovation is correspondingly lower, whatever level of uncertainty obtains (presumably quite high in a place like Syria). The adjectival conservative will

[21] Partly because space precludes, and partly because Brennan and Hamlin have extended their argument in a paper in this volume, 'Practical conservatism'.
[22] Beckstein, 'What does it take to be a true conservative?' 13.
[23] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, 183, and also Michael Oakeshott ,'Rationalism in politics', in *Rationalism in Politics*, 5-42.
[24] Beckstein, 'What does it take to be a true conservative?' 13.

certainly not be "equally disinclined to promote innovation." In fact, he may welcome it. The risk of lousing up a lousy status quo is far less than the risk of lousing up a pleasantly functioning society. However, this simulacrum does not compare two different states of uncertainty, as in the Beckstein test, but rather two different qualities of life. To say that uncertainty is endemic is not to say that no social judgments are more likely or better supported than any others – the conservative is prepared to produce arguments that the current status quo in Syria is much worse than the current status quo in Luxembourg, although such is the complexity of modern societies that no doubt some people, even some Syrians and Luxembourgeois, could be found to dispute such assertions.[25] These arguments will doubtless be rooted in the conservative's values (which, whatever they are, are not values uniquely held by conservatives on the adjectival account). The conservative is also not certain that innovation will improve matters, but is satisfied that the risk of making things worse is relatively low. Nevertheless, the burden of proof remains with the innovator.

And we can consider a third test to contrast adjectival and substantive conservatives. Suppose we had a substantive conservative who espoused value set V, who lived in a society in which V was not instantiated. Such a conservative would not only have no reason to resist change (assuming her espousal of V was the major content of her conservatism); she would have a reason actively to support change, to bring V about. Meanwhile, the adjectival conservative's worries about risk and uncertainty would still obtain, and he would still be nervous of change.

A sceptical definition of conservatism

Beckstein allows that "one could argue that risk and uncertainty qualify not simply as possible contingent circumstances … but are permanent features of the human condition."[26] which the adjectival conservative is likely to do. In that case, as noted above, Beckstein's test will not be decisive. Recognising this, he brings in further arguments, but before considering these, it is worth making the argument somewhat more concrete by fleshing out the kind of posture that could be adopted by an adjectival conservative, centred on epistemology and change – two topics that conservatives tend to foreground.[27] Neither of the two principles set out below is individually sufficient for a conservative philosophy, but their conjunction meets our three desiderata for a definition of conservatism and, because it is agnostic about value, an adjectival conservatism at that.

The knowledge principle is as follows:

> … because society and its mediating institutions are highly complex and dynamic with natures that are constantly evolving as they are co-constituted with the individuals who are their members, both data and theories about society are highly uncertain.[28]

Uncertainty on its own is not enough for conservatism, despite Montesquieu's nostrum that "in a time of ignorance one has no doubts even while doing the greatest

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[25] The death of the first Luxembourgeois 'martyr' for ISIS was tweeted from a now-deleted account in June 2014.

[26] Beckstein, 'What does it take to be a true conservative?' 13.

[27] Kieron O'Hara, *After Blair: Conservatism Beyond Thatcher*, Duxford: Icon Books, 2005; *After Blair: David Cameron and the Conservative Tradition*, Duxford: Icon Books, 2007; *Conservatism*, London: Reaktion, 2011.

[28] O'Hara, *Conservatism*, 49-50.

evils; in an enlightened age one trembles even while doing the greatest goods."[29] It does not constrain the politician from innovation – indeed, as Ulrich Beck argues, politicians can often be "condemned to respond", pushed into taking action, *any* action, by adverse media comment,[30] and as a class they have not exactly adopted a humble attitude toward their frequent policy failures.[31] Someone uncertain about the effects of a proposed policy might plausibly decide to implement it anyway. Even if it was likely to have unintended consequences, they needn't necessarily be negative, and might even be positive, for all anyone knew.

Hence a second principle, the change principle, is required to furnish a rationale for problematizing change, as follows:

> … because the current state of society is typically undervalued, and because the effects of social innovations cannot be known fully in advance, then social change (a) must always risk destroying beneficial institutions and norms, and (b) cannot be guaranteed to achieve the aims for which it was implemented. It therefore follows that societies should be risk-averse with respect to social change, and the burden of proof placed on the innovator, not his or her opponents. It also follows that change, when it does come, should ideally be (a) incremental, (b) reversible where possible, and (c) rigorously evaluated before the next incremental step.[32]

So Burke's hostility to the change wrought by the French Revolution was driven to a large extent by his belief that it undermined the manners (undervalued and perhaps even unregarded by revolutionaries and radicals) that underpinned (and were underpinned by) property, law, commerce and liberty across Europe, not only in France (which made the revolution an existential crisis for Britain).[33] Similarly, Eliot's complaint against Harold Laski's 'new civilisation' is epistemological, based on the relativity and diversity of important values that Laski has ignored: "what we are not justified in concluding, with regard to his or any other changes in the social framework which anybody advocates is that the 'new civilisation' is itself desirable."[34] It is also important, as Eliot argued, that any change principle needs to be constructive ("the habit of examining evidence and the capacity for delayed decision"), not simply the refusal to act ("we need not only the strength to defer a decision, but the strength to make one").[35] There is a risk in doing nothing, as well as risk in acting, and the change principle needs to be appropriately drafted to respect the conservative's need to identify and address serious problems.[36] Let us refer to the conjunction of the two principles as kp+cp.

There is a strong epistemological component running through kp+cp. This is obvious given that the first principle is a sceptical statement about our knowledge of society,

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[29] Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, xliv.
[30] Ulrich Beck, *World At Risk*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, 41.
[31] Anthony King & Ivor Crewe, *The Blunders of Our Governments*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2013.
[32] O'Hara, *Conservatism*, 88-89.
[33] J.G.A. Pocock, 'The political economy of Burke's analysis of the French Revolution', *Historical Journal*, 25 (1982), 331-349, at 346ff; Michael A. Mosher, 'The skeptic's Burke: *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790-1990', *Political Theory*, 19 (1991), 391-418, at 410; Iain Hampsher-Monk, 'Edmund Burke's changing justification for intervention', *Historical Journal*, 48 (2005), 1-36, at 30ff.
[34] T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, paperback edition, London: Faber & Faber, 1962, 17-18.
[35] Eliot, *Notes*, 29.
[36] A point made to me by Martin Beckstein. I will return to this issue later in the paper.

or lack of it. The risks that the conservative detects in innovation, alluded to in the change principle, follow from that uncertainty. The risk of destroying value is ever-present, while the probability that innovation will achieve its ends is systematically overestimated by its proponents. This kind of epistemologically-based conservatism not only raises the bar to innovation, but also strongly challenges the calculable cost/benefit view of politics put forward by the rationalist. Sure, we can still see politics as an attempt to balance costs and benefits, but these principles undermine claims that such a balance is ultimately computable with any certainty. As Burke put it, "I am not possessed of an exact measure between real service and its reward."[37]

Neither the knowledge principle nor the change principle makes any claim that includes assumptions or motivations that are inherently unacceptable to people with different moral or political convictions, and so kp+cp can be defended using public reason. Refuting its claims requires engagement with its epistemological foundation, which is unconnected with the contingent assumptions of an unrepresentative group.

Does kp+cp entail a bias toward the status quo?

If kp+cp is to support the case for conservatism as adjectival, then it cannot entail any particular value. Kp+cp respects conservatism's situational nature. The values a conservative will wish to preserve – which could be moral, economic, nationalistic, religious or whatever – will depend on what a particular society or culture valorises. The conservative, on this reading, holds some values dear, but these will not identify him as a conservative in the substantive sense. The values he holds will, all things being equal, be (some of) those that matter in his home society or culture. Any conservative is such that there exists a value that he holds, but it is not the case that there is a value such that all conservatives hold it. Compare Burke once more, whose Christian faith did not suggest to him the universality of Christianity, but rather the importance for a society of its religion, enabling him to criticise imperial disregard of local religion and culture during the impeachment of Hastings. He did not share values with the Hindus and Muslims in whose interests he spoke, but was still able to defend them in the Indian context (indeed, for Burke, the political challenge of empire was the balance of interests between its heterogeneous components and the centre, not the imposition of the values of the imperial power upon subordinates). Kp+cp is, therefore, an adjectival position, not a substantive one.

In Brennan and Hamlin's discussion of substantive conservatism, the value that they suggest sits most easily with it is a positive bias toward the status quo. One can derive some thoughts about the status quo from kp+cp, but not a bias towards it. Approval of the status quo by conservatives is conditional, as argued for instance by Wilson who pointed out that "in no state of society have all interests reached an equilibrium which permits of complete coöperation and no struggle. In this sense, conservatism represents a functional value in existence, since the stability of a conservative society is a situation in which the conflict of interests and wills is muted and restricted."[38] Existence value is significant, and an institution or structure must contribute to stability before the conservative undertakes to defend it. The adjectival conservative's position on change is nuanced and flexible.

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[37] Quoted in Peter J. Stanlis, 'The basis of Burke's political conservatism', *Modern Age*, 5 (1961), 263-274, at 266, and see Stanlis' argument about the contrast between Burkean prudence and Benthamian expediency.

[38] Francis G. Wilson, 'A theory of conservatism', *American Political Science Review*, 35(1) (1941), 29-43, at 29.

Certainly this sort of conservative is not going to go about challenging the status quo without good reason, and will be able to furnish a series of arguments that challenge the innovator's confidence in altering the status quo. But the kp+cp conservative himself would argue that he does *not* have a status quo *bias*. His claim is that he values the status quo properly, while his opposing ideologues have a bias *against* the status quo.

It is important to grasp that the three statements 'A is biased in favour of X', 'B is biased against X' and 'A is more likely to have a positive attitude towards X than B' say very different things. A bias is a deviation from a norm, a disposition to hold a partial perspective, or, in a scientific sense, a systematic error. To show that a conservative has a status quo bias, it is not sufficient to show that he is more likely to support the status quo than ends-based ideologues, even if that is true (and it may not be in a society where the status quo is undesirable); it has to be shown that he himself has a partial view, and this has not yet been done. The conservative's converse claim is that the ends-based ideologue is necessarily partial against the status quo by virtue of a narrowly-focused ideology which will be too coarse to capture all sources of value from a complex society.[39] This is a structural defect of any ends-based ideology. Meanwhile, the attitude of kp+cp to the status quo is derivative from its epistemological and other themes, not first order.

Conservatives maintain that the status quo is undervalued by ends-based ideologues in relation to imagined or potential futures. "Criticism is almost baffled in discovering the defects of what has not existed; and eager enthusiasm, and cheating hope, have all the wide field of imagination in which they may expatiate with little or no opposition."[40] An ideologue who focuses on a particular end detects its absence in existing society (which is so complex that no end will be entrenched enough to satisfy its adherents). This then becomes a key aim of the ideologue's policy,[41] because of his one-dimensional yardstick of what constitutes a successful society.[42] On the other hand, the conservative eschews the idea of society having ends at all,[43] and so – though he may well be critical of existing society – he can also appreciate its positive aspects without contradiction. It also follows from kp+cp that the positive aspects of the status quo are threatened by innovation, and its negative aspects will not necessarily be corrected by the planned innovation.

In the remainder of this paper, I shall therefore treat kp+cp as an exemplar of adjectival conservatism, and consider it in the light of the discussion by Beckstein, Brennan and Hamlin.

Three further arguments against adjectival conservatism as a species of conservatism

Given a concrete adjectival conservative position kp+cp, let us proceed to consider Beckstein's auxiliary arguments against adjectival conservatism as a species of

[39] Hence, the conservative would argue that 'the ends-based ideologue is biased against the status quo' is true, 'the conservative is biased in favour of the status quo' is false, and 'the conservative is more likely to have a positive attitude towards the status quo than the ends-based ideologue' is undecidable in the abstract.
[40] Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 280.
[41] Note that this argument applies to all ends-based ideologies, not just those of a rationalist persuasion.
[42] Roger Scruton, 'Man's second disobedience: a vindication of Burke', in Ceri Crossley & Ian Small (eds.), *The French Revolution and British Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, 187-222.
[43] Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

conservatism. Are the intuitions upon which they trade valid in the case of a subscriber to kp+cp? If we were to accept kp+cp as an account of conservatism, would the arguments succeed?

Hilda

First, there is the example of Hilda.[44] Hilda is a communist, but because she realises that the practical policies of the Communist Party are unlikely to succeed and, by promoting opposition, may even put the glorious day still further off into the future, she has made the decision to join the conservative Christian Democratic Union.[45] Her choice is not perhaps as bizarre as it might seem. Many revolutionaries reason that moderate reform will suppress revolutionary feeling across society, and therefore wish to stifle it. Such people often attempt to split the coalitions that support moderate reform, but they might, *in extremis*, become rapacious capitalists, thereby helping discredit capitalism. Beckstein argues that Hilda is risk averse, all the while reasoning strategically; she certainly is not a conservative, even though she is trying to prevent or restrict change, and to preserve the status quo. She really believes in Marxism, and ultimately wishes to bring its utopian positions about. Yet her behaviour is consistent with conservatism, and her reasoning conservative, yes?

No. In the first place, Hilda does not meet Beckstein's own characterisation of adjectival conservatism as "risk aversion in the face of uncertainty,"[46] as she is not uncertain. But more to the point, it is clear that Hilda does not buy into kp+cp. She doesn't accept the knowledge principle; it is because she (believes she) knows about current, future and hypothetical states of society that she eschews moves toward change now. She is risk averse, but not on the grounds of sceptical epistemology. She also does not accept the conditions of the change principle – she does not believe that she undervalues the status quo, does not believe that she risks destroying beneficial institutions, and actively believes that the radical policies that the Communist Party espouses will fail to correct the problems they are intended to. Her caution is soundly based in her own certainty. Kp+cp completely fails to characterise Hilda's political logic. Although she may outwardly appear to behave like one, she is not an adjectival conservative and is not reasoning conservatively.

Conceptual overstretch

The second argument is that the adjectival view of conservatism would "suffer from conceptual overstretch."[47] Moderate members of most political parties would fall under the definition of conservatism (as argued by Brennan and Hamlin, although they do not see this as a negative point).[48]

The adjectival view works in terms of our three desiderata. The objection here is that a fourth desideratum ought to be included – the definition should *not* embrace people who are recognisably outside the conservative tradition (i.e. people who are not followers of Burke). If this desideratum is added then we embark on a subtly different

[44] Beckstein, 'What does it take to be a true conservative?' 13-14.
[45] Arguably conservative; see Jan-Werner Müller, 'Towards a new history of Christian democracy', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 18(2), (2013), 243-255. If you don't think the CDU is genuinely conservative, insert a suitable conservative equivalent.
[46] Beckstein, 'What does it take to be a true conservative?' 8.
[47] Beckstein, 'What does it take to be a true conservative?' 14.
[48] Brennan & Hamlin, 'Conservatism, idealism and cardinality'.

philosophical project,[49] but there are a couple of reasons for thinking that this is not only unnecessary but undesirable too.

The minor reason is that kp+cp describes a pattern of thought, rather than a categorisation of political thinkers and actors, so it is perfectly consistent to argue that an adherent of a rival ends-based ideology was thinking conservatively when she made some particular argument or decision to defer action, even if this was out of character. Conservative thinking is distinct from mere risk aversion as we have agreed, so this would not include Hilda at any stage of her career. But it might reasonably be argued that milder versions of socialism – social democracy, for instance, which promotes social justice within a capitalist framework – contain conservative elements, or that a socialist's career might contain conservative episodes (Willy Brandt's crafting of *Ostpolitik*, perhaps). Some feminists, such as Wendy McElroy or Naomi Wolf, seem to have reasoned conservatively at possibly rare moments in their careers. One would not call Brandt, McElroy or Wolf conservatives, but kp+cp gives a framework for becoming attuned to conservative overtones that depart from the fundamental frequencies of their work.

The more important reason is that kp+cp is far less promiscuous than the criticism assumes – it does not simply sweep up moderates of every persuasion. Consider someone who cleaved to an ends-based ideology, and who often reasoned in the cautious way set out by kp+cp. What would she be like? Someone who reasoned regularly in this way would have a pretty watery commitment to an idealistic redrawing of society's structures and institutions. She would have to believe that her theory about society was highly uncertain (this goes way beyond Hilda's view that there was a risk in applying it – by the knowledge principle, our ideologue would have little confidence in the truth of the theory itself). She would believe not just that innovating was a risk, but also, by the change principle, that the current state of society is typically undervalued by political thinkers, including presumably her fellows. She would not believe that her party's proposed policies could be guaranteed to address all the problems that they were intended to, and would be worried about their unintended consequences. Her ends-based ideologue colleagues might balk at mixing with someone who always advised them not to act and held such a sceptical position about their own pet theories.

In short, she would not be a very strong ideologue, and her political thought would be highly conservative in character. She might be better characterised as a conservative whose values were congruent with another ideological group – for example, she might hold dear a value such as liberty or equality or the promotion of her nation, but she would clearly have very little confidence in her own ability, or the ability of her comrades, to achieve that end. To that extent, she would resemble Montaigne, who wrote that "there is a great deal of self-love and arrogance in judging so highly of your opinions that you are obliged to disturb the public peace in order to establish them, thereby introducing those many unavoidable evils and that horrifying moral

[49] Such as Beckstein's, who is concerned in his own paper with defining 'true' or 'authentic' conservatism, and his project is intended to draw that distinction as clearly as possible, whereas kp+cp is intended to define a conservative kind of thought. The adjectival position, to the extent that it is consistent with other ideological positions, is a poor candidate for Beckstein's project, because it will bring people into the conservative fold who should not be there.

corruption which, in matters of great importance, civil wars and political upheavals bring in their wake – introducing them moreover into your own country."[50]

We can clarify this using two potential examples of overstretch.[51] First of all, let us consider someone living in a nihilistic, anarchistic culture, a commune run on Kropotkinesque lines perhaps, who wishes to preserve that culture. Is he a conservative, despite professing to be an anarchist? This boils down to the question of whether (a) he wishes to preserve that culture because he thinks Kropotkin was right and his commune is either optimal or such that further application of Kroptokin's ideology is all that is required to achieve optimality, or (b) he believes that the commune works well enough (whatever its imperfections), thinks that it will be destabilised if it changes course, potentially losing much of value, but does not want to see Kropotkin's ideas applied more rigorously either, for the same reasons. On the adjectival view he is an anarchist and not a conservative if (a) is true (because he rejects both kp and cp), but if (b) is true he is conservative (in this respect) and some might want to say he is not an anarchist either. If conservatism is substantive rather than adjectival, then he could not be considered to be a conservative in either case because he would in all likelihood hold some value not shared with the community.

Second, consider a pigheaded communist apparatchik in late 1980s Russia. She might be seen as espousing kc ("I don't believe any of the statistics because I know they are fabricated") and cp ("We got to be careful with this perestroika nonsense"). Is she therefore a conservative? Again, this boils down to another question. Does she believe (a) that post-Brezhnevian Russia is vile, but that care is needed because she is in danger of losing her privileged position, or (b) that there are, *pace* Gorbachev, things to value in the functioning bureaucracy, and, who knows, rapid change might lead, not to a smooth transition to a wonderful liberal free market economy, but to botched privatisations under a boozy president[52] followed by a corrupt, totalitarian and aggressive regime led by a sinister former KGB man, under both of which Russia's people will suffer economically and in other ways as well as destabilizing the global world order? If (a), then she is not a conservative on this account; for instance, she does not believe that the status quo is undervalued by critics, and is prepared to resist innovation however low the risk of its adoption (and of course her account is not defensible using public reason). She therefore does not espouse the change principle after all (as is evident, the change principle says much more than 'I don't like change'). If (b), she is reasoning conservatively.

The fallacy of the undistributed middle

Beckstein's third argument, generalised from the above, is that there is an undistributed middle fallacy in play, and that the champion of adjectival conservatism is confusing conservatism with risk aversion, based on the very similar behaviour that the two attitudes license.[53] This is an important point, and Beckstein is not specifically addressing kp+cp. However, when we replace the abstract notion of adjectival conservatism with the specific kp+cp, the confusion evaporates.

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[50] Michel de Montaigne, 'On habit, and on never easily changing a traditional law', in M.A. Screech (ed.), *Complete Essays*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991, 122-139, at 135.
[51] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for these proposed counterexamples.
[52] As argued, for example, by John Gray, 'Enlightenment, illusion and the fall of the Soviet State', in *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age*, London: Routledge, 1995, 31-33, and 'The post-communist societies in transition', in *Enlightenment's Wake*, 34-63.
[53] Beckstein, 'What does it take to be a true conservative?' 14.

Kp+cp certainly subtends an attitude to risk, but it is not a philosophy of risk aversion. Risk aversion is not an assumption implicit in kp+cp, but might be derived from the two premises of epistemological scepticism and the undervaluation of the status quo by ends-based ideologies, and the derivation would be illegitimate to the extent that the status quo was not valuable. Conversely, someone who is risk averse need not subscribe to either the knowledge principle or the change principle (as, for example, with Hilda above). Kp+cp has more content than merely a description of idealised behaviour – it involves a set of attitudes to other ideologies, to the status quo, to theory and data, and so provides enough context to allow a distinction to be made between it and mere risk aversion.

Adjectival conservatism and action

Scepticism and sensitivity to risk appear to be the most likely candidates to compose the posture or attitude to value and policy that marks out the conservative, but at first sight this seems a bland concoction. Beckstein is dismissive of adjectival conservatism, while Brennan and Hamlin characterise it as focusing on "normative risk,"[54] and see it as an attitude towards the ends of other, more transformative ideologies – one would be a conservative liberal, or a conservative green, or a conservative feminist. Yet this minimal conservative identity is not very consistent with the assertive and sometimes strident conservative tradition. Can kp+cp support a more striking adjectival conservative identity than this?

As Oakeshott argued, a conservative individual might be quite adventurous – he might simply want government to leave him alone to pursue his radical idea of the good.[55] The conservative doesn't agonise about whether to do something exciting, like trek along the Annapurna Circuit. His concerns are that (a) society is stable enough to allow him to pursue his idea of the good, (b) government will not stop him doing it, and (c) if for some reason his pursuit of his idea of the good causes conflict with other individuals' legitimate pursuits, government will provide a procedure to resolve the issue. The conservative isn't restricted to cultivating his suburban lawn.

However, that doesn't solve the dilemma of the conservative politician. A conservative who conforms to the lugubrious stereotype of the master of inactivity will struggle in today's politics. He will need to persuade a mass media and a Twittersphere driven by novelty, innovation and hyperactive problem-solving – unfortunately, the very things that his ideology is meant to hinder. He will have problems with negotiation – if his starting position is epistemological humility, pluralism and compromise, who is going to find him a convincing opponent?

Conservative scepticism is not an automatic assumption of the futility of any kind of reasoning. Abstract principles can play a guiding role in action.[56] Rather, the doubt is whether abstract reasoning is sufficient to ensure that political action will be practical. This is an acid test. Richard Bourke has argued that, for Burke at least, a practical approach to politics was essential, alongside a powerful moral stance. "Deprived of normative substance, political opinions were mere fancies; shorn of practicality, they

[54] Brennan & Hamlin, 'Comprehending conservatism', 234; Brennan & Hamlin, 'Analytic conservatism'.
[55] Oakeshott, 'On being conservative', 434.
[56] Seán Patrick Donlan, 'Burke on law and legal theory', in David Dwan & Christopher J. Insole (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 67-79, at 68.

were mere moralising whims."[57] Burke himself turned the charge of vacuity around, and argued that his own principles, rooted in a particular set of historically contingent values, were much more anchored than those of his opponents. Richard Price's abstract reasoning meant that "his zeal is of a curious character. It is not for the propagation of his own opinions, but of any opinions. It is not for the diffusion of truth, but for the spreading of contradiction. Let the noble teachers but dissent, it is no matter from whom or from what."[58]

The conservative is not condemned to unadventurousness. The risk-based approach of kp+cp leaves room for political action. Margaret Thatcher was often identified as a radical (correctly so on a number of occasions), but as I argue in detail elsewhere, her philosophy had prominent conservative aspects (consistent with kp+cp), at least until 1986 or so when she began to plot a measurably radical course.[59]

Adjectival conservatism leaves it entirely open for a conservative to demand change, even radical change. When the state of a political unit is dire, then the risk of change will be diminished. "To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely."[60] In the 1970s, it was common ground across the political spectrum that the United Kingdom was unlovely, 'the sick man of Europe'; its economic situation was terrible, voters and citizens were fed up with strikes and power cuts, and popular culture was nihilistic and anarchic.[61] This grated against Thatcher's value set, rooted in her Methodist upbringing in the English Midlands.[62] This value set will not power substantive conservatism – many of her conservative opponents within the Conservative Party (christened 'the wets' by Thatcher) held different, more aristocratic, values, as they made abundantly clear.[63] They were both adjectival conservatives with competing value sets, which revealed themselves in different policy prescriptions.

Although the wets wished to make an accommodation with the trade unions to preserve the 'post-war settlement' of cooperation between government, management and unions, it was equally conservative (i.e. consistent with kp+cp) to say that the current position was untenable and change was needed. In her first term Thatcher attempted to get the public finances under control by lowering public spending and reducing the government's involvement in the economy, which she believed inherently counterproductive, and to provide a more stable business environment by undermining the legal protections of trade unions, which she considered inherently disruptive.

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[57] Richard Bourke, 'Burke, enlightenment and romanticism', in David Dwan & Christopher J. Insole (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 27-40, at 37.
[58] Burke, *Reflections*, 95.
[59] Space precludes a full discussion of this strong claim, but the reader is referred to Kieron O'Hara, 'The conservative dialectic of Margaret Thatcher's first term', in Bradley W. Hart & Richard Carr (eds.), *The Foundations of the British Conservative Party*, London: Continuum, 2013, 39-61, for the complete argument in terms of kp+cp. Note that this is an illustrative example only; if the reader is not convinced, it is not fatal to the argument here.
[60] Burke, *Reflections*, 172.
[61] Mark Garnett, *From Anger to Apathy: The British Experience Since 1975*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2007, Dominic Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle For Britain, 1974-1979*, London: Allen Lane, 2012.
[62] Margaret Thatcher, *The Path to Power*, London: HarperCollins, 1995.
[63] Ian Gilmour, *Dancing With Dogma: Britain Under Thatcherism*, London: Simon & Schuster, 1992.

Thatcher's first-term policies were attempts to fix identified problems with the British economy, while hers was the last UK government to emphasise its lack of control of the economy (an epistemological humility dropped when her second chancellor Nigel Lawson wished to take credit for the boom of the mid-1980s). Later in her period of office, the innovations for which Thatcher came to be known (e.g. the Big Bang deregulation of the financial sector) would have theoretical rather than practical backing, and address no specific problem apart from perceived opportunity costs. Kp+cp is congruent with Oakeshott's nostrum that "an innovation which is a response to some specific defect, one designed to redress some specific disequilibrium, is more desirable than one which springs from a notion of a generally improved condition of human circumstances, and is far more desirable than one generated by a vision of perfection."[64] Thatcher's first term policymaking generally met that condition while the second two terms abandoned it.

One lesson from this is that if the adjectival conservative does not value the status quo highly, then she may well embrace and even initiate change if she feels that the risk of change is suitably low. A second lesson is that kp+cp does not tell the conservative how to act, it tells her how to argue. Depending on the values that the conservative holds, then different aspects of the status quo may be defended, and we might find ourselves in the position where one conservative faction (e.g. the first-term supporters of Thatcher) is in conflict with another conservative faction (e.g. the 'wets' of Thatcher's first term).

So there is no conceptual problem with an activist conservative of the adjectival type, as long as she is able to argue that the current situation is rotten enough to justify action. That leaves the suspicion that her sceptical epistemology will let her down when it comes to deciding *what* action is justified: "the weakness of conservatism appears in not knowing always what are the fundamental propositions supporting its manner of living, and in inability to judge the consequences of political and economic mutation."[65]

In practice, the weakness is not as glaring as it appears in the abstract; there are at least three immediate sources of policy prescriptions for the adjectival conservative. First, as Freeden points out,[66] the conservative's contributions to policy will often be intended to confound the innovator or the rationalist. The conservative is there to protect, and his political discourse will be crafted around the threats he perceives. Second, it is also important to go beyond "the boiling point of the moment."[67] Wilson notes that social change is an interesting indicator of the 'fundamental' institutions and practices the conservative will seek to conserve: "the conservative looks upon similarities and dissimilarities in social change, and the 'fundamental' is practically always the similarity between two periods."[68] Third, there are the values that the adjectival conservative holds, not by virtue of being a conservative, but by virtue of being an individual situated within an existing and functioning society and culture.

Certainly, conservatism should not be equated automatically to conflict-aversion. A vital, living tradition that is worth preserving will be an object of discussion, debate

[64] Oakeshott, 'On being conservative', 412.
[65] Wilson, 'A theory of conservatism', 29.
[66] Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, 336ff.
[67] Wilson, 'A theory of conservatism', 30.
[68] Wilson, 'A theory of conservatism', 30.

and even controversy. Vital traditions "embody continuities of conflict."[69] The less controversial is the status quo, the happier the conservative will be,[70] but that is not inconsistent with a bit of argument and controversy to show that an institution or tradition is an important part of people's lives.

Conclusion: out of the ideologues' shadow?

The two conservative principles help differentiate its understanding of innovation from that of radicals and progressives. The conservative argues that the societal response to an innovation will be unpredictable, and therefore it is at least possible that some people will use any new system in creative and unforeseeable ways, which (particularly at scale) will affect how that system functions and the effects it has. The only reason we understand how people work around today's systems and adapt to their inadequacies is that the systems are in place and the unpredicted behaviour is there to be observed. Indeed, some sociologists (and not only conservative ones) have argued that designed systems can *only* work if we leave room for the workarounds.[71]

The conservative's charge is that the radical is handicapped by having to present a system design that he cannot show will survive the first contact with the enemy. Hence, as opposed to Brennan and Hamlin's characterisation of adjectival conservatism as an adjunct to more meaningful ends-based ideologies, Burkean conservatism presents itself as an essential precondition to the successful pursuit of any political or value-laden end. Instead of conservatism being the qualifier of ends-based ideologies – a conservative liberal, a conservative green – it becomes the mark of any practical ideology, after which one becomes free to pursue one's own ideas of the good. One can, like Burke, be a liberal conservative, or like Scruton, a green conservative.[72]

Conceived in the abstract – i.e. simply as an absence of a characteristic value to pursue – adjectival conservatism may seem like a mere commentary on ends-based ideologies. However, when we consider a species of the genus, such as kp+cp, the gap between a conservative and someone who merely behaves conservatively becomes clearer. Beckstein argues, and I agree, that it is not sufficient for someone to behave conservatively to qualify as a conservative. In this paper, I have argued that, furthermore, it is not sufficient for an ends-based ideologue to behave conservatively to qualify as an adjectival conservative; her conservative behaviour needs to be rooted in conservative reasons independent of the values she holds. These reasons are absent from Brennan and Hamlin's abstract characterisation of adjectival conservatism, but are a key part of the analysis, and so a more specific characterisation is required. Where we draw the border between, say, liberal conservatives and conservative liberals may be moot, but, at least in the context of kp+cp, that there is a border is not in doubt.

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[69] Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd edition, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, 222.
[70] Wilson, 'A theory of conservatism', 29; Oakeshott, 'On being conservative'.
[71] James C. Scott, 'Geographies of trust, geographies of hierarchy', in Mark E. Warren (ed.), *Democracy and Trust*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 273-289.
[72] Roger Scruton, *Green Philosophy: How to Think Seriously About the Planet*, London: Atlantic, 2012.