Conservatism and Justified Attachment[1]

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Abstract: Value conservatism is the thesis that there is some distinctive reason to preserve valuable things even when a (somewhat) more valuable thing might be created by their destruction. I offer an account that improves on the current literature in response to G.A. Cohen's "Rescuing Conservatism." In short, we become psychologically attached to valuable things that make up part of our lives; the same holds true, interestingly, with things of relatively neutral value. Severing attachments is painful. This yields a reason to favor an object that someone is attached to over an object that no one is attached to. But an analysis is only part of a theory of conservatism: we also need to know whether such conservatism is justified. I argue that Cohen's idea of "accepting the given" can be read to yield such a justification: it is valuable to maintain some moderate disposition to accept what one already has. This attachment-based account of conservatism displays a number of attractive theoretical features, including accounting for the impulse to restore past valuables and providing a framework for judging conservatism excessive.

1. Conservatism and the Given

G.A. Cohen (2012) influentially proposed a brand of "value conservatism," arguing that it would be wrong to blithely destroy some valuable thing in order to create a new thing of (slightly) greater value. The point is not to defend always preserving the status quo, but to claim that seeking solely to maximize value is a blinkered position, overlooking the significance of valuable things that already exist. Instead, there should be some (limited) bias in favor of existing valuable things rather than creating new valuable things. My interest is the nature and justification of this bias, and how it is best accounted for theoretically.

[1] I'm grateful to Luke Golemon, Andrew Lichter, Michal Masnay, Steve Wall, and an extremely helpful anonymous referee for comments and discussion as this paper developed.

Cohen suggests three possible grounds for value conservatism: that we should care about *particular valuable things*, not value in the abstract; that our *personal* connections to existing things can generate reasons to preserve them, aside from their independent value; and some further significance in "accepting the given." The first idea, about the value of particular existing things, is given the most attention by Cohen, and attempts to work out that thesis have mostly occupied the subsequent literature.[2] I propose a unified reading in which there is really one complex argument here, which relies centrally on a natural psychological disposition for forming attachments to particular things. This is a revisionist interpretation, and I do not claim that it is the only cogent sort of conservative thesis. But it has an important advantage that I do not believe any competitor accounts can claim, including Cohen's own: it fits with Cohen's claim that value conservatism is a disposition that "everyone who is sane" displays in some measure (2012: 204). On my view, this is a very important clue as to the kind of conservatism we should be after.

Let me briefly state the main reasoning. I believe that the basic intuition against wantonly striving to maximize value is nearly undeniable, and poses a prima facie puzzle in practical reason. An important point in favor of the intuition is that nearly everyone actually *does* display some loyalty to what they have. This suggests that value conservatism has not only a moral but a psychological reality. I analyze value conservatism directly in terms of this practical disposition to conserve. This disposition is, I argue, importantly justified to at least some degree. This amounts to a defense of value conservatism, but one in which the grounds for "particular" valuing are in fact based in dispositions for personal valuing, and are ultimately justified by the importance of accepting the given. Accepting the given itself may be justified in different ways, but I will link it to the value of contentment. This permits (but does not require) an analysis of conservatism that is consonant with a sophisticated approach to maximizing value.

In a slogan, what makes up a life are the things that are *ours*. Now, in many cases this may lead us astray, as when we fail to appropriately value the new and strange. But conservatism is not only or mainly a regrettable foible of human psychology. There are plausible materials in Cohen's argument

[2] See Scheffler 2018, Nebel 2019, Nebel 2022, O'Brien 2022.

for justifying our disposition to conservative attachment. The question of justification is too often passed over: Cohen understood conservatism to create a genuine difficulty for the value maximizer. This requires that the conservative disposition is not only explicable but defensible. A mere analysis of conservatism leaves open the prospect that we should attempt to overcome our atavistic conservative dispositions rather than reifying them into moral reasons. Given that conservatism is (I believe questionably) posited to be in conflict with maximizing value, there is an obvious case to be made that rationality favors expunging the disposition.

One possible answer lies in Cohen's third and most mysterious argument, concerning accepting the given. Cohen writes that failing to take anything as given indicates an "attitude of universal mastery over everything [that] is repugnant, and, at the limit, insane" (2012: 207). He references the "Gethsemane idea," which evokes the "abandonment of striving, of seeking a better state, and instead going with the flow, as do the lilies of the field" (2012: 203). I will read this rich idea in a rather plain way: one who is always striving for improvement may lead a worse, less happy life than one who is content with what they have, even if the striver is largely successful in their efforts. Of course everyone should do some striving, too. But there is an obvious defect in perpetually seeking improvement, rather than accepting and enjoying what one has. A cliche example is that one should love their spouse as they are, rather than being prepared at any moment to seek a new and improved relationship with someone new who has similar-but-even-better features. (The same example aptly suggests the perils of excessive conservatism, as well. One should not accept too many relational defects.) This is a plausible justification for maintaining and even encouraging the conservative disposition: without an aspect of conservatism, each aspect of our lives will always be up for grabs; only by rejecting a globally maximizing stance can we find the contentment of a flourishing life. This suggests that conservatism is a (partial) solution to a deep puzzle in practical reason, one that every person encounters: when should we accept what we have, and when should we strive for more?

Now, Cohen clearly presents particular, personal, and "given" conservatisms as distinct lines of argument. Further, Cohen's main arguments are about the nature of value, rather than our justified attitudes toward valuable things. But I believe the account that emerges, based on the idea of accepting

the given as justifying our disposition to form personal attachments to objects of positive and neutral value, is independently attractive. And I will argue that this approach resolves a number of problems in the current literature.

Jacob Nebel (2022) provides a helpful roadmap of the current state of play. He distinguishes three approaches to analyzing conservatism — oriented, for the most part, around the idea of particular value. These are respectively labeled as existential, attitudinal, and object-affecting conservatism. Existential conservatism is Cohen's original position, which begins with the distinction between particular bearers of value and value in the abstract, and moves (problematically) to the conclusion that *currently existing* valuables should have a bias in their favor. Attitudinal conservatism is Scheffler's (2018) position, which holds that a conservative bias is conceptually implicated in the idea of a valuing attitude, as held by persons regarding the objects we value. Our valuing attitudes, in particular, entail a disposition to preserve. Note that the attitudinal account already shifts registers from the nature of value itself to the nature of *valuing*. Object-affecting conservatism is Nebel's view, on which (at least some) valuable objects directly warrant preservation because being preserved is (typically) *good for* the valuable thing.

In section 2, I explain why neither existential nor object-affecting conservatism succeed. A crucial point, raised by Nebel (but not clearly satisfied by his own theory), is that conservatism also intuitively implicates a disposition to *restore* some valuables that no longer exist — indeed, the impulse to restoration seems paradigmatically conservative. But this point is not captured by Cohen's original account. I argue that only a broadly attitudinal approach can capture the appropriate shape of conservative attitudes: conservatism does not disappear when a valued object is destroyed, but instead gradually *fades* over time. Neither existential nor object-affecting views have the right shape. In sections 3-5, I explain why Scheffler's attitudinal conservatism, suitably modified, can explain the nature and shape of restoration. But attitudinal conservatism by itself is still is not quite sufficient: partly because it does not answer the justificatory question, and partly because Scheffler's view only applies to objects that one judges to be agent-neutrally valuable. The impulse to conserve seems unified between those cases and cases where I recognize that I am attached to an arbitrary object. And the full range of the

conservative disposition requires justification. I believe that justification flows from the idea and value of accepting the given.

2. Desiderata for a Conservative Theory

Cohen's self-consciously exploratory discussion seems that it cannot be quite right. What he mainly says in support of favoring existing valuable things relies on a distinction between the bearers of value and value itself: we might put Cohen's position as holding that we should value *valuables*, not *value* (2011: 213). I should value *this beautiful painting*, not the value (beauty) that inheres in it. Even if we grant this (somewhat difficult) distinction, Scheffler (2018: 110-12) points out that distinguishing value and valuables, and prioritizing valuables, does not itself entail conservatism in the sense of discounting potential valuables relative to existing valuables. A painter may be interested directly in painting new works of art — in Scheffler's example, Jill does not care about maximizing the art (or art-value) in the world overall, but *also* does not particularly care about preserving art in general. Going slightly further, she might even destroy an art work of her own in order to make a new one that she knows will be of *less* value.[3] The example shows that the disposition to value particular valuables (rather than value itself, whatever that means) doesn't entail conservatism. This yields the first desideratum: our theory must successfully explain the discounting of future valuables relative to present valuables, which existential conservatism fails to do clearly on Cohen's presentation.

This is already a serious problem for existential conservatism. Nebel (2022) raises another serious objection. Even if we made out some other argument for favoring existing valuables, conservatism seems intuitively to bear on past valuables which don't currently exist. Indeed, Cohen begins in the very epigraph of his paper with the sentiment "It's not like it was." That seems to capture a key wistful element in conservatism. Nebel plays on this with a case close to Cohen's heart, All Souls College. If All Souls had recently been destroyed or seriously modified in order to create (just barely) more objective value, but Cohen could press a button to magically restore it the way it was, shouldn't that be an obvious case for value conservatism (Nebel 2022: 184)? But it appears outside the scope of

[3] This example builds on an example from Anca Gheaus, discussed by Cohen (2012: 220). Cohen recognizes the seriousness of the point, but does not seem to recognize that it vitiates the conservative aspect of his basic proposal.

Cohen's view. So existential conservatism falls short. Our second desideratum is that conservative discounting should extend to the discounting of recently-created valuables relative to recently-lost valuables.[4]

O'Brien (2022) proposes an interesting reconstruction of, and test case for, existential conservatism. His main test example concerns "mirrored histories," in which (simplifying somewhat) a certain valuable thing either exists up to a certain point in time and then ceases to exist, or (the very same thing) comes to exist at that point in time and then exists indefinitely. (Past and future are presumed to extend indefinitely, so there is no difference in the length of time the object exists across the two histories. But only in one history is there an instance of destruction.) From an objective point of view, setting aside any self-interested reasons, is there a reason to prefer one history over the other? O'Brien's claim is that, to the extent we have intuitive reason to prefer the second history (without an instance of destruction) over the first history, there is undefeated intuitive support for existential conservatism.

There are two points to be made about this account, one regarding the strength of this intuitive explanation and one regarding restoration cases. O'Brien canvasses several alternative explanations of the mirrored history example. For instance, one might worry that intuitions are grounded illicitly in a preference that, if I were in a position to choose which history I am in, I would prefer to be in a history in which I will coexist with the sole valuable thing in the universe going into the future. But the case is meant to be neutral with respect to such personal preferences or biases: for instance, we may stipulate that the chooser will indeed coexist with the valuable for their entire life; they are choosing whether the object was created just before they became conscious (and will persist indefinitely thereafter) or will be destroyed just after they lose consciousness (having indefinitely

[4] The restoration intuition concerns cases where existing value must be lost in order for previously-existing value to be restored. (Of course, if we can restore previously-existing value without sacrificing anything that currently exists, we should do that instead.) I do not claim that this intuition is undeniable, especially by those who favor existential conservatism. But it does seem to me to capture an important aspect of the conservative disposition. I believe the main lines of my argument could be made out even if restoration were set aside, but I do not pursue that here. My thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing for clarification here.

preceded them) (O'Brien 2022: 160). I am happy to grant that O'Brien's responses (on this score and others) are successful in isolating a pure existential conservative intuition. And this intuition may well be the source of some actual conservative dispositions. But another lesson can be taken from O'Brien's discussion: the properly isolated version of existential conservatism is extremely abstract. Say that someone denies that there is any moral difference between the mirrored histories: what matters, they say, is the amount of time that a valuable exists for. Does this stance seem like a reason to question their *sanity?* I am not sure. I am, at least, very skeptical that the strength of the general value conservative intuition can be fully explained by the existential conservative intuition as displayed in the mirrored history case.[5] One might take this as simply dismissing Cohen's thesis out of hand. But given the richness of his discussion, and his own reservations about the true nature of the thesis, I do not think such interpretive strictness is called for. In fact, especially intriguingly, Cohen specifically suggests that in an updated "reworking of the theme of this essay, the emphasis on particular valuable things that now exist would be relaxed" (2012: 220).

The second point concerns restoration. O'Brien's formulation might suggest a rejoinder to the restoration problem. In one version of the thesis, his existential conservatism gives a reason to favor any *independently* existing thing (2022: 152), where the idea of independent existence is that some objects are going to come into existence independent of what anyone does. This might help with one difficulty in Cohen's view. Say we know that some valuable thing will come into existence in the next few years. If we can now act to prevent the destruction in the distant future of that thing, which at the time of its destruction will be very old, conservatism seems intuitively to favor that act of preemptive preservation. On a bare existential conservatism, it seems that we cannot vindicate that intuition. With the independence condition, it seems we can.

One might further think that the idea of independent existence further singles out a class of objects that would be worth restoring. But this would, I think, go too far. The idea of independence is

[5] To be clear, O'Brien himself is very cognizant of this possibility, and presents his discussion as a test of the true nature and strength of conservative intuitions. See his discussion at O'Brien 2022: 165. I believe it is very dialectically useful for this purpose. And perhaps there are other grounds — including possibly Nebel's object-affecting conservatism — for embracing the existential conservative intuition about mirrored histories.

that it makes sense to value things that we know *will* exist — we are in a sense guaranteed their value, so we should take account of it (see O'Brien: 152). But this does not naturally bear on things that did independently exist but no longer do: we had their value, but now it is lost. Why does even a supplemented existential conservatism give any distinctive reason to bring it back? (Further, restoration plausibly should apply to things that never had independent existence, as well: do I not have some reason to restore the valuable thing that only ever existed because I created it?)[6] So, if the restoration intuition is granted, it remains an additional data point not captured by existential conservatism.

I now turn from existential conservatism to consider Nebel's proposal. Interestingly, it is not clear that this account fares any better with respect to the restoration desideratum. Nebel's view goes roughly like this. Some things have *status value,* which means that they have value for their own sake. People are the most obvious bearers of status value. If something has status value, we have noninstrumental reason to promote its good, independent from reasons of value promotion. Object-affecting conservatism is simply the principle that we have reason to preserve objects with status value, if such preservation is indeed good for them (Nebel 2022: 188-9).

Nebel rightly emphasizes that object-affecting conservative provides a real explanation of conservative intuitions in a way that Cohen's existential conservatism did not, once the irrelevance of the value/valuable distinction was recognized. That is, OAC meets the discounting desideratum. Much of the rest of his argument concerns the appropriate scope of conservatism. OAC holds that conservatism is appropriate just when valuables have status value. Nebel is officially neutral on which valuables in fact have status value. But he favors a wide scope of status value, to include things like ecosystems and works of art (ibid: 186), and this is dialectically significant. His primary objections to attitudinal conservatism are that it is under-inclusive in precisely these respects, failing to conserve

[6] Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting further discussion of O'Brien's view, as well as a correction to an earlier presentation of the mirrored history example.

objects which no one in fact values (sometimes because they are entirely remote, like distant planets).[7] I discuss this point in the next section.

Regarding restoration, we can ask the same question of OAC as for existential conservatism: we might grant that (some) valuables have status value while they exist, but why do they retain their status value after being destroyed? Perhaps the answer is that the particular dignity or respect that is reflected by status value is retained after destruction, in the way that we may still have reasons to respect the dead.[8] The problem is that restoration does not involve merely restoring a valuable thing, but restoring a value thing *at the loss* of a newly created thing that (by hypothesis) is equally or more valuable. And, absent some other argument, the newly created valuable would seem to have status value as well. One would think that, if anything, the bias should be toward the thing that currently exists: the harm of destruction has *already* been done to the other.[9]

Nebel does not adequately set up the restoration problem in either his critique of Cohen or the discussion in light of OAC. In both cases, he considers examples where a valuable thing has been replaced with something that is plausibly *less* valuable. He imagines All Souls College changing radically, and (among other things) "becoming a Christian Rock record label" (2022: 184). Unless we stipulate that the new All Souls is equally valuable on some metric, there is no puzzle as to why we should restore the old version. (It might be that the new version is not valuable at all, such that existential conservatism simply does not apply to it, or that the gap in value outweighs any conservative

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[7] Nebel treats these as distinct objections, but they seem the same. He discusses two other problems: one concerns restoration, which I discuss later; the other concerns conserving valuables which *others* value but I do not. Nebel immediately suggests a convincing solution: we have reasons to prevent harm to others, and the loss of something they value is a harm (2022: 186). But he oddly still lists this as a problem later on (2022: 192).

[8] It is not entirely clear to me that Nebel himself would endorse this, because in other work he suggests the claim that "the kinds of things that make a person's life worth living are only good for her on some condition that entails her existence" (2019: 136). But he might endorse it, and of course others might.

[9] Notably, Cohen simply accepts that existential conservatism favors preserving a newly created thing rather than restoring an old one (2012: 214). But he views this a shortcoming, and I believe Nebel is right to view it as a damning shortcoming. Interestingly, he gestures toward personal value to answer this challenge: I believe this is evidence for my argument in favor of a theory that unifies Cohen's three arguments.

bias toward the newly existing version. Examples where the original thing is more valuable do not disambiguate the various possibilities) A similar dynamic holds later on, where the verdict of OAC on restoration cases appears to hang on the relative value comparison between the two valuables: "If the replacement is also worth caring about for its own sake, then we might also have some reason not to destroy it in order to restore the original. What we have most reason to do probably depends on the case. Averröes's counterfeit might be less worth caring about for its own sake than Aristotle's original" (2022: 192). There is no clear claim of a distinctive bias in favor of restoring the original thing, which is what we should be after. As discussed in the next section, only a version of attitudinal conservatism can handle restoration appropriately. In the process, we arrive at a generally attractive (though somewhat deflationary) account of value conservatism itself.

3. Attachment and Restoration

Attitudinal conservatism is set out and defended by Scheffler (2018: 113-6). The basic move is to shift the locus of conservatism from a special value that objects have to a special property of our *valuing* particular objects. When we value something, we are attached to it, in a sense that we are susceptible to a range of distinctive emotions: let me simplify and say that attachment entails a particular kind of disappointment at the loss of the valued thing. I argue that this is the right general approach, but that the view must be loosened in two significant ways: first, conservatism can extend to objects that no longer exist, and in some special cases to objects that have never yet existed; second, the attitudinal approach can extend naturally to Cohen's "personal value" of objects of neutral value.

When combined, these modifications suggest that conservatism, as commonly understood, is actually a subset of a more general psychological phenomenon: we become attached to objects beyond their agent-neutral value; severing this attachment is harmful; and such harms are morally significant. Emphasizing attachment in this way suggests that the harms of severing attachment can be considered in the overall practical deliberation on what is right to do, alongside the benefits of creating new value. These direct moral considerations must be viewed in light of the indirect consideration of preserving an attitude that appropriately "accepts the given." Without this latter consideration, it might be appropriate to, in the long-term, attempt to eradicate the disposition toward attachment. Such indirect

considerations are familiar from the literature on "sophisticated consequentialism" (e.g. Railton 1984), and do not raise any fundamental problem for the idea of maximizing value.

I now turn to the nature of attitudinal conservatism — or, more broadly, the nature of attachment. Scheffler distinguishes valuing an object and regarding it as valuable. One can recognize that an opera house is valuable, but, disliking opera, not feel the sort of disappointment if it closes down that you would if your favorite concert venue closed down. Attachment requires yourself valuing the thing in question. But this is still not sufficient: I can value an opera house which I have never visited, but I am unlikely to be attached to it in the way that I might be attached to the opera house which I have visited regularly for some years. I likely do not feel *personal* pain at its destruction, even if I find it very regrettable. Scheffler captures this idea by associating attachment with *acquaintance* (2018: 115). His use of acquaintance is non-technical and not explained in any detail, except by example. The main point he emphasizes is that one cannot be relevantly acquainted with things that have never existed. I suggest making this point in terms of *familiarity* rather than acquaintance, for several reasons. Familiarity avoids the association, which Scheffler rejects, with the idea of "knowledge by acquaintance." Familiarity is more naturally scalar than acquaintance: it seems that we are or are not acquainted, but we can be more or less familiar. And familiarity is a more natural way of talking about past valuables or, in some cases, possible futures: I am no longer directly acquainted with my childhood home once it is torn down, but I remain intimately familiar with it.

Familiarity is a phenomenological notion. I become familiar with a thing or person by routine engagement over time. Familiarity is inflected by both intensity and duration: one might become deeply familiar with a car by an intensive process of tearing down and rebuilding its engine over weeks or months, but familiarity with a home is a matter of extended, ambient attention. (However, someone totally engrossed in their work or study such that they hardly notice their surroundings might conceivably spend a long time living in a place and form little attachment to it: familiarity does require *some* attention.)

The basic idea of attitudinal conservatism is fairly simple. We invest time and attention, and therefore a part of ourselves, in the valuable things which make up our lives. This is a psychological

trait, and for that reason is difficult to put as precisely as one might like. My goal is only to sketch a coherent set of underlying traits that would ground a plausible account of value conservatism. It may be that the final attitudinal theory is subject to further refinement based on the actual facts of human psychology — and this might affect its overall persuasiveness. We are working from the data point that people generally share a disposition to value particular objects of importance to them. This is not captured effectively by abstract theses about existence or status value: clearly people do not display an acute sensitivity to value in all its forms, but they do generally display sensitivity to the set of valuables they themselves interact with regularly. One model for this is a kind of habit or skill: as we interact with a valuable regularly, we become sensitive to its traits, and come to rely on the place it has in our lives. I might *know* that something else is equally valuable, the way I know that someone else's affiliation with a particular sports team is relevantly similar to my own affiliation with a rival team. But that does not mean I can easily see or feel the value when their team defeats mine. And the same for the car I have driven, the painting I have studied, the home I have lived in, and so on. While one valuable can of course be replaced by another, this does not generally happen immediately or for free. The rupture of a valuing relation is generally accompanied by grief, a period of transition, and only then by an opening up to replacement. (Sometimes this never happens, or only with great difficulty, as in the case of traumatic losses.)[10]

This does not mean that such losses are not justified, either impersonally or personally — they often are. Sometimes change and loss are even specifically necessary to open space for growth. But the general disposition to preserve attachments is sensible on this model, even beyond the objective value of the objects of attachment, because there are both greater potential benefits and losses when something is valuable *to us*. The attitudinal approach uses these resources to explain why we can often be justified in favoring existing things over new things that can be created — that is, it satisfies the discounting desideratum in a natural way.

Nebel raises a series of objections to attitudinal conservatism, which focus on ways in which he believes it is under-inclusive: he argues that we have reason to conserve more things than attitudinal

[10] Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting further discussion here.

conservatism can explain. Broadly, the alleged shortcomings are due to the personal or relational nature of attitudinal conservatism: Nebel believes that it is worth conserving valuables to which we have no personal connection.

The first objection is that attitudinal conservatism does not explain preserving the attachments of others. This is not initially difficult: as Nebel notes, we have reason to prevent harms to others, and the loss of their attachments is a distinctive harm (Nebel 2022: 186). But what, Nebel asks, about things to which no one is attached? Further, what about things which are "spatially remote," like distant unobservable planets, which no one even *could* be attached to in the sense that requires familiarity?

These objections rely two questionable ideas: the first is a presumption that our moral ontology should regard things such as remote planets as warranting moral concern in themselves; the second is that, whatever moral concern is warranted, it should be explained in terms of *conservatism*.

Nebel is officially neutral on the appropriate moral ontology: when he develops object-affecting conservatism, it is only as a sufficient condition for preserving whatever valuable things *do* have the relevant status value. So objections on behalf of valuables which no one does (or even could) value should be taken as speculative. But even if such things do warrant consideration, it is unclear whether this is really the apt target for a theory of conservatism. Recall that Cohen meant to explain a common disposition that was nonetheless undertheorized. Whatever reason we might have to preserve remote ecosystems, it is not an everyday intuition. Indeed, the very claim that objects (rather than agents) can have status value at all is an abstract theoretical idea, and a controversial one at that. We live in a world in which many people — almost all of whom, according to Cohen, have some aspect of the conservative disposition — happily eat factory-farmed pigs and cows, whose status value (one would think) is far more secure than that of trees, paintings, or planets.

Further, if we have conservative reasons to preserve things which do *not* have status value, then we will still need to appeal to something like attitudinal conservatism to explain the target phenomena (ibid: 192). Nebel welcomes the possibility of pluralism, but note the asymmetry: attitudinal conservatism by nature is likely to explain all of the impulses to conserve that people are commonly

invested in; it is only if we extend our moral ontology that any objection presents itself, and *even then* attitudinal conservatism is a necessary part of the picture. None of this shows or even indicates, to be clear, that the claims of object-affecting conservatism are wrong. And, like Nebel, we could coherently hold a pluralistic position that includes on a distinctively conservative reason to preserve spatiotemporally remote valuables — that is, in favor of making some sacrifice to do so that is greater than their objective value. But this would be quite distant from the widespread conservative disposition.[11]

The deepest issues concern restoration. Nebel initially maps out a plausible account of restoration based on attitudinal conservatism: "we might have reason to recover the original, because we might remain attached to it…Of course, as we grow attached to the replacement and lose our attachment to the original, we might acquire reason to preserve the replacement and lose reason to restore the original. But that's to be expected: it is implausible that we should forever remain loyal to what we initially valued" (Nebel 2022: 186).

This is roughly this picture I mean to defend. But Nebel then raises an issue. We are not currently acquainted with things that have been destroyed. So, the immediate object of our attachment is a mental representation of something that does not currently exist. But this "runs the risk of undermining attitudinal conservatism's intuitive asymmetry between past and future" (2022: 187), because we might also value mental representations of things that have never existed, but which we would like to create.

A natural response, which Nebel notes, is that there are asymmetries in the character of memories of the past and imaginings of the future: we generally have better epistemic access to past

[11] Further, it is unclear to me why the object-affecting principle need be cashed out as a conservative principle at all. If the relevant ontology — including ecosystems and so forth — has status value, why not simply say that such objects have moral rights, or some attenuated form of moral claims? This would attend to their status value without invoking conservatism. Consider in this connection Michael Otsuka's *asteroids* example, discussed by Cohen (2012: 220-1). One possible upshot of the example is precisely that, while remote aesthetically (or otherwise) valuables may well merit preservation, they do not clearly merit preservation *more* than they merit creation.

valuables, because actual familiarity has a much richer level of detail than typical imaginings.[12] But this kind of asymmetry is a contingent psychological matter: there is no strict relation between immediate acquaintance and degree of familiarity. One can learn in rich detail about past valuables that were already long destroyed at one's birth, and, in principle, there is no clear reason to deny that some imagined entities might be very richly realized in one's mind. Nebel sees this as a problem, because it is taken as a fixed point that there must be a strict asymmetry between past and future (really, past and *possible*). But this is in fact a theoretical opportunity to resolve the most puzzling aspects of conservatism, by explaining the intuitive phenomenon in a way that is not strictly conservative at all.

4. A Broad View of Attachment Conservatism

In a way, we have already taken a turn away from conservative strictly construed in the introduction of restoration cases, because to restore is obviously not actually to conserve. But Nebel's point that one committed to conserving what exists should *also* be committed to restoring recently destroyed valuables seems to me undeniable. What we are really after is coherent explanation of a conservative-coded disposition that goes somewhat beyond simple conservation. The attitudinal account is in this respect very promising. It says — somewhat broadening Scheffler's formulation — that a certain valuing attitude contains a commitment to preserve or (re)create the valued object. That commitment only takes a practical form when there is a well-defined object in mind, and only has significant force when one is suitably invested in the object. We are very often invested in the valuables that we interact with in our daily lives, and that investment does not disappear when they are destroyed (though of course it generally fades over time). But, in special cases of emotional investment in an imagined object, there is nothing implausible in the idea that the valuing attitude confers a distinctive reason to create the object.

For example, if someone has spent many years designing their dream home, from architecture to decor, it seems clearly better to build and gift to them *that* home, rather than a very different, but

[12] Nebel mentions this only in passing, immediately after raising the objection. He then goes onto the objection about spatially remote planets. This suggests that these issues are dialectically focal, but, as I suggested above, this seems like tenuous ground in the context.

objectively slightly more valuable house. Indeed, building and giving them the alien but more valuable house would seem disrespectful — a failure to attend to their particular desires. And this would seem true even with a reliable prediction that they would, in time, come to value the alien house slightly more. If this intuition holds, then the "conservative" bias applies in the very same way to certain special cases of creating a valuable that has never existed. It bears emphasizing that, while the shift in intuitive cases is (it seems to me) quite small — the structure of the reasoning is very similar — the theoretical shift is dramatic. We have moved from conserving existing objects, to restoring previously-existing objects, to creating brand new objects, and the same mode of reasoning, based on attachment, can apply to each. But it bears emphasizing that attachment, grounded in familiarity, will *generally* be associated with existing objects. It is much easier to gain familiarity with existing things than past things, and much easier to gain familiarity with past things (given suitable documentation) than with imaginings, which tend to constantly shift and morph in our mind's eye. Earlier, I framed the idea of attachment as a kind of acuity or sensitivity to value. Actual existing (and accessible) valuables demand much less acuity: they often foist their value upon us, sometimes against our will. (Perhaps I do not *want* to become attached to a stray dog that I take in for a few days. But I will.) Further, imagined objects cannot be destroyed in any ordinary sense, so the idea of preservation, focal in discussions of value conservatism, is not generally or perfectly apt. The relevant bias comes clearest in cases of projects coming to fruition, as just discussed. Nonetheless, there is no need for sharp principled distinctions to be drawn here on the broad attachment theory, and I take this to be a theoretical virtue.

A similar point holds regarding particular and personal value. Recall that particular value was meant to apply to existing objects that are objectively (or agent-neutrally) valuable. Cohen reserves the disposition to conserve objects of neutral value to the separate category of personal conservatism. A notable example is his favorite pencil eraser (Cohen 2012: 221). Scheffler preserves the sharp distinction between attachments to (agent-neutrally) valuable and non-valuable objects, reserving attitudinal conservatism for objects that one at least *believes* are independently valuable (Scheffler 2018: fn 9). But it is unclear why, in the register of attachment, we should preserve this distinction. Cohen did not believe his pencil eraser was especially valuable, and yet he was attached to it. It is easy to

imagine this grounding a reason for him to keep that eraser rather than replacing it with one that had some small value (say, an eraser bearing a tiny illustration that has some aesthetic value). The nature of the conservative bias does not seem to vary based on the objective value (or lack thereof) of the object, on the attachment account.

5. Justifying Conservatism

The independent value of the objects of attachment is, however highly significant to the *justification* of the conservative bias. Stipulating that particular or attitudinal conservatism applies only to independently valuable objects avoids the most problematic cases for conservatism, in which clearly disvaluable things are preserved. But we will regardless require an explanation of how, and how strongly, conservatism is justified. Obviously (as all parties recognize) it can be wrong to conserve a valuable if one has the ability to replace it with something *significantly* better. How is conservatism justified, and can a unified account apply to valuable objects, objects of neutral value, and objects of negative value?

None of the standard accounts include a clear justification for conservatism. For Cohen, particular value is simply a commonly held disposition in need of analysis. For Scheffler, conservatism is a conceptual feature of valuing. Nebel's object-affecting conservatism builds in a justification, but, as we've seen, his view does not map clearly onto the common conservative disposition (nor does he claim that it does). But recall from section 1 the discussion of accepting the given. A justification is latent in Cohen's discussion of this idea: a life in which we accept nothing as given would be in some way deficient. While Cohen does not spell it out in this way, it is natural and plausible to think that always striving for improvement is a recipe for misery. This is an idea that consequentialists have long accepted: often the best path to happiness involves thinking only or mainly about other aims (Sidgwick 1962 [1907]: 413). In this case, it may be that a psychological stance that takes various things as given,

rather than seeking to improve or replace the objects and affiliations that make up a life, is more conducive to happiness.[13]

Importantly, whatever is good about accepting the given could be spelled out in a wide variety of ways. The last paragraph takes an instrumentalist tack, but one might also hold that there is something intrinsically bad or repugnant about failing to accept the given.[14] What is important is that accepting the given is posited as a *substantively good thing*, such that we have reason to *remain* conservative even if we had the ability to rid ourselves of the disposition. (It might be thought that this is unnecessary, because ridding ourselves of conservatism is impossible. But surely we could train ourselves to become more or less conservative; and, even if not, we should know whether our conservatism is something to be cherished or regretted.) For myself, the broadly consequentialist view that failing to accept some things as given will lead to misery is compelling enough; others may want to fill in different characterizations of the relevant value. Alternatively, one can deny that accepting the given is valuable: then we are owed a different explanation of why conservatism ought not simply be abandoned.

With that said, I want to say something more on behalf of the broadly instrumentalist idea of accepting the given. It may seem that the instrumentalist point is basically shallow, where the idea of accepting the given is in Cohen's hands a very deep one. The appearance of shallowness lies in the association with simple consequentialism that I have invited. But the basic point can be cast in more complex consequentialist as well as non-consequentialist guises. Further, even in the simple form it is not a shallow point at all.

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[13] There is some textual evidence for this interpretation. Recall the "Gethsemane idea" with which Cohen opens his essay: "The motif is abandonment of striving, *of seeking a better state,* and instead going with the flow, as do the lilies of the field, *which are at peace with the world, and therefore with themselves*" (Cohen 2012: 203). Further, failing to accept anything as given "both violates intrinsic value *and contradicts our own spiritual requirements*" (207). The phrases that I have italicized indicate a connection with achieving some form of contentment, apparently construed as a psychological state.

[14] This seems to be Cohen's main line, illustrated by his example of a man slowly replacing his "fleshly parts" with artificial ones (2012: 208).

If one is a suitably pluralistic consequentialist, then it may be thought that an appropriate deference to the given is intrinsically valuable in itself. I mean to say that the *disposition* to form attachments is valuable. This is because the alternative figure of the person who accepts nothing as given, and is therefore willing to overturn anything in pursuit of new value, seems in this regard *bad*. They manifest a lack of a certain important virtue, and this lack is bad in itself. This may obviously be translated into non-consequentialist grounds as well: whatever the precise grounds are, we may just as well say that there is a *duty* to accept the given.

With that said, even the simplest model, in which we should accept the given because doing so is necessary for personal contentment and happiness, bears on a deep challenge of human life. The challenge is that the reasons for accepting the given must be self-effacing: it would not do to *consciously* pass up improvements because "well, I'll make myself unhappy if I don't accept the given enough..." This would imply making the relevant value comparisons, and then weighing them against the value of accepting the given. But much of the value of accepting the given lies in not making the comparisons at all.[15] On the other hand, if conservatism is to be a defeasible disposition (and, like Cohen and others, I have said little about how *strong* it should be), there are many comparisons that we must make. Conservatism must be unreflective and yet operate within moral boundaries. A psychological stance that manages this seeming paradox is no small matter. (At least philosophically speaking. In practice, we do it all the time.)

This discussion prompts a possible objection to the basic role of accepting the given. Conservatism is a *bias*, which inclines us to favor a familiar valuable to some extent over an unfamiliar valuable. This could be modeled as a kind of multiplier — a conservative treats a familiar thing as 1.2x as valuable as it objectively is. (An extreme, and thus indefensible, conservative treats familiar things as 3x as valuable, or whatever.) But taking something as given seems to imply a categorical refusal not to

[15] I will give a more precise characterization of how this might work in the next paragraph. I do not think that the value of accepting the given is *entirely* vitiated by making the value comparison. In some cases, it might be right to make the comparison, see that more value could be gained (or so it seems from my *current* reflective point of view) by overturning some aspect of my life plan, and then explicitly rejecting a life that consists in pursuing value in this manner.

evaluate certain things at all, rather than simply favoring them somewhat in the evaluation.[16] There are a couple possible responses. One is that we generally have limited capacity to deliberate on what is most valuable, and therefore tend to only deliberate on "close calls." A conservative bias will move many decisions outside the scope of deliberation; and, once deliberation begins, the conservative bias will still tip the scales. Alternatively, we could model the conservative bias directly in terms of the propensity to initiate deliberation: say, we need to suffer a certain degree of harm before we will deliberate on a certain matter, and the more conservative I am, the higher my non-deliberative pain tolerance is. This would more directly capture the idea of accepting some things as given. Both of these models suggest what any account of conservatism must hold: that we should not take anything as *truly* given, at least not anything that is (or could be) changeable, because we should not pass up very large improvements.

The proposal, then, is that attachment is a way of representing the tendency to take many aspects of life as given. This tendency to attachment is virtuous in many cases, but clearly not in all cases. As just described, we can be excessively conservative regarding something of genuine value. We can also become attached to things of neutral or negative value. I have already discussed the case of attachment to things of neutral value, and suggested removing any sharp distinction between particular and personal value. A further benefit of the attachment approach is that it applies equally well to the conservative disposition to maintain bad things. It is odd to hold, as Cohen does, that conservatism *per se* only applies to things that are in fact valuable.[17] Someone who is attached to a bad state of affairs — say, an unjust law or system of laws or public policies — is clearly displaying conservatism. It simply is an indefensible instance or application of conservatism.

I would make a further claim as well. The harm that occurs when an attachment is severed is a morally significant harm, even when the severing is a requirement of justice. This raises important issues involving transitional justice and legitimate expectations.[18] But attending to the moral justification for conservatism pays dividends here. Taking *bad* things as given is an unjustified

[16] Cohen is very clear, however, that his idea of conservatism is a defeasible one (208-9).

[17] Cohen 2012: 204. Scheffler's view only requires a valuing *belief*, and is in this regard an improvement. But it seems to me that one could still be meaningfully attached to something even while holding the belief that it is bad.

[18] Some of these are recently discussed in Quigley 2023.

disposition: to the (imperfect) extent that we can be expected to only form attachments to valuable things, attachments to bad things are grounds for moral criticism. However, there are likely many cases where the demands of justice simply change over time.[19] Say justice demands, or is at least compatible with, a certain social form — say, suburban housing developments. People naturally form attachments to their ways of life. Then the demands of justice change: it turns out that suburban housing developments are bad (stipulatively — but also in truth) for distributive justice and for climate change. Many people will then have attachments to currently unjust patterns of life, without clearly having done anything wrong. Political conservatism, when it is bad, can therefore be understood as a combination of *excessive* conservatism, *unlucky* conservatism, and genuinely *mistaken* conservatism (when one culpably forms an attachment to something bad).[20] In this way, the attachment theory advances our analysis of conservatism writ large, in a way that other accounts of value conservatism are unable to do.

An interesting point, suggested by an anonymous referee, is that we might want our conservative dispositions to themselves be an object of a conservative bias. After all, they are a valuable thing. While some people might take the final step necessary on the attachment account and value their own conservatism, this seems to me a bridge too far. I explain and justify the conservative disposition ultimately in non-conservative reasons. I see this as a point in favor of the view, but this reflects the ultimately reductive nature of the account. An advantage of existential or object-affecting conservatisms, from a certain perspective not my own, is that they aim at a more basic account of value conservatism. Perhaps a more basic account of this kind would then itself yield a reason to conserve our dispositions toward attachment. An implication is that my account is, in principle, entirely compatible with it turning out that we should, after all, get rid of our own conservatism — that, as it were, we should not accept as given our own acceptance of the given. It is hard for me to imagine a case for either of the ideas that we could or should actually do this. But I think it is only appropriate that

[19] Buchanan 1975 discusses some related points.

[20] See Brennan and Hamlin 2004 and 2016 for further discussion of varieties of conservatism, some of which have application to political conservatism.

conservatism should not defend itself: we often have grounds to revise our degree of conservatism, and might at least intelligibly (but I think never actually) have grounds to dispense with it altogether. However, I leave open the possibility (mentioned above) that a different development of attachment conservatism might ground the importance of accepting the given in a different way, with different results.

6. Conclusion

Value conservatism is the thesis that there is some distinctive reason to preserve valuable things even when a (somewhat) more valuable thing might be created by their destruction. I have argued for an account that unifies the three threads of Cohen's original discussion of value conservatism. In short, we become psychologically attached to valuable things that make up part of our lives; the same holds true, interestingly, with things of relatively neutral value. Severing attachments is painful. This yields a reason to favor an object that someone is attached to over an object that no one is attached to. But this is only part of a theory of conservatism: we also need to know why such conservatism is *justified*. I argue that Cohen's idea of "accepting the given" can be straightforwardly read to yield such a justification: it is certainly instrumentally and plausibly intrinsically valuable to maintain some moderate disposition to accept what one already has. This attachment-based account of conservatism has several interesting features. First, it gives conservatism a broader and more ecumenical character than any of the existing theories. Second, it satisfies the intuition that there should be some conservative impulse to *restore* past valuables, but that this impulse should fade over time. Third, it helps articulate the sense in which conservatism is often excessive: it is correct to accept the given to some degree, but not to be resigned to the present or stuck in the past. Fourth, the broadly conservative disposition can, surprisingly, apply in special cases to objects that have never existed. Fifth, due to the previous features, there is in the last analysis no conflict between conservatism and value maximization: severing attachments is of disvalue, and the disposition to form attachments is itself valuable, so it is appropriate to factor in the value and disvalue of our attachments in the final analysis.

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