

The Future of Conservatism

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1 Introduction

I've got 15 minutes to talk about the future of conservatism, so all I can do is present one part of that future in bold strokes.

Conservatism has big problems today. When you've got big problems you should look at basics, so I'll discuss basic issues. That means the discussion may get a bit abstract. I can't help it, so bear with me.

My argument will be as follows. It starts with a couple of definitions.

1. **Political modernity** is the application to social life of the modern understanding of reason, which has become technological reason.
2. **Conservatism** is opposition to the direction set by political modernity. That opposition is due to attachments to goods political modernity destroys—family; religion; locality; inherited habits, loyalties and moralities; particular community and culture.
3. It follows that conservatism is resistance to the modern understanding of reason: either resistance to reason, or acceptance of an understanding of reason that is different from the modern understanding.
4. Resistance to reason is defensive and short-term. It can't stand up to sustained attack. It doesn't tell us what to do or where to go.
5. The future of conservatism, at the level of basic principle, must therefore lie in the articulation and application of some non-modern understanding of reason. That non-modern understanding, I will claim, must have a religious aspect.

2 Modern reason

All of which calls for explanation.

2.1 Reason

“Reason” is the way we come to reliable conclusions about what’s real, what’s admirable, and what we should do; that is, about the true, the beautiful and the good.

Modern thought likes conclusions that are clear, demonstrable, and to the point. So it’s drawn toward scientific materialism, which tells us that everything worth thinking about can be understood based on simple concepts and clear demonstrations, and which is closely bound to experience and action. It’s hard to bring principles into public discussion that critically-minded participants aren’t willing to accept, so scientific materialism now functions as our public orthodoxy.

2.2 Scientific materialism

Scientific materialism, like any general theory of things, tells us what’s real, what we can know, and what we should do.

1. What’s real is atoms and the void, or whatever the current version is—wave functions and space-time maybe.
2. What we can know is what we can observe and describe numerically, together with theories that enable us to make predictions.
3. What we should do is use our theories to get what we want.

2.3 Contemporary liberalism

Contemporary liberalism develops the ethical implications of that understanding:

1. The point of politics and morality, like the point of rational action generally, is to get what we want.

2. It's the simple fact that something is desired that makes it good, and each of us equally makes things good by his desires. It follows that all satisfactions of desire are equally goods, and each one of us has equal claim to satisfaction.
3. The standard for morality and politics must therefore be maximum equal preference satisfaction. Give everyone what he wants, as much and as equally as possible. That's the rational way to treat goods as goods in accordance with their goodness and persons as persons in accordance with their dignity.
4. Further, that standard should be applied in accordance with reason, which means that procedures and justifications have to be explicit and demonstrable based on the foregoing theory of what's real, good and just.

Accordingly:

- (a) Experts and markets rule. They give clear rational answers, through clear rational procedures. In concept expertise should trump markets, because it's more clearly rational, but in practice it's a bit of each and the balance shifts.
- (b) Nothing's sacred, except the ego and its desires. If the goal is getting what we want, then everything's a resource to be used to maximize satisfactions. Physical objects, social arrangements, moral understandings, even human nature and the human body have no essence that has to be respected.
- (c) Informal nonrationalized arrangements like historical community, particular culture, and the family, that mostly run themselves in their own way, and can't be supervised and controlled from above by neutral experts, can't be allowed to affect social life. They're irrational and at odds with the system of universal equal freedom to which liberalism aspires. They must be suppressed.

2.4 Relativism radicalized

So far I've presented modernity as bright and hard-edged. It rejects transcendence, so it wants everything to be clear, distinct, demonstrable, and

controllable.

But what about the warm and fuzzy aspects of contemporary liberal thought? The answer is that they're not what they seem.

1. Some, like celebrating diversity, eliminate the authority of particular informal cultural standards and so make it impossible for informal institutions to function.
2. Others, like the concentration on feelings, turn substantive goods into private valuations public life can't deal with. Public life therefore comes to deal solely with formal values such as efficiency and equality.
3. Still others, like Gaia worship, substitute for traditional attachments and consolations, and so make the modern world more habitable. As a practical matter though they promote technocracy. Environmentalism provides an example. It tells us that it's Green and organic to have global centralized bureaucratic control over everything.

You should note that postmodern skepticism does not act equally. Scientific demonstration resists it better than common sense. So its overall effect is to destroy the ability of non-experts to criticize what's done in their name and supposedly on their behalf. The result is to make the liberal state ever more absolute.

3 What's wrong with political modernity?

Time is short, and we're all conservatives, so I'll just say it doesn't work in the long run. You can't formalize things that much. Human life runs mostly by implicit knowledge (otherwise known as habit and prejudice). Also, social organization depends on informal ties that are irrational from the modern point of view. If loyalty is treated as a personal taste or a means to an end, which is what count as rational motivation in political modernity, it's just not loyalty. Political modernity takes time to transform inherited ways, but as the process approaches completion society becomes less and less functional.

4 Bad responses

So modern tendencies of thought have deficiencies that make them destructive if left to their own devices. What do we do about it?

4.1 Pure opposition

There's the inarticulate "I just don't like the way things are going" approach. That takes two forms:

1. *Things were better the way they used to be.*
2. *Thus far and no farther.*

Neither is going to stand up.

4.2 Attempted compromise

Something more principled is needed. Many conservatives therefore adopt what might be called the **neo-conservative** or **moderate modernist** approach:

1. They accept the modern understanding of reason—practical reason as maximum equal preference satisfaction—as a general thing.
2. They note that a system based on self-interested means-ends rationality can't be counted on.
3. They conclude that we've got to stick in a little prerational loyalty somewhere to prop it up.

That doesn't work either. From a liberal standpoint prerational loyalty is simply irrational, and a rational agent can't choose irrationality as his habitual way of supporting his own system of action.

5 Which way lies hope?

Rejection of reason doesn't work. Nor does mitigated acceptance of the modernist version of what reason is.

What conservatism needs, then, is a non-modern understanding of reason—of what makes sense. Otherwise conservatives will always be playing defense, with no clear idea what the game is about.

So how do we articulate a different understanding of reason? That's a big question that I won't be able to answer completely today. We can start though by noticing some things lacking in modern reason with regard to the good, true and beautiful.

5.1 The good

As to the good, one thing lacking is what we might call moral essentialism. Rational action is not a simple matter of means and ends. To act rationally is also to act in accordance with what things are.

Loyalty, for example, is rational because it's a matter of acting in accordance with what I am. I'm loyal to my country and my family not simply because I happen to feel like it or to achieve some other goal but because I'm part of them and they are part of me. To be disloyal would deny and to some extent destroy myself. That would not be rational.

5.2 The true

As to the true, we need the transcendent. The modern outlook lacks a way of dealing with realities that we cannot fully grasp. Those realities include the moral essences I just mentioned and almost everything else we care about as human beings: for example, the good, beautiful and true.

If something's transcendent, though, how can we know enough about it to be useful?

5.2.1 Traditionalism

Edmund Burke suggests traditionalism as the way to take hold of things that can't otherwise be pinned down and made clear. In addition to what we can demonstrate right now, we can rely on the experience and perceptions of all the ages, as crystallized in the settled outlook of our own community.

Unfortunately, that's not enough. The approach depends on things being settled, and political modernity unsettles things. Taken straight, tradi-

tionalism reduces to the stand-pat view: stick with however things happen to be here and now.

5.2.2 Religion

We need a more definite reference point. So where do we get a reference point that's sufficiently independent of the *status quo* and enables us to orient our actions toward transcendent goods, truths and essences that we can't completely grasp?

Evidently from religion. You can pretty much define religion as a scheme of orientation toward goods and truths we can neither do without nor understand completely. The acceptance of such a scheme is what is called faith. The future of any conservatism worth bothering with must therefore have something to do with religion.

That claim of course raises lots of questions. What religion or religions can do the job? How can any religion that is definite enough to be worth bothering with get the public authority it needs? And is talk about religion "doing a job" futile because religion can't be treated as a means to an end?

Those are topics to explore at great length. In brief, though, my own answer would be that

1. There are indeed religions that would work, for example Roman Catholicism.
2. Whatever can deal with a fundamental problem that's not going away is likely eventually, somehow or other, to gain influence.
3. Discussion of ultimate issues has to start where we are and with the problems we are facing. Where the discussion ends up, of course, is likely to be quite different.

5.3 The beautiful

As to the beautiful, we should take it seriously. Beauty is one thing modernity can't give us at all. In principle, it should be a great point in favor of conservatism.

The point of beauty, after all, is to be exactly what it is. It's irreducibly non-technological. That makes it useful for debunking utility. It demon-

strates that what matters most can be recognized, but not demonstrated. And it shows that what we love is not simply what we desire.

For such reasons a conservatism that doesn't take beauty seriously is rejecting something essential to its own life. It's just another faction or ideology. It's useless. Burke said that a social order has to have something in it that inspires love. He was right.