

Divergent Sources of Conservatism

Thomas Short

IS CONSERVATISM UNGROUNDED absent religious faith? The question presupposes a distinction between conservative views or sentiments, on the one hand, and their ground—either source or justification—on the other. Source and justification may be the same; but a source can be cited in justification only if it is known, and we can possess sentiments without knowing their source. We can be confident that they are grounded, or act in the faith that they are grounded, and yet not know what, exactly, that ground is. I maintain that this condition, of possessing sentiments while being unsure of their ground, is characteristic of conservatism and constitutes its strength, not its weakness.

We can identify some ancient and medieval thinkers as conservative, *e.g.*, Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, but they did not think of themselves as conservative: they applied no word to their views that could be translated by “conservative.” That word was first applied, by his disciples, to Edmund Burke’s reaction to the radicalism of the French Revolution. Burke’s reaction might be explained by the views and attitudes he expressed in writings, and in political speeches and actions, prior to his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. But it is

the latter that showed those to be conservative. Beliefs are identifiably conservative only as they are opposed or opposable to radicalism. And radicalism can be traced back only so far: to Rousseau or, I would say, to Descartes, or, some would say, to William of Ockham. If we identify Aristotle’s or St. Thomas’s ideas as conservative, it is because they can be used to justify those sentiments which radicalism outrages.

Radicalism begins with the assertion that, out of the power of our own minds, we can come up with a plan for the future that is superior to all contrary beliefs about what is good or prudent or just, however much these latter may be sanctioned by tradition or experience or religion. Radicalism, therefore, must outrage sentiments rooted in the past: it must outrage common sense and common decency. I suggest that there is nothing distinguishing conservatism from common sense and common decency except for the fact that these latter qualities may be retained unreflectively, whereas the conservative retains them in the face of radical challenge. It is in defending sense and decency from radical onslaught that the conservative seeks for grounds, if he does not already consciously possess them, by which to justify those sentiments or—a quite different approach—by which to justify relying on traditional sentiments even if their grounds are not known.

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It follows that conservatism is an intellectual movement and that it is in that respect on a par with radicalism. But it is more sophisticated than is radicalism, for the simple reason that it is in the first place a critique of radicalism's presumptions. Now, such a critique cannot very well proceed by way of deduction from metaphysical axioms, as some have suggested, or from other axioms, since that is the mode in which radical thinkers proceed. It would serve only to oppose one set of abstractions to another, convincing none who needs convincing. Besides, axioms are not where discussion properly begins; they are where it ends. In *The Republic*, VII, Plato described an education that ascends from sensuous particulars to abstract principles but is then capped by a dialectic in which some of these principles are established, as axioms, by showing how they and their consequences fit together in an intelligible whole whilst alternative principles result in no such coherence.

The crucial question is, what is to be included within that coherence? Radicals tend to be satisfied with a logical consistency of abstract principles. By contrast, Socrates's dialectical practice demanded a coherence embracing genuine convictions about how one should act in particular situations. If one's theory (or one's action) does not square with one's real sentiments, it is usually the former that must be modified, not the latter. (*Usually*: for a sentiment can be shown to be false or to be in need of qualification when it fails to cohere with our other sentiments and well-founded ideas.) This approach is conservative because it is relatively concrete, and takes what we already believe seriously, and is therefore opposable to radical thought.

Take the case of Peter Singer, Princeton University's recent notorious appointment to a chair in ethics. From utilitarian premises, Singer deduces the justifiability of infanticide, in certain circum-

stances, and the equal right of animals not to be caused pain. Do not these conclusions discredit those premises? Is not clinging to one's premises regardless of such implications precisely what we call unwise? The frequently noted fact that Singer made an exception to one of his harsher principles for the sake of his mother shows that, whatever the logical consistency of utilitarianism, it fails the deeper test of coherence: it is not a doctrine a sane man is willing to live by. Singer's inconsistency shows that he is not as bad a man as his theory is a theory. My point is that one does not have to explain filial obligation in order to arrive at this conclusion. One does not have to justify one's belief in filial obligation. The burden of proof is on him who would deny it, and his citing abstract axioms is not enough to carry that burden.

Argument from historical example also appeals to sentiments, whether or not their grounds are evident, and has done so with some success. That each past or present communist regime began with a bloodthirsty tyranny, and went downhill from there, has turned millions away from communism, including millions who were communists. The rationalizations of communism's crimes wore thin, independently of any theoretical refutation of them. The failure of centralized economic planning also tells its own story, independently of F. A. Hayek's compelling analysis of why it has to fail. But in showing so much, history and experience have shown more: they have shown that they are better instructors, regarding practical matters, than is unaided reason. We trust the lessons of experience over reliance on reason, because it has been our experience that those who have reasoned their way to moral and political conclusions have been responsible for the worst of evils. Conservatives believe that history teaches by example; and that is exemplified first of all in the way that most of us have come to our

conservatism.

But, being thus taught to rely on tradition even without knowing its grounds, we will naturally seek grounds on which to explain and justify, refine and elaborate, our conservative beliefs, both for our own satisfaction and the better to persuade others. (It is, I hope, plain that I am not denying that beliefs or sentiments are true only if grounded. I am only urging that we can be more certain of traditional beliefs and sentiments than we are of what we think grounds them.) As it happens, different such grounds are plausible, and their differences make a difference to how they shape our beliefs. That is why we can disagree so much among ourselves. The various religious faiths are among those alternative grounds.

Notice, however, that the logical situation is not simple and one-directional. Our beliefs are altered and strengthened in being grounded, but hypotheses about grounds are adopted partly on the basis that they do ground our ordinary moral sentiments. Ideas of grounds are grounded on what they ground. This is true, to a degree, even of religious grounds. Jesus Himself said of false prophets that "Ye shall know them by their fruits." False prophets produce such bitter fruits as suicide cults. The fruits are moral or immoral, as judged by sentiments one already possesses, before he has distinguished the true from the false prophet. What Jesus said, therefore, was conservative: He took existing beliefs seriously and made them a test of true religion. That does not diminish, even a little, the sources of religious faith in miracle, scripture, the rituals in which one has been raised, and mystical experience. Nor does it preclude the power of revelation to deepen and refine the pre-existing morality. But if, for example, we are taught to substitute a morality of forgiveness for a morality of vengeance, that is in the context of holding firm to already existing notions that murder and cruelty

are wrong, kindness to one's brethren right; the kindness is merely being extended.

Conservatism, as I have been portraying it, is especially receptive to being grounded on religious faith, for several reasons. As it argues the insufficiency of human reason to penetrate the mysteries of human existence, it cannot reject religious faith out of hand; it counsels the need for one sort of faith or another in any case. And religious faith tends to preserve that sense of mystery, even while it claims for moral principles a transcendental ground. Furthermore, religions present their moralities in imagery and through parable and example and ritual, thus retaining conservatism's concreteness. Finally, the traditional religions, and the moral visions they embody, have withstood the conservatives' test of time, even when they explain moral principles as being grounded in an historical moment of revelation, revolutionary in its time. There is no denying the power of religious faith, and this makes it the most effective defense of conservatism. There is, alas, one drawback: you have to have the faith, first. You cannot adopt it merely because it will provide your views their most effective ground.

A secular grounding of conservatism requires a use of reason more modest than the radicals'—*e.g.*, reasoning that begins with our ordinary moral judgments, *à la* Socrates, or with observation of things in their first growth and origin, *à la* Aristotle. It will be objected that modern science, being materialist and mechanist, precludes any secular grounding of conservative tenets. I mean such tenets as respect for individual life and freedom, that freedom entails self-restraint, and that an individual has obligations to society. It will be said that modern science forces us either to drop such ideas, as inconsistent with a materialist and mechanist concept of human nature, or to adopt a faith that transcends scientific rationality. We have either to reject

science or to reject conservatism.

But that is a mistake. Modern science is not a monolithic doctrine; it is not a metaphysical system; it does not demand either belief or disbelief. It is a network of specialist inquiries continually altered by new discoveries. The meanings of “matter” and “mechanics” in contemporary physics, for example, have a tenuous relation to their meanings in early modern science, and further inquiry will likely further strain those already antiquated words. Nor is there anything in the idea of science that requires us to adopt a social science that reduces human nature to the merely animal, much less to the merely physical. Reduction of the whole to its parts is but one alternative method; it is not an article of faith to which all communicants of the Church of Science must subscribe. It is quite possible, then, for us to develop, on wholly secular grounds, a nonreductive theory of human nature within which traditional views of the dignity of man, the value of the individual and his freedom, and so on are intelligible. In particular, it would seem to be a matter of fact, confirmed by any number of separate strands of in-

quiry, that man is essentially a social animal; hence we may suppose a range of virtues and corresponding vices that distinguish man from other animals, as in certain doctrines of natural right.

The strength of conservatism, at least on the account of it I have been giving here, is its humility and concreteness, its holding close to the facts and to the well-tried in their specific detail and variety, whether or not those facts and traditional sentiments are thoroughly understood and explained. For they are the sharp rocks or sunken reefs on which radical theories come to grief. Deep familiarity with the concrete produces prudence and political wisdom. Grounding is superadded. We can try to explain and justify this conservative adherence to the concrete on various grounds. We can also try, in various ways, to ground and systematize specific sentiments. All this variety of grounding makes for somewhat different conservatisms, and hence for intellectual liveliness. But among conservatives there will be a large measure of agreement on practical issues, even when we draw our inspiration and confidence from divergent sources.

The Exigence of Transcendence in a Postmodern Age

Stephen L. Tanner

THE ISSUES IN THE DEBATE between theistic and nontheistic conservatism are articu-

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lated most distinctly for me in the warm and mutually stimulating friendship of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, two giants of conservative thought in America during the first third of the twentieth century. These men met as graduate stu-