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Analytic Conservatism

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We propose an analytic account of dispositional conservatism that attempts to uncover a foundation of what is often taken to be an anti-foundationalist position. We identify a bias in favour of the status quo as a key component of the conservative disposition and address the question of the justification of such a conservative disposition, and the circumstances in which the widespread adoption of such a disposition might be normatively desirable. Our analysis builds on a structural link between the economist's traditional emphasis on questions of feasibility and the conservative's attachment to the status quo.

Our aim in this article is to identify, explicate and analyse what we take to be an important and defining aspect of conservatism. Our general line of approach might be summarized in terms of addressing a sequence of four questions: is conservatism usefully understood in dispositional terms; if so, what is the content of the conservative disposition; what, if anything, justifies the conservative disposition; and, finally, under what conditions would it be normatively desirable if the conservative disposition were widely shared? Unsurprisingly, we will answer the first of these questions in the affirmative, with the proviso that we do not intend our identification of a dispositional aspect of conservatism to exhaust the definition of conservatism. The conservative disposition, we suggest, locates just one element of conservatism – although we think it a key element. Our answer to the second question is to specify a bias in favour of the status quo as a (possibly, the) key element within the conservative disposition. Our answers to these two questions are largely stipulative. The next section provides some discussion of the nature of the dispositional conservatism that we have in mind. We hope to convince the reader that our starting point is reasonable, but we recognize that we are emphasizing one aspect of conservatism, and one element of the conservative disposition.

Our discussion of the third and fourth questions is intended to be more 'analytic' and, before proceeding, we should comment on the 'analytic' element of our title. In part this reflects nothing more (or less) than our intention to analyse conservatism as a political philosophy. Contemporary political philosophy has over the last thirty years become so 'analytic' that it is increasingly difficult for a political philosophy to count as political philosophy unless it can be rendered in appropriately analytic terms.[1] This requirement is

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[1] Conservatism might seem to be a poor relation in the contemporary political theory literature, partly because it presents less as an analytic theory and more as a kind of mystique. For example, there is no discussion of conservatism in Raymond Plant, *Modern Political Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). For a discussion of conservative ideology that raises the contrast between conservatism as ideology and conservatism as disposition, see Anthony Quinton, 'Conservatism', in Robert Goodin and Philip Pettit, eds, *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 244–68. See also Samuel P. Huntington, 'Conservatism as an Ideology', *American Political Science Review*, 51 (1957), 454–73; Noel O'Sullivan, *Conservatism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976); Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (London: Penguin, 1980); Ted Honderich, *Conservatism* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990).

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a challenge particularly to conservatism, because its traditions are not generally thought conducive to analytic treatment. We will discuss later the view that conservatism involves an anti-foundationalism that renders it beyond the reach of analysis. At this point, we merely note that we think that conservatism, as depicted and analysed here, is worth taking seriously as a political philosophy – that it adds something significant to the political philosophy landscape. We also think, perhaps more controversially, that the analytic methods of economics provide the right kind of means to articulate conservatism in its 'analytic' mode – or, perhaps more aptly, to uncover its analytic bones.

DISPOSITIONAL CONSERVATISM

Conservatism, as understood here, is a disposition that grants the status quo a normative authority by virtue of its being the status quo. This definition specifies not only a dispositional approach to conservatism, but also a key element in the content of the conservative disposition – a status quo bias. We wish to make two points in clarification of this definition before supporting it in more detail.

The first clarification is to emphasize what the definition is not. Specifically, conservatism as defined here is to be distinguished from the policies and ideological positions adopted by political parties who happen to bear the label 'conservative'. The term 'conservative' has come to be most commonly interpreted in terms of the simplest form of the left–right ideological spectrum.[2] Anything that is not of the 'left' is often enough described as 'conservative'; and, in particular, parties which may be quite radical in promoting, say, free market policies and associated ideological platforms are widely referred to as 'conservative' parties, in both American and European (including British) settings. We distance ourselves quite explicitly from that usage. Conservatism as we understand it here is not classical liberalism; nor is it libertarianism of either the 'natural rights' or quasi-utilitarian variant; and nor is it necessarily of the political 'right' in any simple sense. It is simply the explicit recognition of the normative status of the status quo – whatever that status quo might be.

Our second point of clarification relates to an alternative rendering of conservatism that relates to what is certainly a common theme in much conservative literature – scepticism or anti-foundationalism. This scepticism includes a general distrust of human nature, including a distrust of human reason and ideas, and so provides a sweeping critique of any attempt to provide foundational principles for politics. Conservatism, on this reading, places special value on the emergent properties of the social order, not on the basis of some normative political argument, but out of a profound distrust of all such arguments.

As O'Hear puts it:

> The conservative position is one that is better unarticulated not, as its opponents might insist, because it is intellectually threadbare, but because its preference is for the harmony which arises from an unquestioning and untroubled acceptance of a settled way of doing things. In making articulate what is better left unsaid, conservatism is, from its own point of view, in danger of lapsing into ideology, into the erection of principle and dogma over practice and habit.[3]

[2] Freidrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) makes the same point in his well-known piece on 'Why I am not a Conservative'. The situation can scarcely be said to have improved over the intervening years.

[3] Anthony O'Hear, 'Conservatism', in Edward Craig, ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998), section 1.

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Of course, the extreme view of conservatism as 'unspoken wisdom' threatens to remove conservatism from the agenda of political theorizing altogether. Such a view seems to insist on seeing conservatism as an approach to politics that must be accepted and lived, rather than analysed or understood. Unsurprisingly, we reject this view, but we do think it requires some response.

We recognize that foundationalist and justificatory exercises of all kinds are anathema to many conservatives, and particularly when what is at stake is conservatism itself. But the proof of the pudding here ought to be in the eating. It may be that an analysis of conservatism fails to capture crucial elements of the relevant argument. But that should not be decided on *a priori* grounds. Not all conservatives, moreover, are utterly opposed to the kind of analysis we shall pursue. Oakeshott, for example, opens his essay 'On being conservative' by saying:

> The common belief that it is impossible (or if not impossible, then so unpromising as to be not worth while attempting) to elicit explanatory general principles from what is recognised to be conservative conduct is not one that I share. It may be true that conservative conduct does not readily provoke articulation in the idiom of general ideas and that consequently there has been a certain reluctance to undertake this kind of elucidation; but it is not to be presumed that conservative conduct is less eligible than any other for this sort of interpretation, for what it is worth.[4]

It is noteworthy that this 'general articulation' is not the task that Oakeshott himself pursues. He turns rather to a general description of the conservative disposition, implying thereby that conservatives are, after all, more at home in the world of moods and feelings than in the world of analysis. Certainly he suggests that conservatism is more to be grounded in the psyche – in attitudes that mere description might be taken to justify – than in facts about the way the world works. Still, Oakeshott leaves open the possibility of a more general analytic treatment that addresses both the question of what the conservative disposition is and the question of how it might be explained and justified. Nor, we take it, would he rule out the further questions as to why it would be a good thing if everyone were to cultivate that disposition. These are the questions we want to explore, using arguments and reasoning that will be, if not familiar generally, at least familiar to those working broadly in the tradition of rational actor social and political theory.

Turning now to explicating and supporting our definition, we note that conservatism is unusual – though not unique – among political philosophical positions in that it is not characterized by the end it promotes. Most political philosophies are so characterized: egalitarianism specifies equality as the end to be promoted, liberalism specifies liberty, utilitarianism specifies utility, and so on. Conservatism, as considered here, focuses on a different dimension of political philosophy – not the end sought, but the 'posture' or 'temper' adopted towards that end, whatever it is.[5] On this view, conservatism is consistent with a variety of end-defined political positions. Its use is perhaps best thought of adjectivally. So, one might be a conservative utilitarian, or a conservative liberal. There will be some qualities that all positions so described will share – namely their conservative 'posture' towards the particular end sought. And those for whom this 'posture' is especially significant may have more in common with other conservatives than with those non-conservatives with whom they share the particular end in question.

[4] Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics, and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), p.407.

[5] Huntington, 'Conservatism as an Ideology' refers to conservatism as a 'positional' ideology, somewhat in the same spirit as our 'posture'; the conservative 'temper' is discussed by O'Hear, 'Conservatism'.

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Given this interpretation, conservatism is most obviously to be linked with pragmatism,[6] and contrasted with radicalism and idealism. It is for this reason, perhaps, that conservatism is sometimes claimed not to be an ideology at all, but rather an anti-ideological position. But we think this an inadequate view. A more accurate way of rendering conservatism is as a partial specification of a political position. Conservatives will have some political end – some objective – in view. For conservatives, however, that end is only a part of the total picture – and, in the more extreme cases of conservatism, a relatively unimportant part. Under our formulation, a political philosophy is to be conceived in (at least) two dimensions: one specifying the ideal or political end sought, and the other specifying a posture with respect to that ideal. Conservatism insists on the significance of the 'posture' dimension. It insists, in particular, that more conventional, one-dimensional, ends-oriented political philosophies are themselves only partial specifications, ones in which an important dimension is left out of account. As we shall argue, this second, postural dimension can be usefully thought of as a representation of particular kinds of feasibility consideration; ones which idealists and radicals tend to ignore or relegate to second-order concern. As we shall also argue, attentiveness to feasibility considerations is a feature that conservatism shares with normative economics – at least with normative economics understood in an appropriately abstract way.

To summarize this point, we think of conservatism – and its relationship to other political philosophies – in terms of a two-dimensional grid, with political ends sought and political postures adopted defining the relevant dimensions of that grid. Table 1 illustrates.

The table serves to indicate the ideal that guides political decision making – the direction in which change is desirable, if change is desirable. But, for conservatives who recognize that the current state is not ideal, the questions of whether movement from the status quo is desirable and, if so, how much movement is appropriate, remain open questions. For the extreme idealist by contrast, the imperative is always to move towards the relevant ideal. Only the direction of movement counts – and in many variants only the achievement of the ideal itself receives any significant attention. Considerations may intervene to prevent the achievement of the ideal, even to inhibit any movement towards it. But these considerations are to be considered as unfortunate constraints or impediments, and not themselves as normatively grounded reasons.

This is not to say that all of the cells identified in Table 1 are equally likely to arise in practice; the identification of the two dimensions of 'end sought' and 'posture' merely

TABLE 1 *Political Ends and Postures on a Two-Dimensional Grid*

		End sought			
		Equality	Aggregate utility	…	Liberty
Posture	Idealist				
	…				
	Conservative				

[6] Indeed, pragmatism might in some ways be a more descriptive term if it had not been appropriated for other purposes by Richard Rorty and his followers.

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maps out the logical possibilities. It may be that the conservative posture is more likely to be associated with some ends than others (of the options explicitly identified the cases of the 'conservative libertarian' and the 'conservative utilitarian' may seem more familiar than the 'conservative egalitarian', though there is nothing inconsistent about the idea of a conservative egalitarian as we will illustrate below), and the nature and causes of these associations might benefit from further analysis. Nevertheless, we suggest that the initial separation of the two dimensions is a useful step in the direction of understanding the conservative disposition.

Note that this formulation certainly does not require the conservative to deny that change will sometimes be justified. The normative claims of the status quo have to be weighed against other normative claims. The conservative will recognize the existence of other normative claims, but will mediate those other claims through a status quo bias.

A simple specification of this notion might take the form indicated in Equation 1 below. Let $\{X_1 \ldots X_i \ldots X_n\}$ be the set of social states (which might be thought of as positions along a one-dimensional line). And let $V(X_i)$ be the normative value of social state i abstracting from any consideration of the status quo. Then introducing the possibility of a conservative status quo effect might be achieved by specifying:

$$W(X_i) = V(X_i) - a(X_s - X_i)^2 \ldots \quad (1)$$

Where $a > 0$,

X_s identifies the status quo,

and $W(X_i)$ is the overall, all-things-considered, value of social state i.

In this simple formulation, the value of a state decreases, other things equal, the further that state is removed from the status quo. If $a = 0$, there would be no status quo effect and only the value of each state *qua* state matters. This is the neutral case of the idealist whose valuations are independent of any consideration of the current state. The conservative insists that $a < 0$ so as to bias judgement towards the status quo; and clearly the higher the value of a, the more conservative the posture taken will be. By contrast, a true radical would be someone for whom $a < 0$, so that the status quo effect is negative, and change is seen to be an intrinsically good thing.

Note that we do not seek to define a conservative as one who operates explicitly with a normative valuation function similar to Equation 1. Rather we view Equation 1 as one possible 'reduced form' of conservatism. Equation 1, read literally, implies that there is no single 'Archimedean point' from which policy proposals may be evaluated – rather the valuation function is specific to the particular status quo. All policy proposals must be assessed 'from here' rather than from some abstract or impartial perspective. But we intend Equation 1 to illustrate the general idea of a status quo bias rather than to restrict the particular form of that bias. Indeed, a major part of our wider interest lies in exploring alternative interpretations and justifications of such a conservative posture. In this way, we seek to provide an examination of conservatism's constituent elements.

To the best of our knowledge, nothing remotely like the formulation in Equation 1 appears in the writings of the traditional conservative authors in the English tradition – say, Hume, Burke, Oakeshott and Hayek.[7] And, of course, to argue that our definition of the

[7] We characterize Hayek as a conservative despite his famous protestations to the contrary because he, as much as any recent writer, provides the sort of analytic foundation for a principled defence of the status quo of the type that we take to be characteristic of the conservative position.

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notion of conservatism connects in any real way with what those writers had in mind would require detailed exegesis of a kind that we certainly do not attempt here. There is a simple and obvious sense in which the etymology of 'conservatism' supports our definition. Conserving *Y* involves the retention of *Y*, where *Y* is some prevailing feature of the relevant landscape. But it might be a mistake to rely on ordinary language here: conservatism is a term of art in political theory and terms of art have a habit of taking on a life (and meaning) of their own. We accept, therefore, that we face an onus of proof in defending our definition – an onus that we cannot fully meet in this article.

THE ANALYTIC DIMENSION

What, more precisely, do we have in mind when we talk of *analytic* conservatism? Essentially, we have in mind the general approach to normative analysis that is characteristic of contemporary economics.[8] That approach has two salient elements: first, a strong separation between the 'positive' or 'feasibility' elements of normative reasoning and the 'ethical' or 'desirability' elements; and second a focus of analytic firepower predominantly on feasibility issues.[9] Consider these elements in turn. The first involves a conceptualization of normative social and political theory in terms of a confrontation between the feasible and the desirable – essentially analogous to the confrontation between feasible options and preferences in the standard economic analysis of individual rational choice. Just as the individual chooser scans the set of feasible alternative options and selects that which is most desirable, so the 'ethical observer' scans the set of feasible options (however precisely defined – perhaps in terms of policies, perhaps in terms of social states) and selects that which is most desirable on the basis of some particular ethical criterion. And just as the individual who does not accurately perceive the restrictions imposed by the set of feasible alternatives will make mistaken choices, so the ethical observer who does not fully appreciate the nature of the feasibility constraints will make mistaken judgements. In this sense, any normative scheme that fails to take feasibility seriously is seriously deficient.

The second element involves focusing attention primarily on the feasibility aspect of overall normative reasoning. At one level, this focusing of attention represents just a division of intellectual labour: let the moral philosophers specify the nature of the desirable as such (that is, understood in abstraction from any feasibility considerations), and leave the economists and social scientists to consider the nature of the feasible set. But such a division of labour is only a part of the story. The other – and the more interesting – part is that the focus on feasibility may limit the need for detailed abstract discussion of the desirable. The point here is just that feasibility constraints – properly understood and articulated – are often very tight, and by themselves serve to isolate and identify a very limited scope for choice. Faced with such limited choices, a fully developed account of desirability may not be required. Although, in principle, considerations of feasibility and desirability act together like the two blades of a pair of scissors in cutting through a normative question, it may be that, in practice, feasibility does most of the work.

[8] We recognize other forms of analysis – such as the conceptual analysis offered in some parts of political philosophy – and their value; we merely argue that this economic form of analysis has value here.

[9] A fuller account of the distinction between issues of feasibility and desirability is provided by Geoffrey Brennan, 'Disciplinary Contributions: Economics', in Robert Goodin and Philip Pettit, eds, *A Companion to Contemporary Political Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), pp. 123–56.

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In this sense, normative economics and conservatism each serve to separate normative reasoning into two parts, only one of which is directly concerned with specifying the ultimate end or objective, and each proceeds as if the precise details of the identified objective are of limited importance. This fact suggests that there may be a strong relationship between the economist's concern with feasibility and the conservative's status quo bias. The thought here is that taking feasibility seriously may influence the posture one adopts when considering political institutions and policies. This is, in any event, the claim we wish to interrogate: that taking feasibility seriously is a key idea that serves to justify the conservative disposition. Alternatively put, the primary reason for treating the status quo as if it had intrinsic normative authority is rooted in the way the world is, in a proper sense of the feasible. Recognizing this role of feasibility considerations, and trying to isolate those features of the world that give feasibility concerns their status quo orientation, is a key task that we set 'analytic conservatism'. As Muller puts it in the excellent introduction to his recent anthology: 'Combining the emphases on history and utility, the common denominator of conservative social and political analysis might be termed "historical utilitarianism".'[10]

We have said that our exercise promises two things: an account of conservatism that is intelligible to the analytically oriented; and the prospect of locating conservatism more centrally in contemporary political philosophy. It also offers a third, which is important to conservatism itself. The status quo contains many aspects, and many trends, within it. What, in this array, is to be conserved? If conservatism is grounded in a sensitivity to feasibility considerations, conservatives must be aware that not everything can be 'conserved' – that conservation of some things will imply the change, perhaps even the radical change, of others. And if some elements of the prevailing order are changing spontaneously, it is not even clear that it is coherent to attempt to conserve everything: the river inevitably moves on. What pieces of the status quo then contain the normative authority that the conservative claims? Where does this normative authority originate? And where, when trade-offs have to be made, should the conservative concentrate most energy? Answers to these questions are influenced, of course, by the 'end-specification' aspects of any complete normative scheme rather than the posture that is adopted. But part of the answer also lies in the rationale for the conservative posture itself. And uncovering that answer requires a certain amount of analysis.

To sharpen the question here, take a particular example. Consider the case of tariffs. Suppose there is a particular tariff regime in place. What should be the posture of a conservative in relation to possible changes in that tariff regime? One possibility might be that it is the pattern of domestic prices and, therefore industrial and commercial activities, that should be identified as the relevant aspect of the status quo to be retained. On this reading, the level of tariffs should change so as to smooth fluctuations in world prices or exchange rates and so minimize the effects on domestic industry. This is what we might term 'outcome conservatism'. A second possibility is that the level of tariffs itself should be seen as the relevant aspect of the status quo to be retained. A conservative might see himself to be committed to constant and therefore predictable policy regimes. Accordingly, he will stand against frequent fluctuations in policy that attempt to iron out the impact of events in the external world. Call this 'policy conservatism'. Finally, a conservative might take herself to be committed to the prevailing institutional order.

[10] Jerry Z. Muller, *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 7.

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Provided the tariff policy changes are determined through the prevailing institutional arrangements, say by majority voting after appropriate debate within a properly constituted representative assembly, then the conservative might see such changes as appropriate. This might be dubbed 'institutional conservatism'. These variants are clearly distinct. It may be, for example, that the greatest fear for the institutional conservative is that enthusiasm for conserving particular outcomes or particular policies (or, of course, for changing those outcomes or policies) might induce the enthusiast to ignore 'due process' or 'the proper channels'.

What are we to say about these three types of conservatism? Just that they are different types? Is there anything in the logic of conservative reasoning that would help settle the question, or at least show what the answer might depend on? Intuition might be a poor guide. Unpacking the logic of conservatism and exposing the presumptions on which it is based seem to be required if we are to provide a coherent answer to the question.

There are, in fact, a range of resources in economics that might be enrolled in this task – bits and pieces of argument, empirical presumption, understandings about the logic of social interaction that suggest themselves. In the present context, however, we shall focus on just one particular line of argument, dealing with why rational actors ought to take a 'risk-averse' posture in relation to policy choice. And why in general that risk-averse posture translates into the particular kind of conservatism we have identified.

THE ABUNDANCE OF IGNORANCE

It is a consistent theme in conservative writings that social processes are extremely complex and that much less is known about them than may seem to be the case. This is a part of the generally sceptical character of conservatism noted above. There are at least two separate elements at stake here – a claim about social complexity *per se*; and a claim about the incentives and dispositions of 'philosophers' and policy makers. Consider these in turn.

In modern times the emphasis on informational scarcity is most conspicuous perhaps in Hayek. But similar themes can be found in Hume and Burke and certainly in Oakeshott. One variant of the argument relates to the unintended consequences of human action, a theme familiar to economists since Adam Smith. It is a natural concomitant of an individualist methodology that the behaviour of many individual actors may create aggregate patterns that lie beyond the imagination, let alone the intention, of those actors. This is especially so if the actions of all contribute to the context in which each chooses, if there are complex and potentially cumulative interdependencies. As Pierson puts it, recognition of 'path dependence' involves acceptance of the possibility that: 'large consequences may result from relatively "small" or contingent events … These features stand in sharp contrast to prominent modes of argument and explanation in political science which attribute "large" outcomes to "large" causes.'[11]

Regardless of the accuracy of the claim that much of political science misreads the idea of path dependence, if large consequences can emerge from small events, then it is hardly to be wondered at that most participants have difficulty in recognizing which of the plethora of small events will have the large consequences, or what those consequences will be. Muller puts the point this way:

[11] Paul Pierson, 'Increasing Returns, Path Dependence and the Study of Politics', *American Political Science Review*, 94 (2000), 251–67, p. 251.

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Conservatives have often stressed the cognitive element of human imperfection, insisting upon the limits of knowledge, especially of the social and political world. They warn that society is too complex to lend itself to theoretical simplification and that this fact must temper all plans for institutional innovation. Such epistemological modesty may be based upon philosophical scepticism as in the case of Hume, or a religiously derived belief in the limits of human knowledge as in the case of Burke or de Maistre, or on some general sense of the fallibility of human knowledge, as in the case of Friedrich Hayek or Edward Banfield.[12]

Or consider Burke on questions of institutional design/reform:

> the real effects of moral causes are not always immediate, but that which in the first instance is prejudicial may be excellent in its remoter operation; and its excellence may arise even from the ill effects it produces at the beginning. The reverse also happens; and very plausible schemes with very pleasing commencements have often shameful and lamentable conclusions.[13]

In short, the kinds of issues relevant for policy and for the design of political institutions are complex and it is unreasonable to be confident about the consequences of particular policies and/or institutional reforms. There is, however, a further force in play here – namely, the clear and strong career incentives that encourage scholars and would-be reformers to pretend to a greater knowledge than they can reasonably claim. This additional force is gestured at in one form or another throughout the conservative literature: in Hume, in Burke (especially *The Reflections*), in Oakeshott on 'rationalism', in Hayek on 'constructivism', and so on. The conservative tradition has tended to be extremely sceptical about 'men of letters', and generally those who spin together long chains of reasoning to produce conclusions about the nature of the social order. In the conservative lexicon, 'academic' and 'intellectual' tend to be terms of abuse.

As public choice scholars, we would add to this picture the incentives that surround the expert employed in policy making/advising, and the political agents for whom that expert labours. In neither case will there be much incentive for doing little. Politicians have to stand for something; and they reveal much of what they stand for by the policies they adopt and promote. They have to invent policy platforms even if such platforms do not swell up within them. Furthermore, politics tends to attract persons with a desire to 'get things done', if not for the sake of those things in themselves then for the sake of the public standing of the politician. The judgement that they managed to avoid doing anything disastrous is not one that appeals to politicians. If 'fame is the spur of the noblest minds', as Madison claims, then action is the engine of fame, and those who aspire to fame had better do something that is seen to be fame-worthy. Whatever that action is, the aspirant will want a rhetorical defence that shows exactly why the action *is* fame-worthy. This is often where the expert adviser enters – to provide the *best* defence available for those things that politicians have already decided to do. To be sure, the adviser will occasionally be useful in urging politicians to drop a policy that is clearly defective and in promotion of which the politicians render themselves vulnerable to ridicule. But that is a service that can be over-performed. If you disparage every suggestion your politician employer makes, you will soon be scrutinizing the job ads.

In short, the nature of democratic political institutions encourages both activism and rhetorical defences that will rationalize such activism. Further, the content of those

[12] Muller, *Conservatism*, p. 11.
[13] Edmund Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', in Muller, *Conservatism*, p. 99.

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defences will often be influenced by the creative exploits of academic scribblers, men of letters, philosophers and other forms of low life, all apparently convinced by their own latest theories. And public discussion will be full of confident voices, none of whom are much inclined to confess to their own ignorance, or refrain from grossly simplifying matters that are extremely complex.

All of this makes it seem to the general observer that the experts are collectively much more knowledgeable about social phenomena than they actually are. In other words, conservatives have grounds not just for thinking that the relevant policy issues are complex as a matter of fact, but also for thinking that policy makers and their advisers have incentives to make things seem otherwise.

Of course, the abundance of ignorance could also be used to ground a much more radical posture towards politics. If uncertainty abounds, one seemingly reasonable response might be to experiment and so gather information. J. S. Mill's famous comments on the value of 'experiments in living' might be taken as a particularly clear statement of the radical approach to politics in the face of abundant ignorance. And even if one learned nothing by experiment, the fact that there are unintended consequences associated with policy/institutional change need be no cause for alarm: the unintended consequences might as well turn out to be benign as otherwise. So, it is clearly not the case that the simple fact of ignorance is sufficient to push us in the direction of a conservative posture. The abundance of ignorance is, we suggest, a necessary condition for conservatism, but we need more.

CONVEXITY, DIMENSIONS OF UNCERTAINTY AND THE STATUS QUO

Widespread ignorance about the workings of the social order may be distressing to one who values understanding for its own sake. But it does not in itself make a case for conservatism. Consequences of actions may be unintended and unanticipated but, if the resultant effects are broadly as likely to be positive as negative, then no direct normative conclusion follows. Indeed, if the consequences of policy or institutional changes are virtually unknowable, then even arguing from a patently false theory may not matter much. The games that policy advisers play may not do much (expected) good, but equally they will not do much (expected) harm. Or so it might seem. But, on reflection, economists at least are unlikely to think this is so. And this because there is, in the structure of the economic approach, a set of beliefs about the way the world lies that imply that flying blind is a bad bet.

We will break the discussion of this section into several steps. Initially we will explicate risk aversion and the asymmetry between gains and losses in the relatively familiar context of the economic model of policy where the relevant ethical end is essentially utilitarian, so as to illustrate the link between uncertainty about policy and the status quo bias in the simplest and most familiar possible setting. We will then generalize this argument to other normative settings[14] and introduce a further dimension of uncertainty – uncertainty about ends.

Economists routinely deal with an overall evaluative structure that is 'convex'. This convexity arises from two largely independent sources, one directly normative and one

[14] In a different context, we have discussed the relationship between risk aversion and the idea of resilience that forms a part of the republican ideal of liberty; this might be seen as a particular aspect of conservative liberalism (see Geoffrey Brennan and Alan Hamlin, 'Republican Liberty and Resilience', *The Monist*, 84 (2001), 45–59).

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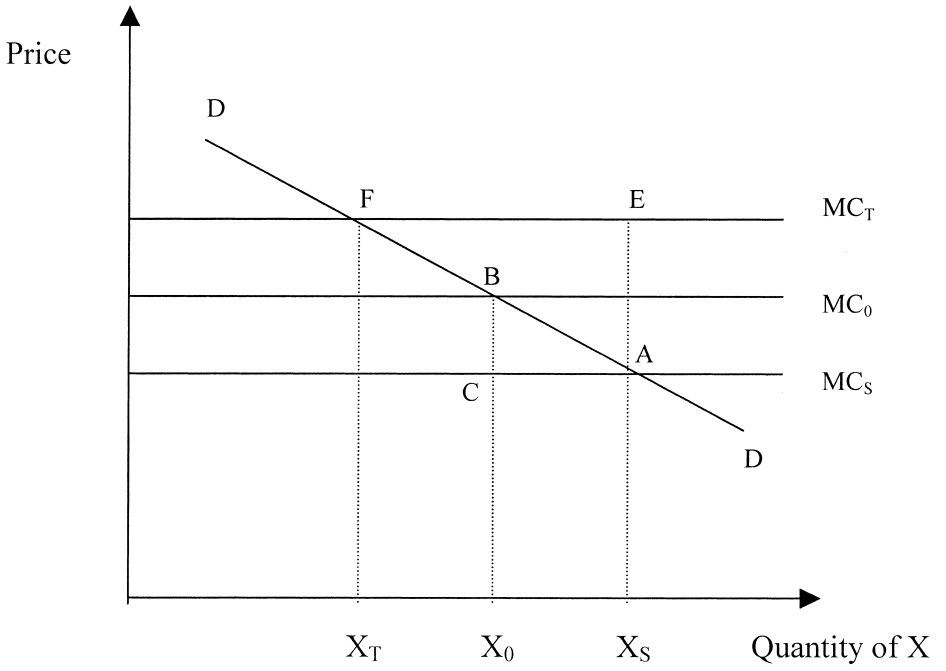


Fig. 1. Uncertainty and welfare losses

essentially descriptive but normatively significant. The substantive normative claim is that 'preference satisfaction' is a good thing and hence something to be maximized *ceteris paribus*. The descriptive claim is that individual preferences themselves are convex; that they exhibit generalized diminishing marginal utility. This means that as an agent is moved further and further from his or her ideal consumption bundle, the welfare losses endured by that agent increase at an increasing rate. In cases of this sort, the potential welfare losses from moving in the 'wrong' direction systematically exceed the potential gains from moving in the 'right' direction, so that there is an asymmetry between gains and losses.

A simple diagrammatic example makes the point in the context of a one-dimensional policy space. Figure 1 sets out a case in which the market demand for some commodity X is given by DD while the private marginal cost of supplying the commodity is MC_O. The private market equilibrium level of X output is therefore X_o. Now, suppose that there is a proposal that X output/consumption ought to be expanded, based on the belief that the private marginal cost MC_O overstates the true social marginal cost MC_S. If this proposal is well founded, the optimal level of output/consumption is X_S. But suppose that, in fact, the true social marginal cost may be either MC_T or MC_S, so that the truly optimal level of output/consumption might be either X_T or X_S, where X_T and X_S are symmetric around the status quo X_0. How should the proposal to expand output be viewed now? If the proposal happens to be well founded, the gain from shifting from X_0 to X_S will be the increase in consumer surplus shown as the area of the triangle ABC. However, if the proposal is ill founded, the cost of shifting from X_0 to X_S when the truly optimum level is X_T is shown by the area of the triangle AEF. The triangle AEF indicates the cost of producing the final $X_S - X_T$ units, measured at the true marginal cost of MC_T, less the benefit to consumers of consuming those units. AEF is clearly much larger than ABC. If MC_S and MC_T are

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roughly equally likely to be valid, then clearly the potential benefits of expanding output are outweighed by the potential losses. Indeed, even if MC_S were considerably more likely to be true, the potential losses will still outweigh the potential benefits.

And of course the same is true for any proposal to reduce output. So, even in the artificial case where we know (with certainty) that MC_0 is not the true value of social cost, providing that we are sufficiently uncertain as to whether the true value is higher or lower, the best policy will be to maintain the status quo.

The point here is simple enough. If citizens are risk averse, and policy makers recognize the normative relevance of that fact, then uncertainty about policy should imply a conservative approach in precisely the sense of a bias in favour of the status quo; and the greater the uncertainty, or the stronger the underlying risk aversion, the greater the status quo bias will be. But note two things about this simple point. First, the status quo bias is relative to a benchmark case that might be described in either of two ways: either the policy maker treats uncertainty in a manner that might seem to be actuarially/objectively fair but which takes no account of the actual risk aversion of citizens, or the citizens are actually risk neutral. In either of these specifications of the benchmark case, a policy should be adopted if and only if the expected value of the policy's impact on individuals is positive.[15] This criterion will accept some policies and reject others, giving a particular balance between the normatively grounded pressure for change and the status quo. Relative to that benchmark, the introduction or recognition of risk aversion will shift the balance towards the preservation of the status quo. It is in this sense that the introduction and recognition of risk aversion introduces an asymmetry into the evaluations and so introduces a status quo bias. And this bias will itself be normatively grounded given that it derives from accepting the normative relevance of descriptive facts concerning citizens.

Secondly, this conservative or status quo bias does not emerge from any risk aversion as such in the policy maker's own psyche. The convexity of preference is initially a descriptive claim about how the world is. And economists make that assumption because it seems to be true about the world and the individuals in it, not because of its particular normative implications. The convexity property of the overall normative evaluation flows from the combination of that descriptive assumption and the normative claim that individual preferences should be satisfied. One way of defending conservatism, then, is to defend the normative claim that preferences should be satisfied. Put another way, the abundance of ignorance and the recognition of risk aversion in the population gives the welfarist (i.e. one concerned with preference satisfaction) or utilitarian reason to be conservative. It explains why those in the utilitarian column of Table 1 ought to adopt a conservative posture. But we need to be a little more precise about the source of this conservatism, and the possibility of an alternative disposition.

Consider Figure 2. In this diagram, the horizontal axis depicts the relevant domain of substantive normative evaluation, whatever it may be. The vertical axis depicts a measure of value associated with each point in the domain, as determined by the relevant substantive normative theory. A theoretical ideal point is marked in the relevant domain of choice to indicate the particular choice that would maximize value. What is critical here, however, is how different positions in the choice domain are valued relative to the ideal point. For valuation to support a conservative view – a status quo bias of the type discussed above – the value function should be convex as illustrated, with value falling at an increasing rate

[15] We leave on one side the distributional question involved in the case where the impact is positive for some and negative for others. In that case inequality aversion plays the role of risk aversion discussed here.

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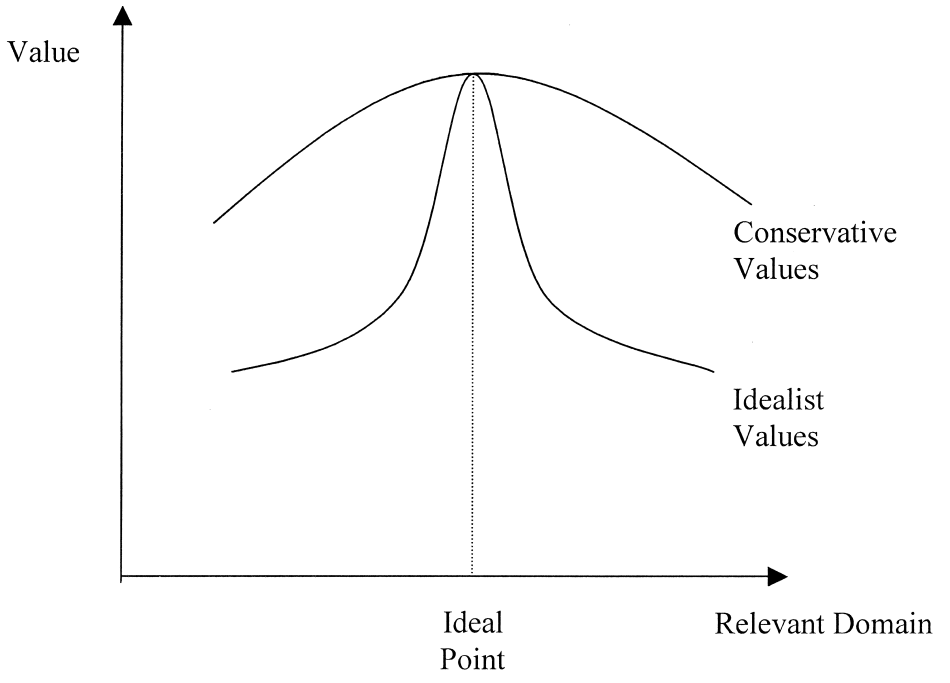


Fig. 2. Conservative and idealist value functions

as we move away from the ideal point. By contrast, we also illustrate what we might think of as an idealist value function that identifies exactly the same ideal point (so that there is no disagreement either about the relevant normative domain or about the specific nature of the ideal, or indeed about how valuable that ideal point is), but where the shape of the value function is very different with value falling at a decreasing rate as we move away from the ideal point. In the limiting case, the ideal point would be the only position that is valued at all, with all other positions having zero value. Under a more moderate idealist posture, positions other than the ideal are valued and ranked, but the structure of values is 'concave'. Note that, in fact the idealist and the conservative may have identical rankings of alternative positions – they may differ only in the relativities that lie behind those rankings.[16] For the idealist, the ideal point forms a kind of value cusp, with steep concave slopes on either side.

An idealist is essentially risk-loving with respect to the achievement of the ideal. If there is some chance that a policy or institutional change will achieve the ideal, that fact will tend to be decisive; down-side risks are relatively unimportant because they simply involve the second-order comparison of points (including the status quo) all of which are non-ideal. In idealist cases, a roughly fifty-fifty chance of moving along the relevant evaluative domain in the right or wrong direction by an equal distance is generally a good bet; and *a fortiori* if there is some chance of landing at the ideal point.

[16] This fact makes it clear that our discussion assumes cardinal measurability – mirroring the standard economic account of risk aversion. If either dimension of Figure 2 is only ordinally measurable, it is not possible to distinguish between convex and concave value functions (since they may identify the same ordering). We do not pursue the ordinal case here.

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We have claimed that utilitarians are natural convexity proponents, and this may be enough for most economists, but does the conservatism extend to those who take other ends to be normatively compelling? Is it the case that the specification of freedom or equality as the relevant end goes as naturally with an underlying convex structure in value? To answer this question would require a fairly detailed exploration of the nature of the particular end in question. It is not a matter that can be answered fully on *a priori* grounds. Perhaps, in most cases, it is an open question. Perhaps whether one is a conservative or an idealist is to be decided by considerations quite independent of the end specified. We suspect though that this is not the case. Consider equality, for example. Certainly, as economists have tended to think about equality – say in terms of a social welfare function formulation with diminishing marginal normative significance of each income/utility level – convexity tends to be built into the structure. And this may generalize. Consider, for example, a measure that might serve equally to redistribute a fixed sum either from the poorer to the richer or from the richer to the poorer, these possibilities having roughly equal probabilities. Though it is by no means logically required, we conjecture that most egalitarians would consider such a measure to be a bad bet. The egalitarian value difference between [100, 200] and [80, 220] – (where in each case the pair of numbers indicates the payoffs to the poorer and the richer respectively) – is plausibly less than that between [80, 220] and [60, 240]. So, a policy that stood a roughly equal chance of producing as its result distributions of [100, 200] or [60, 240] would be worse than sticking with a status quo of [80, 220]. Equally a distribution of [100, 200] is, we conjecture, better than an equal chance of either [150, 150] or [50, 250]. But it would be a strong claim to propose that all egalitarians must endorse that posture.

We can, however, support a more modest claim: namely, that, in the face of abundant ignorance, some attention to the convexity/concavity issue is obligatory; otherwise, one cannot give any coherent answer to questions about what policy choices or institutional arrangements one's political philosophy implies – or, more importantly for our present purposes, what posture one should adopt in relation to the ends defined by one's political philosophy.[17]

So far we have been concerned only with the convexity of the value function on the assumption that the particular end that is valued is known. This has focused attention on uncertainty in relation to policy and its outcomes. We now introduce a second dimension of uncertainty: uncertainty about ends. The point here relates to the general notion of conservative scepticism, and starts from the position in which we acknowledge the possibility that our view of the ethically relevant end may be mistaken. To sharpen the distinction from uncertainty about policy, we will assume – for the moment – that the effects of policy are known with certainty. Now, uncertainty about ends might be dealt with in a manner that parallels the treatment of uncertainty about policies. For example, if we believed, with probability 0.8, that (some particular measure of) utility, U, should be maximized and, with probability 0.2, that (some particular measure of) equality, E, should be maximized then, when considering some policy P, we could simply identify the utility outcome associated with P (U_P) and the equity outcome associated with P (E_P). Assuming

[17] An interesting and rather different line of defence for a conservative posture is found in Hao Li, 'A Theory of Conservatism', *Journal of Political Economy*, 109 (2001), 617–36. Li's argument revolves around the proposition that placing the burden of proof on those who would secure change provides an appropriate incentive for information gathering and encourages a more informed decision-making body. For an exploration of related issues from an economic viewpoint, see Timur Kuran, 'The Tenacious Past: Theories of Personal and Collective Conservatism', *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organisation*, 10 (1988), 143–72.

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that U and E are commensurable in terms of a common scale of value and, for simplicity, that units of U and units of E are directly comparable, then the overall expected value of the policy P might be taken to be the linear sum $(0.8U_P + 0.2E_P)$. We might then proceed by choosing that policy that maximizes this linear sum. However, there are at least two potential problems with this approach; one relates simply to the idea of convexity, the other to the potential significance of the distinction between the *ex ante* expected value of a policy, and the *ex post* realized value of that policy. Each problem suggests a further basis for a conservative status quo bias.

The first point is that the general idea of convexity is both relevant and plausible in this context, exactly as it is in the case of uncertainty about policy. If individuals are both uncertain about ends, and adopt a view of this uncertainty that is risk averse, the maximization of the simple linear sum will be inappropriate, and a convex value function should be used – with the consequent bias towards the status quo for reasons that exactly parallel those given above in relation to uncertainty about policy outcomes.

The second point is more fundamental. The case of uncertainty about ends is logically distinct from the case in which we recognize that the ethically relevant end is multidimensional. If we were concerned with the multidimensional case, the appropriate way to proceed would be as sketched above: first define the all-things-considered value function, which would now be a function of more than one variable (utility and equality in the example above), and then enquire about the convexity/concavity of that overall value function so as to establish the 'posture' relevant to that value function.[18] However, in the case of uncertainty about ends, it is by no means obvious that this procedure is appropriate. In this case, the value function might be, in our example, either utilitarian or egalitarian but is definitely not a weighted sum of these two. Forming an 'expected value function' by taking a probability weighted sum of the underlying utilitarian and egalitarian metrics may not be a good guide to action since maximizing *ex ante* expected value defined in this way will be very different from maximizing *ex post* realized value defined in either utilitarian or egalitarian terms.[19] Again, the intuition should be clear enough. In general, the impact of a particular policy (even when we know it with certainty) may be positive in respect of one ethical measure and negative in respect of another (good for aggregate utility, but bad for equality, for example). If we are uncertain which of these measures is relevant, this fact will be important in deciding whether to adopt the policy, and will tend to introduce a further status quo bias.

The status quo bias deriving from uncertainty about ends is essentially independent from the first argument concerning convexity of the value function with respect to outcomes; but the two arguments can be expected to interact. If we adopt a valuation function that is both convex relative to outcomes in a particular dimension of ethical relevance and convex relative to the comparison across ethical dimensions, the status quo biases will be mutually reinforcing. We will need to be convinced not only that a particular policy will produce a good outcome as measured by our preferred ethical criterion with sufficient

[18] Note that it is possible for posture to vary across dimensions – that is, the value function may be concave with respect to one argument and convex with respect to another. Beyond suggesting that the most thoroughgoing conservative would be one whose value function is convex in each of the arguments, we do not pursue the multidimensional case further here.

[19] On the *ex ante / ex post* distinction and its ethical relevance, see, for example, John Broome, 'Selecting People Randomly', *Ethics*, 95 (1984), 38–55; John Broome, 'Uncertainty and Fairness', *Economic Journal*, 94 (1984), 624–32.

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probability to overwhelm our convexity in that dimension, but also that this result is robust to a range of changes in the specification of the relevant ethical criterion.

THE CONSERVATIVE DISPOSITION

We want finally to return to the question of the conservative disposition. The challenge here is to explain why conservatism has standing as a distinct political philosophy. For all we have said so far, a conservative 'posture' is just a derivative result that may emerge when one does one's normative analysis properly, taking full cognizance of fundamental ignorance/uncertainty in all relevant dimensions. Being a 'conservative' consequentialist is just a matter of being a consequentialist who 'takes feasibility seriously' in a particular way. On this reading, conservatism is as much a set of claims about the nature of the world as it is a substantive political theory. It is true that, given the incentive structures that are in play in the relevant quarters, the most central of these claims – those concerning abundant ignorance – may be non-obvious and invite resistance. Still, as a purely logical matter, conservatism is ultimately just a matter of doing one's normative analysis in full cognizance of the relevant constraints: the appropriate posture is entailed in the proper implementation of the specified end.

But there is more to be said here. Even economists are familiar with the thought that there is a distinction between justification and motivation. The market produces the benign outcomes that are claimed for it by 'invisible' means. In other words, the properties that serve to justify market outcomes are not aspects that necessarily motivate any of the agents whose actions produce those outcomes. In the same way here, what works to motivate conservatives may not be the same as what justifies conservatism. The conservative disposition – an intuitive suspicion of all grand schemes, an intrinsic affection for things as they are, an inclination to be reconciled to one's general situation and perhaps strongly self-identified with it, a tendency to evaluate policies and reforms in terms of 'disaster avoidance' rather than utopian aspiration – may be what motivates conservatives, as a matter of descriptive fact. More to the point, it may be good for those who recognize the intellectual force of the conservative position to positively cultivate that particular disposition. After all, the notion of abundant ignorance points to a kind of psychological constraint. Our minds simply cannot accommodate and process all the information required to calculate the consequences of our actions or policy choices. We will be forced to take calculative short-cuts, to use rules of thumb. We will be influenced by what at the time strikes us as salient. Circumstances will often serve to 'frame' options in ways that might mislead us. When it comes to the crunch, a general sense of prevailing ignorance might not sustain us against other temptations. I might be tempted to play the expert; or be carried away by a spasm of idealist zeal; or just take the line of least resistance against the enthusiasms of those around me, however ill-grounded those enthusiasms might strike me as being. In such cases, as in many others, what will sustain me are my habits of mind, my intuitions, my prejudices, my dispositions. We should not try to do without dispositions altogether, since this is an implausible and perhaps impossible task – and therefore a dangerous one. One who tries to do without dispositions is excessively vulnerable to arbitrary incidental features of the choice situation. And one who has the wrong dispositions just systematically makes the wrong choices. The important thing is to cultivate the right dispositions.

In short, the structure of the conservative argument that we have presented here seems entirely hospitable to the idea that one should in most choice circumstances adopt a mode

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of reasoning and calculation that is distinct from the reasoning that provides the ultimate justification for having that disposition. One cannot work things out from first principles all the time. That is too time-consuming and too error prone. And doing it may not ultimately energize sufficiently to induce action: 'sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought' is how Hamlet puts it. In short, the 'conservative' element in 'analytic conservatism' arises because the conservative disposition operates as a critical piece of the required mental furniture.

Nevertheless, at some level, something beyond the disposition itself is required – something further by way of justificatory argument. The conservative disposition is not self-evidently compelling. What we have tried to provide in this article is one line of such justificatory argument: a line that ought to be intelligible to economists in particular, but also to others in the analytic tradition. We emphasize again that the argument provided here is not the only resource in rational actor theory that might be called into play in this connection. Nevertheless, the argument we have presented is, we think, an important one – not only in itself, but also for the broader class of arguments that it suggests.

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