Existential Conservatism

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Abstract
This essay articulates a kind of conservatism that it argues is the most fundamental and important kind of conservatism, viz. existential conservatism, which involves an affirmative and appreciative stance towards the given world. While this form of conservatism can be connected to political conservatism, as seen with Roger Scruton, it need not be, as seen with G. A. Cohen. It is argued that existential conservatism should be embraced whether or not one embraces political conservatism, though it is also shown that existential conservatism imposes constraints on our political thinking. In particular, it is argued that Cohen's 'luck egalitarianism' stands at odds with his existential conservatism and that one should be a sufficientarian rather than an egalitarian with regard to economic justice.

There are many different senses of what it means to be a conservative. The character of any particular conservatism depends upon what one is seeking to conserve. Sir Roger Scruton, whom I hope to honour with this essay and from whom I have learned a great deal, is best known as a cultural and political conservative. This means that there are certain aspects of culture and the political order that he wishes to conserve. However, I believe there is a more fundamental sense in which Scruton is a conservative, which helps to make sense of his cultural and political conservatism. This more fundamental conservatism I will call 'existential conservatism', and it concerns our orientation towards the world *as it is*, i.e. towards 'the given'. I want to suggest that it is in fact the most fundamental and important kind of conservatism and to argue that one should embrace it whether or not one embraces political conservatism, though I also want to show how it imposes constraints on our political thinking.

In the first section, I will outline my account of existential conservatism and aim to show its attractions. In the second section, I will show how Scruton can be regarded as an existential conservative and how this is connected with his cultural and political conservatism. In the third section, I will discuss the work of G. A. Cohen, who is an instance of an existential conservative who is not a political conservative. However, in the fourth section I will argue that his existential conservatism, articulated later in his life, stands at odds with his 'luck egalitarianism', which, in the words of David Wiggins (directed at John Rawls), wages a 'metaphysical crusade against contingency', i.e. against the given. I will suggest that Wiggins offers an

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understanding of justice that is more in keeping with a commitment to existential conservatism.

Existential stances

What is existential conservatism? Simply put, it is an existential stance – i.e. an orientation towards the given – that seeks to discover, appreciate, affirm, and conserve what is good in the world *as it is* or *as given*. The given here is of two general kinds: *the cultural-political given* and *the natural given*. The cultural-political given is that which human beings have built up and handed on over the generations, and it includes political institutions and moral precepts along with achievements of art, literature, philosophy, and religion as well as the forms of belonging (families, neighborhoods, nations, etc.) we find ourselves in. The natural given includes the wider natural world as well as our human nature and our own natural talents and abilities.

The stance of the existential conservative contrasts with existential stances that emphasize a repudiation of the given. One such stance is that of the radical progressive who repudiates the given world in light of some imagined ideal future world. Another such stance is that of the person who seeks to return to some supposed 'golden age' of the past. By contrast, for the existential conservative there is an emphasis on affirming and inhabiting the present. We see this in Michael Oakeshott's description of the conservative disposition as centring on 'a propensity to use and to enjoy what is available rather than to wish for or to look for something else; to delight in what is present rather than what was or what may be': 'Reflection may bring to light an appropriate gratefulness to what is available, and consequently the acknowledgement of a gift or an inheritance from the past; but there is no mere idolizing what is past and gone'.[1]

The radical progressive and the golden ageist are both agreed in finding the given world to be a disappointment. And this raises *the problem of cosmodicy*: is life in the world worthwhile in the face of evil and suffering? For the radical progressive this can only be answered positively insofar as we see ourselves as moving towards realizing some ideal future. Likewise, for the golden ageist we must see ourselves as recovering some ideal past. But the danger in both cases is that we will despair over attaining (or approximating) the ideal given that the world as it is will always fall drastically short of the ideal. The

[1] 'On Being Conservative' (1962), in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, new and expanded edition (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), 408.

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existential conservative, by contrast, aims to address the problem of cosmodicy not by attempting to realize some ideal future or to recover some ideal past, but rather by seeking to discover, appreciate, affirm, and conserve what is good in the given world, which enables one to find his or her way to an affirmation that life in the world is good and worthwhile, and that it is good to be here rather than never to have been. Indeed, the goal is to feel *at home* in the given world.

It can of course happen that a person seeks to affirm that life in the world is good and worthwhile but finds doing so extremely difficult because of undergoing great hardship, such as experiencing the death of a loved one, or having a debilitating condition, or living under an oppressive regime. There is always the possibility that one might fail at adequately addressing the problem of cosmodicy and end up feeling crushed or falling into despair. Without denying such possibilities, the existential conservative attempts to find and affirm what is good in the given world even when life is experienced as a vale of tears.[2] And this is predicated upon the belief that there is in fact good in the given world and that it is our task to discover, affirm, appreciate, and conserve it as best we can. But this affirmative stance is not predicated upon a belief that the given world is entirely as it should be. The existential conservative can and should acknowledge that there is a great deal of evil in the world that should not be affirmed and indeed should be rejected precisely because of the good that is affirmed. For instance, affirming that human life is a 'gift' or a great good to be cherished, promoted, and protected means that one must stand opposed to all that threatens human life. Thus, the existential conservative will seek reform to remove such threats to human life, and this reform is sought precisely in order to conserve what is good. However, the existential conservative also believes that evil will never be fully eradicated while we are on this mortal coil and yet the given world is worth affirming.

The crucial point is about our orientation towards the given world. We can state what is at issue here in terms of the following question: is our basic outlook on the world *as it is* centred on *affirmation* or *repudiation*, *yes-saying* or *no-saying*? These are not mutually exclusive options, but the question concerns the emphasis of a particular outlook. The existential conservative, in contrast to the radical progressive and the golden ageist, is fundamentally affirmative: there is an emphasis that the world, as it is and in spite of its evils and

[2] For powerful instances of this, see Helmut Gollwitzer et al. (eds.), *Dying We Live: The Final Messages and Records of the German Resistance* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009 [1956]).

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imperfections, is meaningful and worth affirming; i.e. the given world as a whole is good and is a source of joy and fulfillment, even if not everything about it is good and even if there are ways, whether minor or major, that it should be made better. Radical progressivism and golden ageism are of course not without affirmation, but the focus of affirmation is on an ideal future or an ideal past by which one critiques and seeks a thoroughgoing change of the present. Their attitude towards the given world emphasizes repudiation and a sense of *indignation*. The existential conservative, by contrast, first seeks to count his or her blessings, to take stock of what is good about the given world, before figuring out how to make it better. In other words, an emphasis on *gratitude* or *appreciation* is at the heart of existential conservatism.

This is exemplified in the work of G. K. Chesterton, who in his autobiography tells us that the chief idea of his life is 'the idea of taking things with gratitude, and not taking things for granted'.[3] And elsewhere he writes: 'I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought; and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder'.[4] The sort of thanks that he is discussing here we can call 'existential thanks', and such thanks are 'the highest form of thought' because they give appreciative attention to the fundamental fact of the sheer *gratuitousness* of existence (i.e. the undeserved goodness of the given world). Chesterton brings out this sheer gratuitousness of existence in the following passage:

> There is at the back of all our lives an abyss of light, more blinding and unfathomable than any abyss of darkness; and it is the abyss of actuality, of existence, of the fact that things truly are, and that we ourselves are incredibly and sometimes almost incredulously real. It is the fundamental fact of being, as against not being; it is unthinkable, yet we cannot unthink it, though we may sometimes be unthinking about it; unthinking and especially unthanking. For he who has realized this reality knows that it does outweigh, literally to infinity, all lesser regrets or arguments for negation, that under all our grumblings there is a subconscious substance of gratitude.[5]

[3] *The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2006 [1936]), 325.

[4] *A Short History of England*, in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton, Volume XX* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press. 2001 [1917]), 463.

[5] *Chaucer*, in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton, Volume XVIII* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1991 [1932]), 172-3.

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The last sentence here addresses the problem of cosmodicy: with existential gratitude we affirm that life in the world is worthwhile even in the face of evil and suffering.

For Chesterton, there is an integral connection between such existential gratitude and theism since it is to God that our thanks are ultimately due for the sheer gratuitousness of existence (though more immediately they are due to our parents). Indeed, he writes: 'the worst moment for the atheist is when he is really thankful and has nobody to thank'.[6] Elsewhere he considers an imagined critic who questions why someone 'cannot be thankful for grass and flowers without connecting it with theology', to which he responds: '[Such a person] cannot do it without connecting it with theology, unless he can do it without connecting it with thought. If he can manage to be thankful when there is nobody to be thankful to, and no good intentions to be thankful for, then he is simply taking refuge in being thoughtless in order to avoid being thankless'.[7] The idea here is that gratitude involves a 'to-for' structure: we are thankful *to* someone *for* some gratuitous good.[8] What existential gratitude requires then is *someone* who is the ultimate source of the undeserved good of one's existence and of all existence and *to whom* he or she is thankful, which includes a feeling of indebtedness and a desire to pay back the debt in some way. However, I think we can allow a metaphorical extension of existential gratitude for those who want to speak about life as a 'gift' as a way of expressing their appreciation for the undeserved good of life, even though, strictly speaking, they do not believe that life is a gift, but rather it is just good luck. In any case, with regard to the cultural-political given both theists and non-theists can appropriately express gratitude, and in regard to the natural given both can at least express appreciation.[9] And often this will take the form of contemplation, understood as a kind of appreciative attention. Regarding contemplation, Josef Pieper writes:

[6] *Saint Francis of Assisi*, in *Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Francis of Assisi* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1986 [1923]), 251; Chesterton attributes this statement to Rossetti (with agreement).

[7] *Autobiography*, 330.

[8] See Robert C. Roberts, 'The Blessings of Gratitude: A Conceptual Analysis', in Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough (eds), *The Psychology of Gratitude* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[9] The language of 'the given' here can of course have the connotation of being a 'gift', but recall that I am using it as being synonymous with 'the world *as it is*'.

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> Only the vision of something we love makes us happy, and thus it is integral to the concept of contemplation that it represents a vision kindled by the act of turning towards something in love and affirmation. … How splendid water is, or a rose, a tree, an apple! But as a rule we do not say such things … without implying, to some degree, an affirmation which transcends the immediate object of our praise and the literal meaning of our words – an assent touching the foundation of the world. In the midst of our workaday cares we raise our heads and unexpectedly gaze into a face turned towards us, and in that instant we see: everything which is, is good, worthy of love … [Despite] everything there is peace, wholeness, and splendor in the depths of things.[10]

Existential conservatism can thus be understood as a habitual disposition to appreciative attention or loving beholding of what is good in the given world, which ultimately requires assent to the world as a whole as being good in order to address adequately the problem of cosmodicy.[11] Moreover, this sort of disposition is important for any effort to make things better. As Edmund Burke remarks:

> [In] general, those who are habitually employed in finding and displaying faults, are unqualified for the work of reformation: because their minds are not only unfurnished with patterns of the fair and good, but by habit they come to take no delight in the contemplation of those things. By hating vices too much, they come to love men too little. … From hence arises the complexional disposition of some … to pull every thing in pieces.[12]

[10] 'Earthly Contemplation', trans. Jan van Heurck, in *Josef Pieper: An Anthology* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989), 144, 146.

[11] Though I don't have the space to do so adequately here, this affirmation of the goodness of the world can be filled out in terms of Aquinas's thesis that being and goodness are convertible: 'The essence of goodness consists in this, that it is in some way desirable. … Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect, for all desire their own perfection. But everything is perfect so far as it is actual. Therefore it is clear that a thing is perfect so far as it exists. … Hence it is clear that goodness and being are the same really. But goodness presents the aspect of desirableness' (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 5, a. 1; trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province). The corollary here is that things are bad insofar as they are opposed to being.

[12] *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), in *Select Works of Edmund Burke, Volume 2* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1999), 277.

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Existential conservatism is thus not a mere affirmation of the status quo (i.e. the existing state of affairs), but rather, it is a habitual disposition (i.e. life-orientation or existential stance) that seeks to find what is good in the status quo, and which in turn best enables one to improve the status quo where improvement is needed and desirable. However, the greatest significance of this existential stance is not how it best enables improvement (though this is certainly important), but rather how it enables us to address the problem of cosmodicy by showing how even in troubled times and amidst efforts to improve our condition we can still affirm that the given world as a whole is good and is a source of joy and fulfillment, which enables us to feel at home in the world rather than in a perpetual state of alienation.[13]

With this account of existential conservatism in place, I want now to turn to explore how Scruton can be regarded as an existential conservative and how this is connected to his cultural and political conservatism.

Scruton's metaphysical conservatism

In his 2014 book *How to Be a Conservative*,[14] Scruton distinguishes between two kinds of conservatism. One he says is *empirical* and is a distinctly modern phenomenon, as it is a 'reaction to the vast changes unleashed by the Reformation and the Enlightenment' (viii). It is a specifically political form of conservatism, and he spends most of the book discussing it. The other kind of conservatism is *metaphysical* and he says it 'resides in the belief in sacred things and the desire to defend them against desecration' (viii). Scruton thinks that this belief is 'exemplified at every point in history and will always be a powerful influence in human affairs' (viii). He only discusses this form of conservatism towards the end of the book, but it plays a central role throughout his philosophical work, e.g. in his

[13] For more on the problem of cosmodicy, see my essay 'Nietzsche, Cosmodicy, and the Saintly Ideal', *Philosophy* 91:1 (2016): 39-67.

[14] London: Bloomsbury. Citations will be provided in-text. This is Scruton's most up-to-date statement of his conservatism; for earlier statements see: *The Meaning of Conservatism*, 3rd ed. (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2002 [1980]); *A Political Philosophy: Arguments for Conservatism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006). See also: *Conservatism: An Invitation to the Great Tradition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017), which provides a historical overview of conservative thought.

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writings on religion, aesthetics, and ethics. Scruton's metaphysical conservatism, I believe, is a form of what I have called existential conservatism, and I want to try to bring out how this is the case.

To begin, we should ask: what are the 'sacred things' that are in need of defense? Something (e.g. a text, a work of art, a building, a place, a human being, etc.) is sacred if it is in some way set apart from other things in demanding an attitude of reverence and bringing with it requirements of inviolability. Belief in sacred things has traditionally been connected with a religious worldview, but in many places in the modern world such a worldview has been under threat and in decline. And with this there has arisen the threat of disenchantment, i.e. a loss of meaning or value that stands independent of our desires as that with which we ought to orient our lives. Scruton seeks a kind of re-enchantment that can recover and defend the experience of the sacred, especially through recovering and defending the experience of genuine beauty.

We see this in chapter 11 ('Realms of Value') of *How to Be a Conservative*, which is the chapter in which Scruton discusses his 'metaphysical conservatism' most extensively. There he puts forward the experience of beauty as a way of re-enchantment: 'when we look on an object, be it a flower or a work of art, and see it as intrinsically worthy of our attention, we are in a measure recuperating the religious worldview, … however far we may be from any transcendental belief' (153-4). The idea is that there can be something 'set apart' and reverence-worthy revealed here. Like religious belief, he says that the experience of beauty has come under threat in the modern world due to the 'culture of desecration' (or the 'cult of transgression'). In the twentieth century, beauty came under suspicion and '[art] increasingly aimed to disturb, subvert or transgress moral certainties and it was not beauty but originality – however achieved and at whatever moral cost – that won the prizes' (159). This culture of desecration is not the only challenge for a genuine encounter with beauty: there is also the 'haste and disorder of modern life, the alienating forms of modern architecture, the noise and spoliation of modern industry', as well as the disenchanting tendencies of modern science that encourage a disengaged viewpoint where the world is seen as bleached of all value-properties. Yet, Scruton says, 'we all know what it is, suddenly to be transported by the things we see, from the ordinary world of our appetites to the illuminated sphere of contemplation' (162).

Here Scruton endorses a contemplative stance that is a form of what I have described as the existential stance of affirming and appreciating the given. He describes it as an attitude of 'disinterested

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contemplation' that is directed 'towards our world in search of its meaning': 'When we take this attitude we set our interests aside; we are no longer occupied with the goals and projects that propel us through time; we are no longer engaged in explaining things or enhancing our power. We are letting the world present itself and taking comfort in its presentation. This is the origin of the experience of beauty' (162). T. S. Eliot also expresses this attitude well, but in a more religious key, in 'Little Gidding' (the last of his *Four Quartets*; the title of which refers to a village retreat in Cambridgeshire established for prayer and worship):

> You are not here to verify,
> Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
> Or carry report. You are here to kneel
> Where prayer has been valid.[15]

What is particularly important about this contemplative stance – as previously discussed – is that it enables us to feel *at home* in the world ('History is now and England', as Eliot puts it), which is a chief aim of existential conservatism. Indeed, Scruton maintains that 'our greatest need is for home', and he says that we achieve the feeling of home 'through representations of our own belonging' (162).[16] And here the need for home connects up with the need for beauty:

> [Our] human need for beauty is … a need arising from our metaphysical condition, as free individuals, seeking our place in an objective world. We can wander through this world, alienated, resentful, full of suspicion and distrust. Or we can find our home here, coming to rest in harmony with others and with ourselves. And the experience of beauty guides us along this second path: it tells us that we *are* at home in the world, that the world is already ordered in our perceptions as a place fit for the lives of beings like us. (162-3)

[15] See Scruton's 'Eliot and Conservatism', which is the last chapter of *A Political Philosophy*.

[16] The love of home – or *oikophilia* – is a key theme in Scruton's work; see especially *How to Think Seriously About the Planet: The Case for an Environmental Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). On the significance of artistic activities and imagination for Scruton's outlook, see *Conversations with Roger Scruton* (by Mark Dooley [London: Bloomsbury, 2016]), chs. 1-2.

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Elsewhere Scruton also writes:

> We can, at any moment, turn away from desecration and ask ourselves instead what inspires us and what we should revere. We can set ourselves on a path along which the light of beauty shines … We can turn our attention to things we love – the woods and streams of our native country, friends and family, the 'starry heavens above' – and ask ourselves what they tell us about our life on earth, and how that life should be lived. And then we can look on the world of art, poetry and music and know that there is a real difference between the sacrilegious, with which we are alone and troubled, and the beautiful, with which we are in company, and at home.[17]

Scruton acknowledges that our being at home in the world is never perfectly realized, and hence 'the experience of beauty also points us beyond this world, to a "kingdom of ends" in which our immortal longings and our desire for perfection are finally answered'.[18] Here again we see Scruton recovering a religious frame of mind. But it is important to emphasize that even though some not-fully-at-homeness may remain, we can be at home in the world in the sense that we affirm that the world as a whole is good and that we can find a meaningful place within it.

So how does all of this bear on Scruton's political conservatism? I think the basic disposition of existential conservatism that we find in Scruton, which seeks to discover, appreciate, affirm, and conserve what is good in the given world, plays itself out in the cultural-political given and results in conservative judgments. In particular, Scruton thinks that in Western civilization and especially in the English-speaking part of it 'we have collectively inherited good things that we must strive to keep', such as: rule of law and equality before it; democratic government; a large space of freedom to live as we see fit; security of property and family life; civility and public spirit; a culture of open enquiry; institutions that promote peace and prosperity and protect the common good; and so on. We often take these things for granted but they are all under threat, and Scruton says that 'conservatism is the rational response to that threat'. It starts from the sentiment that 'good things are easily destroyed, but not easily created', and that this is especially

[17] Roger Scruton, 'The Flight From Beauty', *Axess Magazine* 7 (October 2008).
[18] Ibid.

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true of the collective assets just mentioned, which depend on cooperation with others to maintain them (viii-ix). What is especially important for maintaining these good things that we have inherited, according to Scruton's conservative viewpoint (influenced as it is by Burke and Hegel), is the recognition of non-contractual obligations:

> We can envisage society as founded in a contract only if we see its members as capable of the free and responsible choice that a contract requires. But only in certain circumstances will human beings develop into rational choosers, capable of undertaking obligations and honouring promises, and oriented towards one another in a posture of responsibility. In the course of acquiring this posture towards others, people acquire obligations of quite another kind – obligations to parents, to family, to place and community, upon all of which they have depended for the nurture without which the human animal cannot develop into the human person. Those obligations are not obligations of justice, such as arise from the free dealings of human adults. The Romans knew them as obligations of piety (*pietas*), meaning that they stem from the natural gratitude towards what is *given* … (24; see 19-25)

Scruton goes on to summarize his conservatism as follows: 'Conservatism is the philosophy of attachment. We are attached to the things we love, and wish to protect them against decay' (29). In other words, we only seek to conserve because we love; if there were nothing worthy of love then there would be nothing worthy of conservation. At the most general level, that of existential conservatism, this means being orientated in love or appreciation for what is good in the given world and seeking to conserve (i.e. promote and protect) this good.

Although I am suggesting that Scruton's existential conservatism feeds into his political conservatism, there is no necessary connection between the two kinds of conservatism. It all depends on our judgments about the good and bad of our cultural-political givens.

Cohen's small-c conservatism

Perhaps the best illustration of the point that one does not need to be a political conservative in order to be an existential conservative is G. A. Cohen, who is well known for his work as a socialist political philosopher, including authoring, among other books, *Why Not*

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Socialism?[19] Towards the end of his life, he wrote an essay titled 'Rescuing Conservatism: A Defense of Existing Value'.[20] There he acknowledges (confesses?) that for decades he has 'harbored strongly conservative, that is, strongly small-c conservative, opinions, on many matters that are not matters of justice' (144). He distinguishes this small-c conservatism, which is a particular *attitude* concerned with conserving 'existing value', from large-C Conservatism, or political conservatism, which he thinks is committed to conserving injustice (144, 172-3). I will return in the next section to consider the relationship between existential conservatism and justice, but for now we need to consider in more detail Cohen's small-c conservatism.

The conservative disposition that Cohen endorses is one that he thinks every sane person has to some degree (at least in practice, even if not with full self-awareness), but the small-c conservative is someone who has a 'sturdier form' of it, which is to say, the conservative attitude receives greater emphasis in such a person and he or she has self-awareness with regard to this attitude (145, 150, 154).[21]

[19] In *Conversations with Roger Scruton* (2016), Scruton provides a brief account of his relationship with Cohen: 'After its [*The Meaning of Conservatism*] publication, the Marxist philosopher at University College London, Jerry (G. A.) Cohen, refused to teach a seminar with me. Jerry was brought up as a believing communist in a little circle of the same in Montreal. He couldn't cope with what he saw as a sin, as well as a huge provocation. Later though, Jerry, whom I very much admired, moved in a conservative direction, and responded very warmly to my books on architecture and hunting. I was deeply upset by his sudden death in 2009, just at the moment when we were becoming friends again. In 1980, however, ideas like mine were simply unheard of in the universities and Jerry in particular found them deeply offensive. In the library at Birkbeck you couldn't find, in the politics section, a book by any living conservative thinker … There was a real sense that the conservative position is evil, and that sense is still there in the academic world' (46).

[20] G. A. Cohen, 'Rescuing Conservatism: A Defense of Existing Value', in *Finding Oneself in the Other* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013). Citations will be provided in-text. This essay was in fact his last finished philosophical essay (see *Finding Oneself in the Other*, ix).

[21] In a footnote Cohen cites these remarks from Samuel Scheffler: '[It] is difficult to understand how human beings could have values at all if they did not have conservative impulses. What would it mean to value things but, in general, to see no reason of any kind to sustain them or retain them or preserve them or extend them into the future?' ('Immigration and the Claims of Culture', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 35:2 [2007]: 106). Similarly, John Kekes speaks of a 'natural conservatism': 'If there were beings who did

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This conservative attitude, Cohen says, 'exhibits a bias in favor of retaining what is of value, even in the face of replacing it by something of greater value' (149). He distinguishes between three aspects of this conservative attitude: (1) valuing and seeking to preserve that which is intrinsically valuable (i.e. 'particular valuing'); (2) valuing and seeking to preserve that which is personally valued (i.e. 'personal valuing'); and (3) 'accepting the given'.

In the case of *particular valuing*, Cohen says, 'a person values something as the particular valuable thing that it is, and not merely for the value that resides in it. … [Even] though the particular indeed gets its value, in the first instance, from the intrinsic value that it has, our valuing of it, the particular, is not merely a valuing of the intrinsic value that it has, but also a valuing of *it*, the particular itself' (148). He speaks of valuing *something* here, but we can also speak of valuing and loving *someone*: e.g. a sweetheart or a friend. We don't simply love and value the beloved because of her intrinsically valuable qualities; we also love and value her *for her own sake*, as the particular person she is. If we found someone else who had similar or even certain better qualities we wouldn't say that this other person would do just as well or better. The beloved is *irreplaceable*. We can also say that a particular charming old building or a plot of land or a cultural way of life is irreplaceable. Cohen remarks: 'we devalue the valuable things we have if we keep them only so long as nothing even slightly more valuable comes along. Valuable things command a certain loyalty. If an existing thing has intrinsic value, then we have reason to regret its destruction as such, a reason that we would not have if we cared only about the value that the thing carries or instantiates' (153). Such a mindset, concerned as it is with the conservation of *what* has value and not merely with the conservation of value, is fundamentally opposed to a maximizing mindset that seeks to maximize value at the expense of valuable things, which are therefore regarded as dispensable.

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not enjoy having what they valued and were not afraid of losing it, they would not be recognizably human. … The [conservative] attitude then is basic to human psychology, but it need not be conscious or articulate. … Conservatives can appeal to this basic attitude—to natural conservatism—and realistically hope to be understood'. It is when we become aware of a threat to the good things to which we are attached that such natural conservatism 'must be transformed into a reflective one that can meet it' (*A Case for Conservatism* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998], 5-6).

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In the case of *personal valuing*, Cohen states, 'a person values something because of the special relation of the thing to that person' (148), viz. because of the person's *attachment* to it. Such a mode of valuing is also resistant to the maximizing mindset. For instance, we can think of an attachment to a house: perhaps we could find what is in many respects a better house, but we do not want to move there because it would mean giving up *our home*, and here 'home' expresses our attachment to this particular house and our sense of belonging there. (Of course, sometimes the requirements of work or an expanding family may necessitate finding a new house, and perhaps it is even a better house in many respects, but still if a particular house is a home for us, then we would leave it mournfully.) We can say something similar about a particular plot of land, culture, town, country, friend, and so on. Cohen writes: 'We are attached to particular things [or persons] because we need to *belong* to something [or someone], and we therefore need some things [or persons] to belong to us' (168).[22] Although Cohen does not fill this point out in detail, we should add that such a need for belonging also takes an existential form in what I have described above as a need to be at home in the world. And this also connects up with the third aspect of Cohen's small-c conservatism: *accepting the given*.

With regard to accepting the given, Cohen writes, 'some things must be accepted as *given*, … not everything can, or should, be shaped to our aims and requirements; the attitude that goes with seeking to shape everything to our requirements both violates intrinsic value and contradicts our own spiritual requirements. … [The] attitude of universal mastery over everything is repugnant, and, at the limit, insane' (149). Cohen says the least about this aspect of small-c conservatism; he mostly sets it aside, 'not because it is unimportant' but because, as he puts it, 'it is too deep to explore here' (152). Indeed, he leaves some of the key claims in his remarks about it largely undeveloped. However, it is precisely this kind of conservatism – i.e. 'existential conservatism' – that I have been concerned to explore in this essay, though I have spoken about *affirming and appreciating* the given. Understood in this way, I think this aspect of Cohen's small-c conservatism can be regarded as the basis of the other two aspects as they can in fact be seen as expressions of an affirmative and appreciative stance towards the given, since the given

[22] Cf. Simon May's account of love as seeking 'ontological rootedness' in *Love: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011) and *Love: A New Understanding of an Ancient Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

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includes the particular existing things that have value and our personal attachments.

We can also see this foundational role of affirming and appreciating the given at the beginning of the essay (in the 'Hegelian prelude') when Cohen says that in all three aspects of small-c conservatism 'the subject is at peace with the object', and he goes on to remark:

> [It] is a pregnant moment in the New Testament when Jesus, awaiting his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane and foreseeing the toils to come, cries out "Oh, Lord, take away this cup," but then corrects himself: "but not my will, Lord, thine." 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. There is a connection, as yet to be mapped, between the conservatism that I defend, and cherish, and the Gethsemane idea. (143)

But the 'Gethsemane idea' here seems precisely to be a Christianized version of the accepting (i.e. affirming) and appreciating stance towards the given, which involves accepting the will of God and affirming the goodness of the world as it is (i.e. being 'at peace with the world' and therefore with ourselves) even in the face of hardship. And this general existential stance, I suggest, is important for any other form of being 'at peace with the object'.

With these remarks in place, I want to try to fill out and defend two key claims of Cohen's that he leaves largely undeveloped: viz. (1) the claim that the failure to accept some things as given 'contradicts our own spiritual requirements'; and (2) the claim that an 'attitude of universal mastery over everything is repugnant, and, at the limit, insane'. I think providing a convincing defense of these two claims would demonstrate that everyone has a good reason to be an existential conservative, regardless of one's political perspective.

In regard to the first claim, Cohen does not explain what he has in mind when he speaks of our 'spiritual requirements', but I think one of our spiritual requirements is, paraphrasing Chesterton, to '[take] things with gratitude, and not [take] things for granted'. In other words, we need to appreciate properly 'existing value', i.e. what is good in the given world. And ultimately this is important for the spiritual requirement of coming to affirm the world as a whole and its sheer gratuitous goodness, which addresses the problem of cosmodicy: i.e. the problem of whether life in the world is worthwhile in the face of evil and suffering. We cannot accept everything in all aspects, since some things are evil and need to be corrected as far as

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possible; but some things must be accepted and appreciated as given, and ultimately we need to be able to see the world as a whole as good and worth affirming.

In regard to the second claim, we can say that 'the attitude of universal mastery over everything is repugnant' because it fails to recognize any proper limits set on our wills. Such recognition comes from rightly appreciating what is of value, and hence Cohen says that the attitude of universal mastery 'violates intrinsic value'. Indeed, such an attitude, at the limit, is 'insane' because it courts nihilism. We see this in a passage from David Wiggins that Cohen quotes in a footnote, part of which is as follows: 'if we are not ready to scrutinize with any hesitation or perplexity at all the conviction (as passionate as it is groundless, surely, for no larger conception is available that could validate it) that everything in the world is in principle ours or there for the taking; then what will befall us? Will a new disquiet assail our desires themselves, in a world no less denuded of meaning by our sense of our own omnipotence than ravaged by our self-righteous insatiability?'[23] In other words, if everything is 'up for grabs' (or if we think that 'the world's mine oyster', as Pistol does in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), i.e. if there are no ends of choice that are of great importance such that they can place constraints on our choices, then this deflates our sense of the importance of choice; we are left with a disenchanted view of the world and indeed 'a new disquiet' assails our desires: why desire *anything*? We see a similar point made by Michael Sandel in his critique of genetic engineering in *The Case Against Perfection* (which is also cited by Cohen in a footnote). Sandel writes: 'The problem with eugenics and genetic engineering is that they represent the one-sided triumph of willfulness over giftedness, of dominion over reverence, of molding over beholding'.[24] This undermines a key aspect of the best kind of parental love: viz. an accepting love that appreciates children as gifts rather than regarding them as products of our will. Sandel concludes his book with the following remarks: 'There is something appealing, even intoxicating about a vision of human freedom unfettered by the given. … But that vision of freedom is flawed. It threatens to banish our appreciation of life as a gift, and to leave us with nothing to affirm or behold outside our own will'.[25] And we should add that when we

[23] *Sameness and Substance Renewed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 242.

[24] *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in an Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 85.

[25] *The Case Against Perfection*, 99-100.

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have nothing to affirm or behold outside of our own will, then we have *nothing to will*. Therefore, if we are not to fall into such a debilitating condition, we must regard an affirmative and appreciative stance towards the given as being more fundamental than any choosing stance. In other words, an affirmative and appreciative stance towards what is of value in the given world provides the necessary background against which significant choices can be made.[26]

Sandel is in fact another good example of an existential conservative who is not a political conservative, though his left-wing communitarianism has a fair amount in common with Scruton's right-wing communitarianism (as I think it is fair to describe it).[27] Like Scruton, he puts a strong emphasis on non-contractual obligations in his account of being an 'encumbered self' that recognizes the moral significance of unchosen ties to family, neighbours, fellow citizens, place, and traditions. But Sandel differs from Scruton in seeking to provide a communitarian basis for egalitarian distributive policies. Indeed, his main criticism of John Rawls' liberal egalitarianism is that his 'unencumbered' (i.e. liberal individualist) conception of the self cannot support his 'difference principle', which requires equal distribution of economic benefits unless it can be shown that an unequal distribution is more beneficial to the least well off. Sandel writes: 'What the difference principle requires, but cannot provide, is some way of identifying those *among* whom the assets I bear are properly regarded as common, some way of seeing ourselves as mutually indebted and morally engaged to begin with'.[28]

For Cohen, it is also because of a commitment to an egalitarian conception of justice that he distances himself from political conservatism and indeed regards it as conserving injustice. At this point we must turn to consider the relationship between existential conservatism and justice. I think existential conservatism does have implications for how we think about justice, and I want to suggest that it is at odds with Cohen's commitment to 'luck egalitarianism'.

[26] Cf. Aurel Kolnai: '*response*, not *fiat*, is the prime gesture of the human person' ('Privilege and Liberty' [1949], in *Privilege and Liberty and Other Essays in Political Philosophy* [Lanham, MD: Lexington, 1999], 26).

[27] Scruton is critical of communitarianism, but this is because he identifies it with the left-wing variety; see 'Communitarian Dreams', *City Journal* (Autumn 1996).

[28] 'The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self', *Political Theory* 12:1 (1984), 90.

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David McPherson

Conservatism, luck egalitarianism, and justice

In his essay 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice', Cohen expresses the basic idea of a 'luck egalitarian' conception of justice when he writes: 'a large part of the fundamental egalitarian aim is to extinguish the influence of brute luck on distribution … Brute luck is an enemy of just equality, and, since effects of genuine choice contrast with brute luck, genuine choice excuses otherwise unacceptable inequalities'.[29] In other words, inequalities in society that result from brute luck (i.e. luck due to the contingencies of our natural and social circumstances) are unjust and should be redressed, whereas inequalities that result from genuine choice are not unjust and do not call for redress. Political conservatism conserves injustice, on Cohen's view, precisely because it does not seek to 'extinguish the influence of brute luck on distribution'.

To fill out further the luck egalitarian position, consider its most famous and influential advocate: John Rawls. According to Rawls, 'the accidents of natural endowment and the contingencies of social circumstance' are 'arbitrary from a moral point of view' and should not be allowed to determine social and economic advantage.[30] Thus, in order to come up with the fair terms of social cooperation – i.e. what Rawls regards as the principles of justice – we need to think of ourselves in the hypothetical scenario of the 'original position', where we adopt a 'veil of ignorance' such that we do not know the particularities of our social situation, our natural assets, and our comprehensive conception of the good for human life (10-11). This is supposed to ensure that our choice of the principles of justice is not biased by the contingencies of our natural and social circumstances. There are two general principles of justice that Rawls thinks we will arrive at here. First: 'Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all'. Second: 'Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged … and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity' (266). Part (a) of the second principle expresses the 'difference principle', which, as mentioned earlier, requires equal distribution

[29] 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice', *Ethics* 99:4 (1989), 931.

[30] *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999 [1971]), 14; see also 62-5, 86-90, 273-4. Other citations will be provided in-text.

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of economic benefits unless it can be shown that an unequal distribution is more beneficial to the least well off. Rawls writes:

> The difference principle represents, in effect, an agreement to regard the distribution of natural talents as in some respects a common asset and to share in the greater social and economic benefits made possible by the complementarities of this distribution. Those who have been favored by nature, whoever they are, may gain from their good fortune only on terms that improve the situation of those who have lost out. … No one deserves his greater natural capacity nor merits a more favorable starting place in society. But, of course, this is no reason to ignore, much less to eliminate these distinctions. Instead, the basic structure can be arranged so that these contingencies work for the good of the least fortunate. Thus we are led to the difference principle if we wish to set up the social system so that no one gains or loses from his arbitrary place in the distribution of natural assets or his initial position in society without giving or receiving compensating advantages in return. (87)

Rawls' account of 'justice as fairness' represents a radical assault on the traditional common sense conception of justice as having to do with desert. Not only does he think that we don't deserve our natural capacities nor our favourable starting place in society (how could these be deserved?), he goes further than Cohen in denying desert for individual initiative and responsible choice when he writes: 'Even the willingness to make an effort, to try, and so to be deserving in the ordinary sense is itself dependent upon happy family and social circumstances' (64), and so, as he later says, '[the] notion of desert does not apply here' (89; see also 273-4).

Robert Nozick aptly remarks: 'This line of argument can succeed in blocking the introduction of a person's autonomous choices and actions (and their results) only by attributing *everything* noteworthy about a person completely to certain sorts of "external" factors. So denigrating a person's autonomy and prime responsibility for his actions is a risky line to take for a theory that otherwise wishes to buttress the dignity and self-respect of autonomous beings'.[31] Nozick also takes issue with Rawls' view that we should regard our natural assets as 'common assets'. He turns Rawls' own argument against utilitarianism against him and contends that he 'does not take seriously the distinction between persons'.[32] Indeed, on the basis of

[31] *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 214.
[32] *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 228.

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the atomistic or unencumbered conception of the self that both Rawls and Nozick affirm it is not clear how the difference principle can avoid the charge of violating the Kantian principle that persons should not be used as a mere means to others' ends. To recall Sandel's remarks cited above: 'What the difference principle requires, but cannot provide, is some way of identifying those *among* whom the assets I bear are properly regarded as common, some way of seeing ourselves as mutually indebted and morally engaged to begin with'. Short of either a socially encumbered conception of the self in which we can regard the good of others as our own or a conception of desert by which we can be said to be morally obligated to help those who are less fortunate, it is not clear that our own assets should be regarded as, in some sense, common assets.

What I want to focus on, however, is the attitude towards contingency, or 'the given', in luck egalitarianism. We have seen that Rawls regards the contingencies of our natural and social circumstances as 'arbitrary from a moral point of view'. But is this right? I don't think so. For one thing, these contingencies of natural and social circumstance shape our very character as 'encumbered selves' and give our lives a 'moral depth'.[33] As George Sher says, 'the innumerable contingencies that differentiate each person's situation from those of others' are not simply 'so many sources of unjust inequality to be neutralized by society', but rather they are 'the backdrop in whose absence we could not live recognizably human lives at all'.[34] Furthermore, David Wiggins writes in response to Rawls' attempt to 'remove the "undeserved" or "moral arbitrary" contingencies of natural gifts and fortunate circumstances': 'Even behind the veil of ignorance, the deliberators might easily see the disadvantage of insisting on the "moral arbitrariness" of such blessings—if insisting on it will have the effect of subverting the message of Jesus' parable of the talents, namely one's paramount moral duty to make something (and not just for oneself) of what gifts one has (Matthew 25: 14–30). Contingency is not the same as arbitrariness'.[35] In short, the contingencies of our natural and social circumstances are *morally charged*.

[33] See Sandel, 'The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self', 90-1.

[34] *Equality for Inegalitarians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), viii.

[35] *Ethics: Twelve Lectures on the Philosophy of Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 306.

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In an arresting phrase, Wiggins describes Rawls as waging 'a metaphysical crusade against contingency',[36] i.e. against the given, and I think the same can be said of other luck egalitarians, including Cohen. And thus Cohen's luck egalitarianism stands at odds with his existential conservatism, which is supposed to encourage an accepting and appreciating stance towards the given (though not disallowing reform). In 'Rescuing Conservatism', Cohen does acknowledge some tension between his conception of justice and his small-c conservatism, though he maintains: 'you can be both egalitarian and conservative by putting justice lexically prior to (other) value', i.e. by giving justice precedence over other values when they come into conflict. However, he also says: 'I do not say that I am myself so uncompromising an egalitarian, so lexically projustice. I am not sure that we should regret the production of all the wonderful material culture that we have inherited and that was produced at the expense of gross injustice' (172). In 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice', he writes: 'if priority were always given to relieving misery, then no resources could be devoted to maintaining cathedrals and other creations of inestimable value'. He thinks this is a powerful objection, but says it 'does not challenge the claim that, to the extent that equalization is defensible, welfare is the right thing to equalize' (910-11). But 'relieving misery' is not the same thing as equalizing welfare, and if our concern is with the former rather than the latter (and I will suggest below that it should be), then there is no inherent tension with promoting high culture (e.g. in building and maintaining cathedrals, art museums, private universities, etc.). Moreover, the aim of relieving misery is fully compatible with existential conservatism, whereas luck egalitarianism is not because of its 'metaphysical crusade against contingency', and this is a point that Cohen does not seem to appreciate. Luck egalitarianism encourages a continual disappointment with and repudiation of the given world. It gives emphasis to indignation rather than gratitude for or appreciation of the given, and indeed its focus on what it regards as the wrong of economic inequality encourages constant comparison, which can lead to feelings of discontent, regret,

[36] *Ethics*, 306. Elizabeth Anderson, who coined the term 'luck egalitarianism', similarly remarks that luck egalitarians are concerned with 'correcting a supposed cosmic injustice' ('What Is the Point of Equality?', *Ethics* 109:2 [1999], 288). This is well illustrated when Thomas Nagel, another luck egalitarian, asks: 'How could it not be an evil that some people's life prospects at birth are radically inferior to others?' (*Equality and Partiality* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], 28).

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resentment, and envy that are opposed to the disposition of gratitude.[37] Such comparison with others also distracts us from concern for what really matters for one's own life.[38] And yet we find Ronald Dworkin – another prominent luck egalitarian – putting forward an 'envy test' as a criterion of justice in distribution, writing: 'No division of resources is an equal division if, once the division is complete, [a person] would prefer someone's bundle of resources to his own bundle'.[39] We know something has gone drastically wrong when a vice has been elevated into a standard of justice.[40] It should also be noted that luck egalitarians have supported genetic engineering and have in fact seen it as a matter of justice, which perhaps most clearly expresses their 'metaphysical crusade against contingency'.[41]

[37] See Roberts, 'The Blessings of Gratitude' for an illuminating discussion of how gratitude counteracts envy, resentment, and regret.

[38] Harry Frankfurt writes: 'The mistaken belief that economic equality is important in itself leads people to detach the problem of formulating their economic ambitions from the problem of understanding what is most fundamentally significant to them. It influences them to take too seriously, as though it were a matter of great moral concern, a question that is inherently rather insignificant and not directly to the point, namely, how their economic status compares with the economic status of others. In this way the doctrine of equality contributes to the moral disorientation and shallowness of our time' ('Equality as a Moral Ideal', *Ethics* 98:1 [1987], 23).

[39] *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 67.

[40] John Kekes writes in response to Dworkin: 'It should not escape notice how extraordinary it is to make envy the test of ideal distribution. Envy is the vice of resenting the advantages of another person. It is a vice because it tends to lead to action that deprives people of advantages they have earned by legal and moral means. The envy test does not ask whether people are entitled to their advantages; it asks whether those who lack them would like to have them. … Instead of recognizing that envy is wrong, Dworkin elevates it into a moral standard' (*The Illusions of Egalitarianism* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003], 71).

[41] Rawls writes: '[It] is not in general to the advantage of the less fortunate to propose policies which reduce the talents of others. Indeed, by accepting the difference principle, they view the greater abilities as a social asset to be used for the common advantage. But it is also in the interest of each to have greater natural assets. This enables him to pursue a preferred plan of life. In the original position, then, the parties want to insure for their descendants the best genetic endowment (assuming their own to be fixed). The pursuit of reasonable policies in this regard is something that earlier generations owe to later ones' (*A Theory of Justice*, 92). Dworkin writes: 'if playing God means struggling to improve our species, bringing

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Cohen is opposed to genetic engineering on the basis of his existential conservatism, but again here we see a conflict with his luck egalitarianism.

I think in the conflict between existential conservatism and luck egalitarianism we should side with the former over the latter. This is both because of what I have argued is the spiritual importance of existential conservatism for addressing the problem of cosmodicy and because luck egalitarianism is not a compelling account of justice. I think we do better to preserve the traditional common sense notion of justice as having to do with desert, where people are thought to be deserving of certain consideration and treatment in virtue of their humanity (in light of a view of human dignity), in virtue of the choices they make and the person they become, and in virtue of their membership in a political community. And what deserves our special consideration is dire human need. In regard to responding to contingencies of natural and social circumstance, Wiggins writes that the key issue can be stated as follows:

> [Given] that, whatever principles may be instituted by human beings to regulate the social and political spheres, the human world will always be replete with contingency, good luck, bad luck, and the rest, what guarantees of what strength must we place among the conditions of our cooperation in order to ensure that the worst of the bad luck that anyone encounters will be alleviated, along with its consequences, by concerted social action? After all, the realist will say, the first and foremost thing that affects and harms the dispossessed or destitute is dire, unsatisfied need.[42]

With respect to economic justice, I contend, we should be *sufficientarians* rather than egalitarians (if we must use ugly words). This means that what matters from the standpoint of justice is, as Harry Frankfurt puts it, 'not that everyone should have *the same* but that each should have *enough*',[43] where what counts as 'enough', on my

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into our conscious designs a resolution to improve what God deliberately or nature blindly has evolved over eons, then the first principle of ethical individualism [– 'that it is objectively important that any human life, once begun, succeed rather than fail' –] commands that struggle' (*Sovereign Virtue*, 448, 452).

[42] *Ethics*, 200. See also Wiggins, 'Claims of Need', in *Needs, Values, Truth*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998 [1987]).

[43] 'Equality as a Moral Ideal', 21.

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view, is that each person can live and live well in a characteristically human mode of life, and where relieving misery, i.e. meeting dire human need, is of paramount importance.[44] The specific means we take to ensure that people have enough will be a matter of prudential judgment, though it seems that it should involve some combination of law-governed markets, government assistance, and private charity.

Leaving aside these details (which take us beyond the scope of this essay), what I want to emphasize is that this sufficientarian conception of economic justice, unlike luck egalitarianism, fits with existential conservatism, given it first of all seeks to cherish, preserve, and foster the gift (or given good) of human life. Secondly, it also seeks to preserve the given good of the social bond. Instead of engaging in 'a metaphysical crusade against contingency', we should, as Wiggins says, 'embark on the simpler and altogether more positive alternative project of engaging all citizens as fully as possible, in as many ways as possible, but each in the way best suited to their own aptitudes and predispositions, with the shared thing in which they all participate, and of removing some of the greatest obstacles to this'.[45] Scruton in fact holds a similar view. He maintains that a well-functioning political society depends upon a strong sense of 'we', i.e. a first-person plural, and he writes: 'No such first-person plural can emerge in a society divided against itself, in which local antagonisms and class war eclipse every understanding of a shared destiny. … A believable conservatism has to suggest ways of spreading the benefit of social membership to those who have not succeeded in gaining it for themselves'. Scruton goes on to say: 'the more we take from this arrangement, the more we must give in return. This is not a contractual obligation. It is an obligation of gratitude'.[46] We might also speak here of 'obligations of piety', as we saw Scruton do earlier and which he says 'stem from the natural gratitude towards what is *given*'. But piety not only involves gratitude; it can also be seen as synonymous with reverence. Piety requires us to show reverence for that which is reverence-worthy, including human life and the sources of our existence. And thus it is also important for motivating our concern for those in need.

Although existential conservatism is underdetermined with regard to many of the particulars of political life, as it leaves much of this to

[44] It is also important here to cultivate the virtue of contentment (see Frankfurt, 'Equality as a Moral Ideal', 36-41; see also Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, II.13).

[45] *Ethics*, 306.

[46] *How to Be a Conservative*, 41-2.

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the difficult work of prudential judgment, it nevertheless cultivates an existential stance that emphasizes gratitude or appreciation for the given. And this, I suggest, provides a much sounder basis for our political life than the common alternatives of indignation, resentment, envy, greed, and lust for power. We do better to begin by counting our blessings and work the rest out from there.[47]

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