Conservatism in Epistemology*

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Introduction

Insofar as my attachment to one of my own beliefs outstrips my justification for it, I hold the belief in question dogmatically. Perhaps the ultimate expression of the dogmatic attitude is to say “I happen to believe it—and that’s all the justification I need for continuing to believe it!” Philosophers, of course, have traditionally prided themselves on ferreting out such dogmatically held beliefs, and exposing them to the light of rational criticism.

It is curious, then, to find a clear echo of the dogmatic attitude enshrined, as a principle of justification itself, in the writings of various contemporary epistemologists and philosophers of science. The principle of epistemic conservatism takes many forms. But the basic idea behind it is simple: that an agent is in some measure justified in maintaining a belief simply in virtue of the fact that the agent has that belief. Thus an agent may, according to the conservative principle, correctly say “I happen to believe it—and that is part of my justification for continuing to believe it!”

Despite the initial implausibility of this suggestion, various epistemic benefits have been claimed for the conservative principle: that it embodies an important aspect of cognitive efficiency; that it can help us solve underdetermination problems in science; that it is needed to cope with the fact that we cannot remember the justifications for many of our beliefs; and, perhaps most provocatively, that without some form of conservative principle, none of our beliefs could be justified at all.

This essay will defend what I take to be the common-sense suspicions about conservatism. In certain conditions, the fact that one believes a proposition can help provide evidence that the proposition is true. But the bare fact that one happens to believe a proposition does not, I will argue, justify one at all in maintaining that belief. A critical examination of the philosophical arguments

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that have been offered in favor of conservatism, combined with a close look at some consequences of consistently applying the principle in choosing among beliefs, should help us resist the temptation to sanction even an attenuated form of dogmatic thinking in our epistemology.

1. Conservatism in Contemporary Epistemology

Perhaps the most well-known use of conservatism is in the epistemological picture W.V. Quine (1951) put forth as an alternative to positivist foundationalism. On Quine’s picture, our system of belief is shaped by experience holistically. We strive to accommodate new experiences while maximizing two factors: overall simplicity of the new system, and conservation of old beliefs. According to Quine, the laws of logic themselves are revisable in this way. Thus conservatism (along with simplicity) plays a surprisingly fundamental epistemic role in his system.

The commitment to conservatism is not restricted to the Quinean tradition. In Roderick Chisholm’s (1989), we again find conservatism playing a fundamental role, this time in the context of a foundationalist system. The basic epistemic principles Chisholm proposes include “Accepting h tends to make h probable”, and “If S accepts h and if h is not disconfirmed by S’s total evidence, then h is probable for S”.

Still another prominent manifestation of conservatism appears in Bayesian accounts of justification. Bayesians typically endorse rules of “conditionalization” for changing our beliefs in response to the deliverances of experience. Conditionality principles are not exactly rules for maintaining beliefs—indeed, the Bayesian degrees-of-belief framework is one in which the pretheoretic all-or-nothing notion of belief has no obvious application. But conditionalization principles work by requiring the agent to hold fixed certain conditional degrees of belief (e.g. my degree of belief that the die will come up 6 on the condition that it comes up an even number will typically be 1/3). It was Carnap’s hope that the conditional degrees of belief an agent preserved could ultimately be singled out by purely logical means; however, most contemporary Bayesians have given up this hope. Thus what conditionalization principles turn out to require is that the individual agent preserve a certain aspect of the belief system that she happens to have. So these principles end up embodying, albeit in a somewhat atypical way, the conservative spirit.

The fact that conservatism turns up in such diverse and influential accounts of justification surely suggests that there is something to it. Still, when one thinks about it directly, there is something intuitively suspect in the basic conservative idea. How could the mere fact that an agent happens to believe something justify her, to any extent at all, in continuing to believe that same thing in the future? Neither Quine nor Chisholm nor the Bayesian authors I have read do much in the
way of addressing this worry. But some other philosophers have explicitly set out to defend conservatism. Let us turn now to consider their arguments.

2. Conservatism and Cognitive Efficiency

The first argument I'd like to consider is a frankly pragmatic one suggested (though not ultimately endorsed) by Lawrence Sklar (1975), and developed (and endorsed) by William Lycan (1988). It begins with the observation that changing one's mind, like changing one's social institutions, expends a certain amount of energy. Changing one's mind for no reason is thus cognitively inefficient. Other things being equal, then, one should keep old beliefs rather than adopt new ones. Thus conservatism, at least in a fairly weak form, seems to flow from simple considerations of cognitive efficiency.

Let us assess what kind of support considerations of general cognitive efficiency would give us for respecting epistemic conservatism. Consider a proponent of some scientific theory who is confronted with an incompatible theory which is equal in its evidential support, explanatory power, simplicity, etc. What should the scientist do in such a situation? Lycan's advice is in keeping with conservatism: "I say, keep the original, without shame, because it was there first" (175). It is important that this is to be construed as epistemic advice; on Lycan's account, the scientist is more justified or warranted in believing the original theory. And indeed, both he and Sklar suggest that conservatism can help with the vexing problem of underdetermination of scientific theories. But how compelling should this suggestion be, if adhering to conservatism is desirable only because it saves the energy that would be expended in changing one's mind?

The first thing to notice is that conservatism does not, on this account, provide the scientist with any evidence that her original theory is more likely to be true than the rival one. Now I suspect that if a scientist were convinced that a rival theory was just as likely to be true as the theory she had been believing, she would be unwilling—and perhaps even quite genuinely unable—to follow the conservative advice offered above. But let us put this question aside, and suppose that the scientist is moved by pragmatic considerations. She is considering maintaining her belief not because her theory is better than the rival, but simply because changing her mind would require expending a bit of psychic energy.

When this sort of pragmatic consideration is brought to bear directly on particular epistemic decisions, it seems out of place. If a scientist were to take such considerations into account, it would seem that she should not stop at worrying about expending psychic energy in mind-changing. Perhaps she should find out which theory her department chair wants her to believe. Or the dean, or even the provost. Indeed, continuing this line of thought a step or two further, perhaps she should entertain the sort of considerations commonly attributed to Pascal! Surely
not all of these considerations are relevant to the epistemic justification of the scientist's belief.

Lycan, however, does not see the pragmatic advantages of conservatism as being directly invoked in particular epistemic decisions. He distinguishes two sorts of practical considerations: the particular practical reasons a given individual may have for holding a given belief; and the general practical benefits a certain belief-forming policy may have in helping a species survive evolutionary selection. Only the latter are relevant to the analysis of epistemic justification. (Lycan describes his position as epistemic rule-utilitarianism rather than act-utilitarianism.) Thus Lycan defends conservatism on pragmatic grounds without endorsing Pascal's wager.

Nevertheless, it is not clear that making this distinction helps answer the basic intuitive problem posed by Pascal's wager. The problem is not with taking divine approval in particular as a ground for belief, but with the very idea that the kind of practical considerations entertained above should carry epistemic weight. (If one were concerned about ethical act utilitarianism on the grounds that pleasure and pain were morally irrelevant, one's worries would not be allayed by the move to rule utilitarianism.) Intuitively, considerations of cognitive efficiency do not seem like the kind of thing that could help justify epistemic conservatism.8

This point, however, might be thought to miss the thrust of Lycan's argument completely. For he says that he does not intend evolutionary/pragmatic considerations to provide an epistemic justification for conservatism:

The answer to [the question]—"What justifies any particular appeal to one or more of the [explanatory] virtues?"—is "Nothing," if the question is taken to mean "What more general and fundamental principle mandates simplicity or conservatism?" Obviously, some epistemic principles are ultimate; what is used to prove everything else cannot itself be proved, as Bentham says. (158)

I am not suggesting that our customary canons of theory-choice are epistemically justified by the adaptive utility of our habit of using them; I have already denied that they are justified in the epistemological sense by anything at all. (159)

In evaluating this position, let us grant that if conservatism is one of our most fundamental epistemic principles, it cannot be justified by any "more general and fundamental principle". This leaves open the possibility of other sorts of arguments in conservatism's behalf. We might, as Lycan (158) notes, see how conservatism fits in with judgements about the rationality of particular epistemic decisions we make, or imagine making. Insofar as conservatism is consonant with these other judgements, it is supported as being a component of epistemic justification.

Now a question arises: might some instances of this style of argument provide epistemic justification for conservatism? Such arguments could not justify conservatism by reference to some more basic epistemic principle; but I see no
reason to think that all epistemic justification must proceed in that fashion. Just as we may use certain beliefs and epistemic principles to argue that conservatism would be evolutionarily advantageous, we might well use other beliefs and epistemic principles to evaluate conservatism in other ways. And in doing so, we need not limit ourselves to assessing the fit between conservatism and particular epistemic judgements. There is no barrier even to our exploring the question of whether respecting conservatism will increase the probability of having true beliefs. And given that we take having true beliefs to be an important epistemic value, such an assessment might well bear strongly on a distinctively epistemic evaluation of conservatism.

Thus the fact that our fundamental epistemic principles cannot be justified by some “more general and fundamental principle” does not show that our fundamental principles cannot be “justified in the epistemological sense by anything at all”. And if epistemic justification for our fundamental canons is in principle possible, then the fact that pragmatic/evolutionary considerations do not provide such justification for conservatism is not beside the point after all. It shows that the evolutionary/pragmatic considerations fail to speak to a legitimate question we may pose to any defender of conservatism.

The sort of justification demanded here would, of course, eventually involve circularity. Like Lycan’s evolutionary argument, it would carry no weight with a general inductive skeptic. Nevertheless, this sort of justification might well satisfy someone who accepted many of our beliefs and epistemic principles, but who doubted that conservatism was a part of epistemic justification. Moreover, to the extent that conservatism fits badly with our other beliefs and epistemic principles, we have the best kind of reason we could have for rejecting it. And this would be true even if we accepted Lycan’s claim that no argument could provide epistemic justification for conservatism.

How well does conservatism fit with our other beliefs and epistemic principles? So far, we have noted a common-sense suspicion that the fact that one holds a certain belief should not be seen as justifying one in continuing to hold it; and we have looked at an argument to show that conservative reasoning would be beneficial from a pragmatic/evolutionary perspective. Neither of these considerations, it seems to me, comes close to being dispositive. Our final verdict on conservatism must rest on a more thorough exploration of its interconnections with our beliefs about justification.9

3. Conservatism and Lost Evidence

A strikingly different argument for conservatism has been put forth by Gilbert Harman (1986, esp. chs. 4 and 5). Harman points out that we often fail to keep track of the evidence upon which our beliefs are based. For example, I currently believe that the population of India is greater than that of the United States. Presumably, I was once told this by my mother, or a teacher, or some other reliable source, and I (quite rationally) accepted the source’s word for it. But
today, I could not cite the original justification for my belief if my life depended on it.

Upon examination, a surprising number of our beliefs turn out to be like this. (As Harman points out, their prevalence seems to be a natural result of the fact that our memories are limited—we simply can’t clutter up our brains by remembering the evidence for everything we believe.) Should we call all of these beliefs irrational, and advise people to give them up? Would people be equally rational if they simply “switched sides,” and adopted opposite beliefs (so that I might start believing that the population of the United States is greater than that of India)? Intuitively, the answer is “no”. Yet the obvious alternative seems to be to hold that people are justified in holding onto such beliefs, even though they cannot otherwise justify them. The very fact that these beliefs are believed looks like it counts in their epistemic favor. And this, it seems, is a clear manifestation of conservatism.\(^{10}\)

Before we conclude, however, that acknowledging the legitimacy of maintaining my belief about the population of India commits me to conservatism, it will be helpful to consider the kind of case that makes conservatism intuitively unattractive in the first place. Suppose you flip a coin, and it lands out of my sight. Without going over to look, I decide that it has landed “tails” up. I do not believe the coin to be biased, nor do I believe myself telepathic, nor am I a victim of the gambler’s fallacy who has just seen several “heads” in a row. I simply believe that the coin has landed “tails” up. Now, it seems to me that the fact that I now believe that it landed “tails” up does not justify me—in any measure at all—in maintaining my belief that it landed “tails” up. No belief about the orientation of the coin is justified in my present evidential situation, and no less evidence would be required to justify me in believing that it landed “tails” up than would be required to justify me in believing that it landed “heads” up. To the degree that I favor “tails” over “heads” in revising my beliefs, merely on the basis of the fact that I currently believe it landed “tails” up, I am being dogmatic.

What, then, accounts for the difference between our intuitions in the coin case and our intuitions in the case of my beliefs about the population of India? In both cases, I have a belief for which I am unable to cite any grounds. And in neither case is the belief of some special sort that needs no justification. Yet in one case, maintaining the belief seems quite reasonable; while in the other, maintaining the belief would be almost paradigmatically unreasonable.

It seems to me that part of the difference between these cases lies in a fact I alluded to earlier: that in the case of my belief about the population of India, I suspect that I originally formed this belief (like most of my geographical beliefs) based on the testimony of my mother, or a teacher, or some other generally reliable source. Furthermore, since India is a common topic of conversation in my family, I would have had a good chance of discovering an erroneous belief on this topic if I had one. Thus although I cannot remember my justification for beginning to have the belief, I have general reasons to think that beliefs I now
have about the population of India are accurate. And these reasons provide me with a justification for maintaining the belief.

This contrasts strikingly with the case of the flipped coin. There, my background knowledge of the situation serves to rule out the ordinary reliable means by which I might have come to have an opinion about the coin’s orientation. In that case, there is no reason to think that my belief is an accurate indicator of the state of the world. And this fact seems to be precisely what lies behind our intuitive judgement that, in this case, the fact that I believe that the coin has landed “tails” up provides no justification at all for my continuing to believe that it landed “tails” up.11

It is revealing, I think, to compare my epistemic attitude toward my own beliefs with my attitude toward any other information source which I have reason to believe is at least sometimes reliable. If I see a claim printed in the Times, this usually gives me some reason to believe it. And this is often true even if I don’t know the reporter’s justification for making the claim.12 Of course, if the claim occurs in a story by one of the Times’ more notoriously inaccurate reporters, I will accord it much less credence. If the claim is made by certain columnists, or by a Presidential spokesperson, I may accord it no credence at all—or even take it as reason for believing the claim’s negation.

There is thus no special attitude that I must take to statements in the Times simply in virtue of their appearing in print; no epistemic principle dictating that I should believe—to any extent at all—everything I read. I often have background beliefs which lead me to give credence to certain things I read, but the question of whether a particular printed claim merits any credence, and, if it does, the question of how much credence it merits, are entirely dependent on these background beliefs. Printed inscriptions are one of the many kinds of evidence that I use, in standard ways, to draw conclusions about the world.

Now it seems to me that my attitude toward my own beliefs in the cases considered above is essentially similar. Typically, I have reasons to think that a given belief of mine is an accurate indicator of reality. The strength of the indication varies markedly, of course, from belief to belief, depending at least in part on my background beliefs about the likely genesis of the belief in question, as is illustrated in the contrast between the coin and India cases. But in every case, any epistemic weight I attach to the fact that I have a certain belief derives entirely from independent reasons for thinking that belief to be accurate.

To see this point another way, let us compare the attitude I take toward my own beliefs to the attitude I take toward the beliefs of others. Suppose that I firmly believe that Belgium is more populous than Holland. One day, I discover that my friend Pereboom—who was born in Holland and who spends his free time perusing atlases and almanacs—firmly believes the reverse. Neither of us, we may suppose, can cite any grounds for his belief. In deciding how to accommodate this new information into my own beliefs about Holland, I should of course give my own belief some weight. But given Pereboom’s general geo-
graphical prowess, and his particular expertise in matters Netherlandish, I would be foolish—or, more precisely, dogmatic—not to give his belief more weight than mine. Conversely, if the beliefs in question concerned Indian cookery rather than Dutch geography, I should give my own beliefs more weight. And if I find that Pereboom and I have opposite and equally strong beliefs, for which we cannot cite grounds, and which concern matters about which I have no reason to think either of us to be more reliable, I should suspend belief. Insofar as I am epistemically rational, the fact that one of the conflicting beliefs happens to be my own is simply not relevant.

On this model, we can account nicely for the phenomenon that Harman has brought out: that in many cases, it is rational to maintain a belief even when we would not know what to say if we were asked for the grounds of the belief in question. Of course, strictly speaking, we should not say in such cases that we have no grounds for maintaining the belief. True, we do not have the original grounds that prompted us to adopt the belief—those have been forgotten. But on closer inspection, we do have grounds for maintaining our belief, grounds of a fairly ordinary evidential sort: we have reason to believe that the fact that we have a certain belief is evidence for the truth of that same belief.13

This model distinguishes correctly between the India and coin cases, which Harman’s account cannot seem to do. And more importantly, it does so without entailing that we have reason to continue believing things simply because we happen to believe them already—without invoking conservatism. Of course, there is a kind of “conservative principle” which may be said to follow from the model, if I think that my beliefs are generally reliable: usually, the fact that I believe something does help provide a reason for my continued belief. But if this were all that Harman was defending, it would be far less interesting. For this sort of “conservatism” is a derivative principle, epistemically on a par with countless others, such as “in general, believe what you read in the Times” or “Pereboom is right about most things.” Such a principle might be plausible (it does not, after all, accord an agent’s beliefs any privileged status whatsoever); but it would not provide any of the special benefits that have been claimed on conservatism’s behalf. The interestingly robust conservative principle, which purports to be a fundamental principle of rationality, does not seem to be required by our treatment of beliefs originally based on now-forgotten evidence.14

There is, however, one line of objection to this argument that I have not yet discussed. It goes something like this: I have been suggesting that our attitudes toward our own beliefs should be, in certain important respects, parallel to our attitudes toward the beliefs of others; that our own beliefs shouldn’t be seen as epistemically privileged in the way conservatism requires. But in assessing the reliability of my own (or other people’s) beliefs, I must depend on background beliefs. And the background beliefs I use will, of course, be my own. But doesn’t this require granting a certain kind of epistemic privilege to certain beliefs because they are mine? Must we not then appeal to conservatism in some form after all?
The line of thought exemplified in this objection has, in fact, been explored, quite independently of forgotten-evidence considerations. Indeed, it constitutes what is to my mind the most powerful general argument that has been given for conservatism. Let us now turn to consider this argument.

4. Conservatism and Confirmational Holism

According to a widely held epistemological doctrine, no belief is confirmed (or justified) entirely independently of one’s other beliefs. Beliefs about one’s immediate surroundings, and even about one’s own current sensations, are in principle capable of being undermined by one’s other beliefs. This holist doctrine has been most famously championed by Quine, as part of an epistemological picture which, as we have seen, has conservatism at its center. But holism has also been embraced by a great many others who reject various aspects of Quine’s philosophy. Thus it would be an important result if conservatism turned out to be a necessary component of any holist epistemology. And this is just what has been argued, by Sklar (1975, 395–400) and by Richard Foley (1982, 169–70).15

There are some differences in how the holist position is characterized by Sklar and Foley. Sklar refers to

the view, shared by a number of philosophers of otherwise radically divergent cast of mind, that all epistemic justification is relative to an assumed background of believed theory. . . . From this point of view, there are no “foundations” . . . which themselves require reference to no other beliefs for their justification. (1975, 396)

Foley borrows Goldman’s term ‘maximalism’ to describe the holistic position. Goldman attributes maximalism to Quine, and explains it as follows:

It invites us to use all our antecedent beliefs whenever we wish to appraise our cognitive methods. A maximalist argues that there is likely to be little or no basis for choice among methods unless we can employ a prior corpus of beliefs. And if some prior beliefs are allowed, why not allow them all? Or at least the more confidently held among them, or those arrived at by methods which, until now, we regard as most reliable? (Goldman 1979, 30)

Foley later writes:

The kind of position I have in mind is one which implies that what propositions it is rational for a person to believe are determined in some holistic way by what propositions the person happens to believe when that set is suitably corrected. (1983, 168)

Common to all of these characterizations is the holist claim that no belief is confirmed in isolation from the agent’s other beliefs. Foley may well understand the position he is discussing as entailing that only a belief’s connections to other beliefs are relevant to its justification. Such an understanding (which is not, I
think, Quine’s or Goldman’s) would dramatically narrow the scope of the argument, to apply only to purely coherentist accounts of justification. Since the argument will be more interesting if holism is taken more generally, I will usually do so. I will, however, also discuss a way in which the argument may be more compelling on the more restrictive interpretation.

The argument goes roughly as follows: Let us assume that the justification of any one of an agent’s beliefs depends essentially on the agent’s other beliefs. Now any justification that depends on the agent’s other beliefs will be legitimate only if those other beliefs have something to be said for themselves epistemically. Thus we need to assume, before any justification can take place at all, that there is something to be said epistemically for whatever background beliefs the agent happens to have. And that, of course, is a version of conservatism.

This argument is initially quite persuasive. Let us begin to evaluate it by taking a closer look, to see just where in the holistic justification process conservatism must be presupposed. Suppose we take our agent to be justified in believing that P. On the holist account, the agent is justified, at least in part, because P is supported by certain of the agent’s background beliefs—say that Q, R, and S. But the fact that P is supported by S could hardly count in P’s favor if the agent’s belief that S were itself completely unjustified. Is conservatism required at this point, to give S a favorable epistemic presumption?

Here it seems that the holist should concede the point that the justification of P would be undermined if nothing epistemically favorable could be said about S. But it is not clear at all that the holist has to rely on conservatism to provide the favorable epistemic appraisal. For S may be justified in the same way P was; and this did not seem to require the invocation of any conservative principle. Of course, the holist will have to admit that the justification of S will itself depend, at least in part, on other beliefs. But there is no reason to think that these other beliefs will not, in turn, be justified in the same way, depending on still other beliefs, and so on. Thus it seems that there is no point in the justification of any particular belief at which the holist needs to explicitly invoke the conservative assumption.

There is, however, something unsatisfying about this reply. Suppose that the agent’s beliefs are mutually supporting in the way that would be required for each of them to be justified on the holist account. Couldn’t they still, as a whole, be unjustified? Sklar asks:

[W]ithout some places at which the body of belief as a whole is rationalized by reference to something outside the corpus of belief, can’t we imagine wholly incompatible total belief structure[s] all equally “rational” from the point of view of “local” justification? (398)

Sklar suggests that embracing conservatism is necessary to answer this challenge:
For the complete and adequate answer to the challenge to the rationality of beliefs as a whole is that without some reason for change, sticking with what you have is the only rational thing to do. (398)

Thus conservatism, though not invoked in the justification of any of the agent’s individual beliefs, must be invoked to ward off a challenge to all of the agent’s beliefs simultaneously.16

Now it seems clear enough that the agent cannot respond to this kind of global skeptical challenge in the same way she responded to local challenges to her individual beliefs. But this could show a need for invoking conservatism only if invoking conservatism could actually succeed in rebuffing the challenge. And it seems to me that it cannot. For the skeptic who challenges the total belief structure of a conservative agent will of course be challenging, among other things, conservatism itself. To invoke conservatism in response to such a skeptical challenge would simply beg the question. Thus conservatism is no more capable of refuting the global skeptic than are any of the agent’s ordinary beliefs.17

This point flows from a familiar one—that there is in principle no way of answering a skeptic who challenges all of one’s beliefs and canons of justification. And it is important to remember that this fact alone should not cause us any epistemic distress. For it is a fact about rhetoric, not about epistemology. The fact that we cannot answer a global skeptic is due to the absence of any premises that can be used non-question-beggingly against him. As such, our inability to answer this sort of skeptic tells us nothing at all about the justification, or lack thereof, of the beliefs or epistemic canons that we happen to have. (And for this reason, as skepticism approaches the global limit, its epistemological interest diminishes.)

If conservatism were the only way we had of meeting global skeptical challenges, then embracing conservatism might seem an attractive alternative to pervasive skeptical doubt. But conservatism is not the only way of meeting global skeptical challenges, because it provides no way of meeting such challenges. I have suggested that the fact that such challenges are intrinsically unanswerable should make us wary of taking them too seriously. But even if we should take them very seriously, we should not think that they give us reason to embrace conservatism.

5. Conservatism and Confirmational Holism, Cont’d.

There is, however, another way of presenting a challenge to holism which, it might be thought, could only be answered by invoking conservatism. Foley presents his challenge in a way that suggests an interpretation different from the one we gave Sklar’s:

[W]hat is so special about the propositions a person happens to believe? Why think that the propositions it is rational for a person to believe are a function of some
holistic considerations applied to these propositions? Whatever these holistic considerations might be, why not apply them to the negations of the propositions he believes or to some other list of propositions and then conclude that the resulting propositions are those it is rational for the person to believe? The only remotely plausible way of answering these questions, I have been suggesting, is to accept a principle of epistemic conservatism. (170)

Here it seems that perhaps conservatism is not to be invoked by the agent in the justification of any particular belief, or of all his beliefs. Rather, conservatism is invoked in response to a philosophical question about the justification process itself. The question is addressed not to the agent, but to us as epistemologists. Why should we think that an agent’s belief will be more justified if it fits with the other beliefs the agent has?

This way of putting the question does not obviously make it intrinsically unanswerable. The body of challenged belief is not ours, but the agent’s; so using our beliefs in answering the question does not automatically beg it. Thus there is no reason, in principle, why conservatism couldn’t be invoked to answer the question.

Nevertheless, given the intuitive implausibility of the conservative principle, we would be well advised to see whether its invocation was somehow necessary here. And so far, we have seen no reason to suppose that it is. For the question that has been put to us—why should we think that support from an agent’s other beliefs helps confer justification?—might well be answerable in other ways. This will depend on whether holism, or the considerations which have led epistemologists to embrace holism, allow for the possibility of answering Foley’s question in a non-conservative manner. To canvass the possibilities, let us begin with a brief look at the motivations for holism.

Epistemologists of all persuasions have long assumed that many, or even most, beliefs depend for their justifications on their connections to other beliefs. However, it was thought that there were some exceptions—beliefs that were justified by pure experience or self-evidence. Quine and others argued against the existence of these exceptions; they held that the justification of even prime candidates for membership in these exceptional categories could, in fact, be undermined by other beliefs. Thus even the supposedly foundational beliefs are dependent for their justification upon other beliefs; there just do not seem to be any beliefs that are justified in a non-holistic way.

In thus renouncing strong foundationalism, the holist leaves open a number of possibilities concerning the relationship between beliefs and experience. One possibility is a pure coherence account, in which experience plays no justificatory role, and beliefs are justified solely on the basis of their connections to other beliefs. This sort of position has been advocated by some prominent proponents of holism. But it is important to realize that the holist arguments showing that the justification of every belief depends at least in part on its connections to other
beliefs do not themselves support the view that a belief’s justification depends only on its connections to other beliefs. Thus there is ample room in a holist framework for experience to play a justificatory role—as evidenced by Quine’s own metaphor of experience exerting a pressure on peripheral beliefs. One can, on this sort of holistic picture, even point to the general corrective of experiential pressure as, in Sklar’s terms, a “place[] at which the body of belief as a whole is rationalized by something outside the corpus of belief” (398). To the extent that an agent’s beliefs are informed by experience—albeit in a holistic way—we do have good reason to believe that the agent would do better to use those beliefs (rather than their negations, or some random set of propositions) in deciding what to believe.

This point may be made by proponents of various different holist accounts of the justificatory connections between experience and belief. Most obviously, it can be made by externalists, who see justification as accruing to beliefs produced by, e.g., perceptual input in certain reliable ways. It can also be made by those internalists who hold that perceptual experiences themselves (and not beliefs about perceptual experiences) confer justification on some of our beliefs. One may, in either of these ways, hold that something other than beliefs can do justificatory work, and still hold that beliefs also do justificatory work, and that the justification of any belief depends in part on its connections to others.

It might be thought that it would be harder to answer Foley’s question if one held that justification depended only on factors internal to the belief system of the agent. But many of those who hold this view also espouse some form of foundationalism which takes certain special sorts of beliefs to have at least some degree of intrinsic justification. On such accounts, being believed does not in general confer any justification upon a proposition, but being, e.g., a perceptual belief does. Of course, strong foundationalism, with its incorrigible perceptual beliefs, is not compatible with holism. But more modest versions of foundationalism allow for according some degree of intrinsic justification to a certain class of beliefs while acknowledging that the justification of even these beliefs is sensitive to holistic considerations.

Thus on many ways of conceiving of the justificatory relation between experience and belief, a holist may invoke experiential input to answer Foley’s question without resorting to conservatism. But there is an important class of holist justification theories that cannot avail themselves of this sort of response. As noted above, a prominent kind of holism (and the kind Foley seems to have in mind) employs some version of a pure coherence theory on which the justification of every belief is a function only of its relations to other beliefs. And it is difficult to see how a coherence theorist can answer Foley’s question by claiming that the justificatory input from experience gives us a reason to think that the agent would do better relying on her beliefs than on their negations.

Coherence theorists have offered solutions to this problem that do not involve invoking conservatism. But rather than exploring the adequacy of various non-
conservative coherentist responses to Foley’s question, I would like to ask whether conservatism is capable of providing the coherence theorist with a satisfactory answer to Foley’s question. It is not at all clear that it is. The intuitive worry behind Foley’s question is that, without some justificatory connections to experience, it would seem that an agent’s beliefs might easily be like a fairy tale: a coherent set of propositions that are nevertheless disconnected from reality. And without some reason to believe that the agent’s beliefs are connected to reality, we have no reason to take support from those same beliefs as conferring justification. But if this is Foley’s worry, it is hard to see how it could be assuaged by the invocation of conservatism. Why should the fact that a given coherent set of propositions are believed by the agent count in any way against the possibility that the propositions are disconnected from reality? To invoke conservatism in such a context would, I think, amount to little more than an unmotivated refusal to take the problem seriously. And if conservatism doesn’t address the problem, it cannot be supported as being required for the problem’s solution. Thus it seems to me that there is little point in even a pure coherence theorist about justification invoking conservatism in response to Foley’s question.22

6. Holism without Conservatism

In the previous two sections, we saw conservatism being urged as the required response to certain challenges to holist justification. When we examined these challenges, however, we found either that they could not be met by invoking conservatism, or else that they could be met adequately without invoking conservatism. This undercut the initially persuasive argument purporting to show that conservatism is needed by holists. But it does not show that an anti-conservative holism really makes sense. And it would be especially interesting to see that holism could work without conservatism, given the popularity of holism and the fact that Quine and some others who have followed in his holistic footsteps have often embraced conservatism.

While I have no rigorous argument to show that holism without conservatism is ultimately defensible, I do think that there is some reason for thinking so in common-sense examples of scientific theorizing, where evidential considerations are fairly clear. I’ll consider a kind of case in which conservatism is intuitively wrong, and which does not, like the earlier “coin” case, involve beliefs which appear in mysterious or unusual ways. But this type of theorizing also appears to comport perfectly well with the holist model of confirmation.

Suppose that a scientist holds some theory T—say that a certain class of diseases is caused by viruses—on the basis of the evidence available to her at the time. Suppose someone proposes a new theory—say that the diseases in question are due to a family of environmental toxins. Finally, let us suppose that the two theories are then widely acknowledged to be equally supported by the evidence, and that our scientist in particular concurs in this judgement.
Would it be epistemically rational for her to give more credence to \( T \) in the face of the fact that \( T' \) is (as she acknowledges) equally well supported? The conservative principle dictates that our scientist would be, in some measure at least, epistemically justified in giving more credence to \( T \). Yet intuitively, this is wrong. The scientist should give them equal credence; and in her future research, the fact that she once believed in \( T \) should play no epistemic role.\(^{23}\)

Of course, it might be quite rational for our scientist to continue exploring the consequences of \( T \) in hopes of supporting it further. There may be many reasons for this—for example, she may be familiar with the techniques and literature involved in studying viral disease. In fact, she may even have practical reasons for acting and thinking as if \( T \) were very likely to be true: her morale might be boosted, her thinking focussed, and her scientific performance generally enhanced by a "suspension of disbelief", or refusal to spend much time thinking about the possibility that \( T' \) is true.

But none of this, it seems to me, is relevant to the question of whether the scientist's present belief in \( T \) provides any epistemic justification for her to continue believing in \( T \). An actor may find it desirable, or even necessary, to "think himself into" a role, to put out of his mind the fact that he is an actor on a stage, and even believe, in a way, that he is Hamlet. But such an actor is in no way epistemically justified in believing himself to be a Danish prince. And the point is not just that his acting role doesn't provide him with sufficient justification for this belief; it provides him with no justification at all. Similarly, the scientist's present belief in theory \( T \) provides no epistemic reason at all for her (or anyone else) to continue to give \( T \) even a tiny bit more credence than \( T' \). A scientist who made explicit to her colleagues the fact that she gave \( T \) more credence than \( T' \) on the basis of her own belief in \( T \) would not, I think, be taken seriously.\(^{24}\)

The fact that conservatism looks so wrong when explicitly adduced in such situations suggests that philosophers should be very wary of postulating it as a basic principle of rationality. Of course, our intuitions in these cases are not in themselves decisive. For one thing, even epistemic conservatives would not hold that our scientist should give much more credence to \( T \) than to \( T' \). For another, some arguments in conservatism's favor appeal to the principle only in the context of global justification. But we have seen that the arguments for the necessity of invoking conservatism at the global level do not succeed. Without reason for endorsing conservatism on the global level, the intuition in question—that a scientist's history of belief in a particular theory is not the kind of thing that should affect her future epistemic appraisal of that theory—does support the conclusion that our original suspicions about conservatism were on the right track.\(^{25}\)

More importantly, nothing in the example suggests that the scientist is operating in a non-holistic manner. Her beliefs about the tests she uses for viral infection will rely on a large body of immunological theory. Her interpretations of the
readings on her instruments will rely on other theories. Indeed, the judgement that T and T′ are equally likely to be true will probably involve an enormous range of theoretical commitment. Moreover, there is no reason to suppose that our scientist takes her beliefs about the quantities her instruments have measured, or her present beliefs about instrument readings themselves, or even her beliefs about her apparent perceptions of instrument readings, as being immune from undermining by other beliefs. In other words, nothing about this type of scientific theorizing seems at all out of keeping with the holist dictum that every belief is confirmationally dependent upon others.

We may acknowledge that when a belief, or body of theory, is under scrutiny, we standardly need to evaluate it by relying on certain assumptions which serve as background in that context. But of course the beliefs being evaluated cannot themselves be counted as part of that background. It would beg the question to give them any privileged epistemic status simply on the grounds that they are believed. Furthermore, the fact that a certain theory functions as unchallenged background in a given context does not mean that a principle of conservatism applies to it, either. For it, too, is subject to evaluation; and when it is evaluated, the fact that it is believed will not count in its favor. Thus it seems that intuitively reasonable methods for choosing among competing theories present a strong *prima facie* case in which holistic confirmation resides comfortably within a distinctly non-conservative methodology.

**Conclusion**

There are good reasons to think that conservatism should not be counted among the canons of epistemic justification. The conservative idea—that the mere fact that an agent believes something can to some extent justify her in maintaining that belief—is implausible on its face. And applying the conservative principle to common-sense examples of theory choice yields starkly unintuitive consequences.

These intuitions do not, of course, settle the matter. For it might have turned out that invoking conservatism at the global level was a necessary component in constructing a plausible epistemology. (And perhaps the unintuitive consequences of conservatism would have seemed more palatable when we reflected on the solution it afforded to the problem of theoretical underdetermination.) But we have seen no reason to think that conservatism is required to account for epistemic justification. Conservatism is not what explains the fact that beliefs may remain justified when our original evidence for them has been forgotten. And, contrary to first appearances, conservatism need not be presupposed by an epistemology which takes confirmation holistically. Given the difficulty of defending conservatism, I think that this is a liberating result. For it suggests that epistemology can get along fine without conservatism, and thus that no defense of conservatism is necessary.

This raises difficult questions for any epistemology which employs some form
of conservative principle. We cannot be satisfied with brief comments such as Chisholm’s, in defense of an earlier version of his conservative principle, that it “may be thought of as an instance of a more general truth—that it is reasonable to put our trust in our own cognitive faculties unless we have some positive ground for questioning them” (1980, 14). And Quineans ought to wonder why, in filling out Quine’s metaphorical model of confirmation, we should take it as fundamental that in revising beliefs we “disturb the total system as little as possible” (1951, 44). Similarly, Bayesians should question exactly why maintaining certain conditional probabilities should be thought epistemically better than adopting an entirely different coherent set of conditional probabilities. Of course, if an otherwise very attractive epistemology was shown to require the assumption of a conservative principle, we might yet be tempted to accept the whole package. But the unattractiveness of conservatism should render it an epistemological last resort, not to be employed until shown necessary.

If, in the end, we reject conservatism, we will of course not be able to use it to allay skeptical doubts prompted by theories, scientific or everyday, which purport to be empirically equivalent rivals to the ones we believe. We will have to look elsewhere for that epistemic reassurance. But surely it is better to face the skeptic’s challenges squarely—whatever the eventual outcome—than to succumb to the hollow consolations of dogmatism.

Notes

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1 There are, of course, differences between various authors’ formulations of conservatism. I will use my fairly representative formulation without further comment when details of formulation are not significant.

2 Chisholm actually denies that his principles embody what he calls “epistemic conservatism”, which would entail that believing a proposition made it more probable than not, regardless of evidence one might have against the proposition. But Chisholm’s principles clearly make the agent’s belief in a proposition into a source of justification for itself. Using “probable” to denote a measure of epistemic justification (and not merely a degree of belief), he writes: “Believing that God exists, then, could make it probable for you that God exists.”

3 The classical rule of conditionalization, and an elegant and widely accepted generalization of that rule, are clearly set out in Richard Jeffrey’s (1965).

4 Conditionalization principles have not to my knowledge been discussed before as embodying conservatism per se. But some critics of Bayesianism have complained about precisely the conservative implications of conditionalization—that it gives the beliefs the agent presently happens to have an improper role in determining what beliefs the agent should adopt in the future. Levi (1970, 139–41) comments that conditionalization “at best saddles agents with their past judgements in a manner which cannot possibly be defended on [the subjectivist Bayesians’] own principles.” See also Kyburg (1974, 119–20 and 126–7).

5 My survey of conservative epistemic principles is not intended to be exhaustive. Sklar (1975) suggests that Goodman’s notion of entrenched is conservative. And Rawls’ method of reflective equilibrium in ethics has been criticized as having conservative implications (see Hare (1976) and Lyons (1976)).

6 Some Bayesians do provide detailed “Dutch-Book”-style arguments for conditionalization principles. (See Teller (1973) and Armendt (1980); these arguments are criticized in Christensen (1991)). The arguments turn on a kind of inconsistency between the present and future beliefs of agents who
violate conditionalization. But such arguments cannot address the intuitive worry raised in the text: that mere consistency with the earlier belief an agent happened to have should garner no epistemic credit.

Sklar remarks on this in his discussion of the pragmatic defense of conservatism:

We should be conservative because conservatism itself has utilitarian value, and not because we believe that it will increase the utility of our belief set, or even that it will probably do so, if we follow the conservative rule. There is a utility of methods which is not assimilable into utility of the results of applying the method.” (390)

A referee has pointed out that if “likely to be true” is read as equivalent to “epistemically warranted,” then my claim that conservatism does not add to likelihood of truth would beg the question against those who would see conservatism as a principle of epistemic warrant. Rejecting this reading, of course, leaves open a number of different and controversial interpretations of “likely” and “probable;” and I cannot hope to adjudicate between them here. I do not, however, think this unfair to the proponents of the pragmatic justification of conservatism. Sklar explicitly notes that the rationale he gives for conservatism is independent of any feature of a hypothesis such as “its ‘degree of probability relative to the evidence’” (390). And Lycan, discussing a case in which two scientists come up with rival theories equally supported by the evidence, writes:

Let us keep confirmation and probability theory for use where appropriate but admit that confirmation and formal probability do not tell the whole story of epistemological justification. It seems not unnatural to say of the two scientists in our example that both of their theories are confirmed to the same degree by their evidence, but that each is rational in cleaving to his or her own theory and rejecting the other’s, until new evidence comes along.

Thus neither Sklar nor Lycan wants to support conservatism by arguing that a theory’s having been believed makes it more likely to be true. This leaves open the question of whether conservatism is nonetheless a component of epistemic justification.

It could conceivably be argued (though Lycan doesn’t) that conservatism actually would bring obviously epistemic benefits in an indirect way. For example, it might be claimed that although conservatism was not a sign of truth, the conservative inquirer would have more energy left to find things out, and thus would end up believing more truths. But even this sort of benefit would, I think, fail to provide an argument that conservatism was a component of epistemic justification. Suppose, for example, we found out that those who, ceteris paribus, tended to believe optimistic hypotheses were as a result happier and more energetic, and thereby ended up learning more things than those who didn’t favor optimistic beliefs. (We might even imagine ‘that a certain modest degree of optimism had been selected for in evolution.) I think that this would not in the least tempt us to consider an agent’s belief to be in any measure epistemically justified by its optimism.

Roderick Firth (1981) distinguishes two types of belief-forming policies which might be considered by what he calls an epistemic rule-utilitarian. Some policies tend to produce true beliefs immediately; these might naturally be termed “reliable”. Others policies would produce true beliefs only in the long run (such as by directly producing false beliefs which in turn cause their believers to acquire other beliefs which are true). Firth notes that we might increase our stock of true beliefs by adopting rules of the second sort. But he quickly dismisses as implausible the suggestion that such rules would thereby confer warrant upon the beliefs they (immediately) produced. Foley (1983) would call a defense of conservatism based on such long-run epistemic benefits “not fully epistemic”.

I should note that rejecting Lycan’s evolutionary defense of conservatism need not commit one to rejecting the other principles—such as simplicity—that Lycan supports with evolutionary stories. These other principles may also be assessed in a variety of ways that might bear on their acceptability, and the results of these assessments may well differ from the results of our assessment of conservatism.

I should note that Harman is not entirely clear about the exact form of conservatism he is defending. He gives at least three nonequivalent explanations of the term (see pp. 30, 35, and 46). He also gives two interestingly different formulations of the closely related Principle of Positive Undermining; contrast the formulation on p. 39 (further interpreted on pp. 43–44) with the formulation on p. 115, which is nearly equivalent to the p. 46 formulation of conservatism. Much of what Harman
says suggests that he would defend a basic principle entailing that the mere fact that an agent has a belief by itself provides the agent with some justification for maintaining that belief. The implications of a more limited form of conservatism which might be supported by Harman’s arguments will also be discussed below.

The fact that it is rationally incumbent upon me to revise my belief in the coin case cannot be accounted for by Harman’s “Principle of Positive Undermining”. Harman’s Principle advises us to abandon beliefs when we positively believe that our original reasons for adopting them relied crucially on false assumptions. But in the coin case, no false assumptions seem to have been relied upon.

Harman proposes his principle as an alternative to the anti-conservative “Principle of Negative Undermining”, which advises us to abandon beliefs for which we cannot produce adequate justification. At first blush, it might seem as if this latter principle, though it gives the right result in the coin case, would have to be given up if we want the right result in the India case. As we will see below, however, the anti-conservative principle is actually quite compatible with maintaining my belief about the population of India.

For example, suppose the article states that a certain meeting took place in Williams Hall. Did the reporter actually attend the meeting and look at the sign outside the building? Did she look at a calendar to see where the meeting was scheduled to take place? Did she talk to someone who was at the meeting? These are only some of the ways she might have come to her belief about where the meeting took place; but such information about the reporter’s reasons for belief is not typically part of a news story.

This is why these sorts of cases do not really provide counterexamples to the Principle of Negative Undermining.

Some would dispute the significance of any sharp distinction between “basic” and “derived” epistemic principles, holding that any epistemic principle must be judged in a holistic way against the rest of our principles and beliefs. But the important point here does not depend on any sharp basic/derived distinction. If it is admitted that our own beliefs are on an epistemic par with the beliefs of friends or the claims in newspapers, no epistemically powerful or intuitively objectionable form of conservatism remains.

A similar point applies, I think, to Jonathan E. Adler’s (1990) defense of conservatism on the grounds that a proposition’s having been believed provides evidence that it possesses certain other traditional epistemic advantages.

Sklar’s and Foley’s purposes in offering this argument are dramatically different. Sklar offers it as tentative support for conservatism. But Sklar’s modus ponens is Foley’s modus tollens; Foley wants to use the implausibility of conservatism to cast doubt on the holist epistemological positions which he takes to require it. There are also differences, which will be explored below, between Sklar’s and Foley’s versions of the argument. The argument is foreshadowed in Goldstick (1971, 190), and a related suggestion is made by Lycan (1988, 163–6).

Finally, I should mention that Sklar’s formulation of conservatism is considerably weaker than mine; however, the difference will not affect the discussion below.

Jonathan Vogel (1992) has pointed out that on some interpretations of holism, global doubt of the type envisioned by Sklar is not even possible. In fact, Sklar himself writes “Since justification and its opposite, challenge, are only local and relative to an assumed background, we need not concern ourselves with such hypothesized total alternatives.” (398) As Vogel notes, it is unclear why conservatism would need to be invoked at all on this view.

However, although some holists (such as Quine) undoubtedly do hold that there is something senseless in such global challenges, this is not a necessary consequence of the holist view of confirmation. One may deny strong foundationalism, and hold that every belief is in principle confirmationally relevant to every other belief, without claiming that one somehow cannot make sense of any global rival hypotheses suggested by the skeptic. Thus I do not want to rely on this point to dismiss Sklar’s argument. (I should note that Vogel himself does not think this a clear refutation of Sklar’s argument.)

Sklar explicitly states that an agent’s total belief structure includes not only her substantive beliefs about the world, but also her canons of epistemic justification. However, it might be pointed out that we could imagine a skeptic who challenged all of the agent’s belief structure except conservatism. Against such a skeptic, an agent could invoke conservatism without begging the question. But the possibility of such challenges cannot, I think, show the necessity of invoking conservatism as a basic epistemic principle. After all, the possibility of a skeptic challenging everything but our belief
in astrology does not show the necessity of taking astrology as a component of epistemic justification.

18 BonJour (1985) and Davidson (1986) are notable examples.

19 See Pollock (1986) for a full-fledged defense of this sort of position.

20 It should be noted that while the possibility of invoking experiential input shows that holism without conservatism does not automatically lead to skepticism, it does not thereby furnish any a priori guarantee against the possibility of finding theories incompatible with our own but equally supported by experience. The existence of real any examples of this sort is, however, highly controversial. To use purported examples of this sort to argue for conservatism, one would have to defend the claim that one’s alternative theory was incompatible with the standard theory; that the alternative was equally supported by any possible experience; and that invoking conservatism in this context was more than an ad hoc refusal to confront a real epistemic difficulty.

21 See Bonjour (1985) ch. 8 and Davidson (1986) pp. 314 ff. Davidson’s anti-skeptical use of a principle of Charity purports to yield the conclusion that our beliefs must be generally reliable, but accepting this conclusion is importantly different from invoking conservatism as an epistemic principle.

22 A referee has pointed out that this argument might well not apply if one combined a coherence theory of justification with a coherence theory of truth, or a pragmatic account on which truth was defined in terms of our scientific method. I cannot go into these matters in detail here, but I can sketch some potentially relevant considerations. It is worth noting that on some views of the type envisioned, Foley’s problem would not arise, for our theory of truth would itself provide a reason to think that an agent’s beliefs were true if they were coherent. However, some positions may leave room for a conservative answer to Foley’s question. Insofar as this is so, proponents of some views which combine holism with epistemically coherentism and with certain controversial metaphysical claims may have reason to embrace conservatism. Nevertheless, it should also be pointed out that this argument cuts both ways; and the more controversial the premises are which lead to conservatism, the more attractive Foley’s intended Modus Tollens becomes.

23 Vogel (1992) expresses similar intuitions about a similar case.

24 This is not to deny that a scientist might in some cases have and use “hunches”—intuitive preferences for one theory over another for reasons the scientist is unable to make explicit. These might well be responses to some aspect of the theory that is epistemically relevant. (They also might reflect a number of factors which are not epistemically relevant, and that should make one regard one’s hunches with suspicion.) The situation I am envisaging is not one in which a hunch is involved, but one in which the scientist does make her reasoning clear and explicit.

25 The type of example given is not the only type in which conservative considerations are intuitively out of place in scientific theorizing. My example relied on the proposing of a new explanatory competitor to an accepted theory; and one might object that if the alternative explanation was available all along, the scientist never was really justified in believing the original theory. But the challenge to T could just as well have resulted from the discovery of surprising new evidence supporting T’, rather than from T’ being newly proposed. Intuitively, as new evidence accumulates, scientists should reapportion their belief in relation to that evidence, without regard to whether they believed T or T’ before the new evidence was discovered.

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