The Conservative Disposition and Restoration in Art and Ecology (*rough draft*)
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1. Introduction

My point of departure for this essay is the idea of a conservative disposition, broadly construed. It is the minimal idea that human beings have an undeniable inclination towards preserving the things that we value. Whether the focus is on historically significant buildings, endangered environments, exemplary artworks, political principles, or our very lives, conservative attitudes represent a fundamental pattern of human concern. This has led many philosophers to posit a tight conceptual connection between the nature of value and this conservative disposition. According to these philosophers, some kind of conservative disposition is part and parcel of being valuing creatures. As Samuel Scheffler puts it: "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?" In G.A. Cohen's words: "The conservative propensity that I defend…is to preserve particular intrinsically valuable things, as such…[I] think this disposition of mine is not an eccentric one: I think that everyone who is sane has *something* of this disposition." T. M. Scanlon writes: "When we speak of recognizing the value of some objects, such as the Grand Canyon, or Picasso's *Guernica*, or the great whales, what we seem to have in mind is that there is reason to preserve and protect these things…" and Raz agrees "there is a general reason to preserve what is of value"[1]

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[1] Samuel Scheffler, "Immigration and the Significance of Culture," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 35, no. 2 (2007): 106; G. A. Cohen, "Rescuing Conservatism: A Defense of Existing Value," in *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T. M. Scanlon*, ed. R. Jay Wallace, Rahul Kumar, and Samuel Freeman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 210, 04; T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Belknap Press, 1998), 169; Joseph Raz, *Value, Respect, and Attachment* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univeristy Press, 2001), 162.

Philosophical reflection on the general features of this conservative disposition often takes the form of offhand (albeit perceptive) remarks that arise in pursuit of other questions, and these reflections, as evidenced in the quotes above, are typically treated as simple truisms. When the topic is considered in earnest, it is often with respect to a particular applied problem, such as end-of-life decision-making in bioethics, biodiversity and ecosystem conservation in environmental ethics, or artwork preservation in philosophy of art. Though these applied investigations focus on issues that are quite specific to their particular domains of inquiry, they promise to yield insights that will illuminate philosophical reflection on the conservative disposition in general. G. A. Cohen's recent attempt to explain the conservative disposition through his theory of "particular value" is a stimulating effort at moving past the level of intuitive truisms, and Geoffrey Brennan and Alan Hamlin have done important work refining core elements of Cohen's view: however, I will argue that any attempt to characterize the conservative disposition in general terms would do well to attend to some of the lessons that have emerged from the specific applied inquiries mentioned above. In this essay, I will focus in particular on how issues surrounding restoration in art and ecology can 1) put pressure on the idea that the conservative disposition can be viably analyzed in terms of a response to a special "conservative value," and 2) suggest an alternative analysis that explains the conservative disposition as a virtue.

2. Nominal Conservatism

Brennan and Hamlin describe three forms that a conservative disposition might take: adjectival, practical, and nominal.[2] The nominal form "casts the word 'conservative' as a noun and so identifies conservatives of this type as those who recognise a particular value (or values), not

[2] Geoffrey Brennan and Alan Hamlin, "Conservative Value, Draft," (June, 2014).

recognised by non-conservatives, which directly grounds the conservative disposition."[3] Thus, as Brennan and Hamlin discuss, Cohen's theory of particular value is best characterized as embodying a nominal conservatism: it identifies a special kind of value that we ought to recognize, and which is meant to ground dispositions towards certain types of action, such as preservation. On Cohen's view, the conservative disposition is explained by the fact that the bearers of value have a special value, *particular value*, that they have *in virtue* of being the bearer of these other "basic" value properties.[4]

In characterizing the kind of value that nominal conservatism relies on, Brennan and Hamlin note that "for the relevant value to qualify as a substantive conservative value it must operate systematically to protect the status quo to at least some extent in at least a significant range of cases."[5] Though the claim is not, to be sure, that there is an *exclusive* link between conservative value and preservation of the status quo, the claim is indicative of the assumption that whatever it is that makes a value or disposition count as conservative is *essentially* linked to preservation of the status quo. A similar position is espoused by Martin Beckstein, who argues that nominal conservatism is the true conservatism, since it bears a non-contingent relationship to protection of the status quo.[6] However, it is not clear that protection of the status quo can fully characterize the position of all those who march under the banner of conservatism. Though this may be more common in the context of political conservatisms, the broad conservative disposition evoked by the philosophers surveyed at the opening of this paper, and the explicit focus of Cohen's recent discussion of the conservative disposition in particular, have nothing essentially to do with political conservatisms. Rather, they concern a practical orientation toward valuable things, one that is latent in a wide range

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[3] Ibid., 2.

[4] Cohen, "Rescuing Conservatism."

[5] Brennan and Hamlin, "Conservative Value, Draft," 3-4.

[6] Martin Beckstein, "What Does It Take to Be a True Conservative?," *Global Discourse* (2014).

of human behaviors beyond the political domain, as evidenced by the examples that these philosophers often appeal to, which rely heavily on examples from art and the environment. Thus, I suggest that in characterizing the conditions that are necessary to a viable conservative value, we must be attentive to the range of actual conservative practices and attitudes implicated in appeal to this brand of examples. As I will demonstrate, those practices and attitudes, and importantly, what seems precisely conservative about them, cannot be adequately captured by appeal to any special conservative value or to protection of the status quo: moreover, they sometimes conflict with protection of the status quo.

2.1. Existence and the Status Quo in Art Restoration

To see this, first consider that a conservative value that is linked to protection of the status quo will require that the value in question exist. Brennan and Hamlin identify a relation to what currently exists as "the central element" of Cohen's notion of particular value, and Cohen is indeed quite explicit about this, noting, "the special claim that I have defended is of the value that exits, regardless of how long it's been around."[7] Yet, some paradigmatic conservative efforts in the domain of art are aimed at the reclamation of value that has been lost in addition to protection of that which is threatened. Moreover, though the value that grounds conservation efforts in ecology typically exists, it could hardly be characterized as representing the status quo: indeed, it is often the status quo that threatens the continued existence of such value. Cohen himself is sensitive to this first point, and notes that "some desire to do this [viz. restore lost value] is certainly part of what we should normally consider the conservative attitude."[8] Cohen claims that it is appeal to the further category of *personal value* that explains the restorative inclinations of conservatism, but that *particular*

[7] Brennan and Hamlin, "Conservative Value, Draft," 13; Cohen, "Rescuing Conservatism."

[8] "Rescuing Conservatism."

value "seems to offer no reason for restoring recently disappeared features." However, if these two kinds of conservative value, particular and personal, are thus at odds with each other, then that puts significant pressure on the idea that they are complimentary, and lends support to the conclusion that they are in fact inconsistent. If nominal conservatism has difficulty providing a coherent foundation for the full range of conservative attitudes, it may be that a different approach will prove more satisfactory.[9]

Attention to some specifics of conservation and restoration debates in art and ecology will help us see the extent of the tension here. First, consider two different approaches to art conservation. Advocates for "integral restoration" or "conservator restoration" place emphasis on conserving the original *look* of the artwork: in other words, one might say that they endeavor to preserve the original aesthetic experience of the piece. Given this goal, they are willing to engage in substantial intervention with respect to the physical object itself: reattaching pieces that have fallen off sculptures, adding material when necessary, touching up paint, etc. Contrast this with advocates of "purist restoration" who emphasize the integrity and authenticity of the object. They thus support minimal cleaning of the work, perhaps, but no additions or significant interventions.[10] Now, though both of these approaches employ the term "restoration," it should be clear that they each treat restoration as a *means* of achieving conservative goals: it is not idly that the museum departments that engage in restoration work are called "conservation departments." And indeed, at first glance, it seems fairly straightforward to distinguish between the different things to which the proponents of each approach believe that conservative value attaches. Integral restorers might be said to see

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[9] Though note that Brennan and Hamlin claim that personal value is not in fact a distinctive kind of conservative value, but rather a subjective aspect of familiar basic value. I also doubt that personal value is a distinctive kind of value, and indeed, I believe that appeals to such value often conflate claims about *how* something is valued (e.g. sentimentally) with claims about *who* has reason to value them as such. For discussion, see Erich Hatala Matthes, "Impersonal Value, Universal Value, and the Scope of Cultural Heritage," *Ethics* (forthcoming).

[10] For discussion, see, for instance, Yuriko Saito, "Why Restore Works of Art?," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44, no. 2 (1985); Mark Sagoff, "On Restoring and Reproducing Art," *The Journal of Philosophy* 75, no. 9 (1978); David Carrier, "Art and Its Preservation," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43, no. 3 (1985).

aesthetic experience as the bearer of conservative value, whereas purist restorers take the physical object to be the bearer of conservative value.

However, this poses a problem if we think that truly conservative value must promote the status quo, and thus must be a value that currently exits. For, of course, the aesthetic experience that the artwork provided in its original state no longer exists now that the work has deteriorated. It is precisely this lost value that the integral restorer aims to recapture. But, are we to assume that integral restoration is inherently less conservative than purist restoration (indeed, not really conservative at all!) simply because the value that grounds the otherwise conservative disposition of its advocates is not currently in existence? After all, integral restoration seems to bear many other markers of the conservative disposition. Its advocates do not support simply *replacing* the artwork with something that might provide an experience *as of* the original: rather, they conceive of the original artwork as being inextricably involved in the experience of it, and it this that they aim to preserve.[11] Art conservation seems paradigmatic of Cohen's claim that conservatism is an "expensive taste." Thus nominal conservatism, or at least that version of it predicated on the promotion of the status quo, does not seem able to make sense of integral restoration as an instance of the conservative disposition, despite the fact that we otherwise have good reason to treat it as one.

This points to another weakness in Cohen's approach that is representative, I believe, of nominal conservatism. Cohen is at such pains to distinguish particular value from basic value, that he claims "I do not celebrate, in the first instance, our *experience* of the valuable things, but, instead, the valuable things themselves."[12] But what reason is there to think that experiences cannot be valuable things that admit of the particular value/basic value distinction, valued for what they are and not merely for the amount of value that resides in them? Is there really any kind of thing that is

[11] Cf. Robert Hopkins, "Aesthetics, Experience, and Discrimination," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 2 (2005).

[12] Cohen, "Rescuing Conservatism."

inherently precluded from having particular value? If one assumes that particular value is only possible or of practical importance for things that currently exist, one is apt to favor the kinds of things that Cohen does in his examples: objects and institutions. However, existence is not always so straightforward, and assumptions that favor the aforementioned kinds of things, whose existence is most securely discernible, make one's theory prone to metaphysical error. For instance, one may be liable to confuse the artwork with the object, when the two may not be identical.[13] As Sherri Irvin puts it in discussing the effects of restoration that is insensitive to an artist's sanction: "poor restoration of a painting might jeopardize our access to the artwork by obscuring the features the artist sanctioned for it through his or her acts of painting. Poor restoration changes the object, but it does not change the artwork, which is the proper target of interpretation."[14] Once the object is changed, it may be natural to think that the artwork no longer exists, but perhaps this is too quick. Perhaps restoration of the object, as Irvin puts it, merely facilitates access to the artwork, itself the bearer of particular value.

This further draws attention to the relationship between existence and the status quo. Let's say that we can acknowledge the possibility that the artwork, and not the physical object, might be the bearer of conservative value. The current physical state of the object interferes with access to the particular artwork. Is not the current physical state of the object part of the status quo? If the object is in quite bad shape, unearthing the artwork might involve considerable change to the physical object. Yet again, we must ask, is this not among the paradigmatic instance of a conservative disposition: going greater lengths and expending considerable resources in order to save a particular valuable thing? If so, conservatives need not be wedded to the status quo, at least to the extent that it is cashed out in terms of the currently existing state of affairs. A proponent of the status quo

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[13] For discussion, see Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, Second ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

[14] Sherri Irvin, "The Artist's Sanction in Contemporary Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 4 (2005): 319.

might claim that the status quo is constituted by the *value* that currently exists, as opposed to the current state of affairs construed as the present physical state of the world. However, it is not clear that this move will offer assistance, since the currently deteriorated object that impedes access to the original artwork could itself be valuable as well. But, for the reasons surveyed above, it seems inapt to claim that restoration efforts do not exemplify the conservative disposition simply because they are not aimed at protecting the value that is part of the status quo. Surely, there is an important discussion to be had about whether, for instance, the color of certain paintings ought to be restored to their original look, which may conflict with contemporary taste and expectations regarding that particular artwork (as in the restoration of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel); however, it seems unduly restrictive, and indeed inaccurate, to claim that the restoration effort should not be characterized as a conservative one.

It's easy to see why a conservative would favor things like physical objects that enjoy a robust existence. They're easier to hang onto. But by favoring existence uncritically we risk errors with serious consequences. For instance, Cohen is so concerned with the idea that particular value attaches exclusively to existing things that he writes the following:

> Someone might protest: if [something] has value independently of its contribution to our experience, doesn't it follow that it would be good to preserve a work of art even if it were no longer to be perceived, and even in a perceiverless world? And aren't those consequences absurd? In order to address that pair of questions, let us distinguish between the case of a world of blind people and the case of a world of no people, or other relevant perceivers. In the first case I think the blind people could value the fact that their world contained such beauty, even though no one could appreciate it. So it might indeed follow from my position that it is good that unperceived aesthetic value exists. But I do not find that embarrassing. And if it also follows from my position that something could have aesthetic value even in a wholly perceiverless and conceiverless world, then some will no doubt want to get off the bus there, but I would ride on even then.[15]

[15] Cohen, "Rescuing Conservatism," 19-20.

It's all well and good if Cohen wants to retain the idea that artworks in a world devoid of sentient life are still valuable in some meaningful way. But should we maintain that it is essential to the conservative disposition? Might it not be possible to say with Thomas Nagel: "The problem is to account for external values in a way which avoids the implausible consequences that they retain their practical importance even if no one will ever be able to respond to them. (So that if all sentient life is destroyed, it will still be a good thing if the Frick Collection survives)."[16] I submit that an apt characterization of the conservative disposition should make room for the many that have conservative attitudes without entailing that they must ride Cohen's bus. If that's the direction that the existence requirement pushes us in, then we should wonder whether it offers the best explanation of the general conservative disposition after all.

2.2. Bearers of Conservative Value and the Status Quo in Ecological Restoration

I have focused so far on the matter of existence and its relation to the status quo. But the problem for nominal conservatism is in fact deeper. In the cases considered so far, there was always plausibly a *thing* in question (whether an object, an institution, or otherwise) that might be the bearer of conservative value, whether it could charitably be described as existing or being part of the status quo or not. However, in some paradigmatic conservation debates, it is difficult to say that there is any particular thing that is the focus of the disposition at all. This can be seen if we turn our attention to debates about conservation in ecology.

The idea of conservation instantly conjures images of the environmental movement. But though I imagine we all make such associations, what exactly is it that environmentalists are trying to conserve? Nature seems like a good candidate, as does wilderness, as suggested by organization names such as The Nature Conservancy and the World Wildlife Fund for Nature. However, it turns

[16] Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1986), 153.

out that "nature loves to hide" in ways that even Heraclitus may not have imagined: identifying "nature" is a tricky task, and we may be hard-pressed to say precisely what "wilderness" is. As I will explain, recent debates about the target of ecological conservation efforts suggest the implausibility of identifying some thing that could be the bearer of conservative value and thus ground the conservative disposition in environmental contexts. Insofar as the nominal conservative approach lays claim to explaining the conservative disposition in such cases, this poses a problem.

Let's start with a construal of ecological conservation that is friendly to the idea of the status quo. As Elliot Sober describes it: "The problem for environmentalism stems from the idea that species and ecosystems ought to be preserved for reasons additional to their known value as resources for human use…It is the search for a rationale for this feeling that constitutes the main conceptual problem for environmentalism."[17] This should sound very familiar: it mirrors the task of explaining the conservative disposition in general by positing a special value that goes beyond the basic value of certain things. Interestingly, what makes this task a *problem* for environmentalism according to Sober and others are precisely the difficulties that attend providing an explanation of the conservative disposition via a nominal approach. It turns out that it's quite difficult to explain environmental conservatism as a response to the value of some particular thing. For one, the objects of environmental conservatism are often "wholes" such as species or ecosystems. But the idea of a "species" is itself arguably an arbitrary way of carving up historical lineages.[18] If we have reason to doubt the viability of the species concept, then we must consequently doubt the idea that attributing a special value to species will provide a firm ground for a conservative disposition: there wouldn't be a robust thing to which conservative value might attach, but rather, just an arbitrary concept.

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[17] Elliott Sober, "Philosophical Problems for Environmentalism," in *The Preservation of Species*, ed. Bryan Norton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 227.

[18] B. D. Mishler, "Species Are Not Uniquely Real Biological Entities," in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Biology*, ed. F. Ayala and R. Arp (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

Moreover, even if we assume that the species concept can be vindicated, the idea that species are valuable might itself put pressure on the relationship between species conservation and conservation of the status quo. As Janna Thompson puts it: "Their [environmental ethicists] ideas about what we should value and why—that, for example, we should value the creatures and systems that now happen to exist—depend on a covert reference to the human point of view, to our interests and concerns."[19] Her worry is not with taking an anthropocentric view *per se*, but, rather, with the arbitrariness of the evaluative assumptions that might generate a fixation on the species that currently exist: if it turns out that we can cogently identify a special value borne by species and ecosystems, why focus on the ones that exist now?

It might be said that this anthropocentric reference point that focuses our attention on the value of existing species and ecosystems is precisely what the conservative disposition *is,* and we're currently involved in the task of explaining that disposition, not justifying it. This is clear in Brennan and Hamlin's analysis of nominal conservatism in terms of "state-relative" value, in which an evaluative comparison is assessed relative to the status quo. On this picture, we might consistently claim that $V(A) < V(B)$ (i.e. the set of species in existence at time B is more valuable than that in existence at time A), and that $V|_A(A) > V|_A(B)$ (i.e. the set of species in existence at time A is more valuable than that in existence at time B, relative to A, which is the status quo).[20] Brennan and Hamlin note that "valuing state A from a recognition that state A is indeed the status quo typically reveals additional value overlooked by the state-neutral valuation of A." This is an intriguing proposal, but it demands that we ask: precisely what value is revealed?

Consider a comparison with a similar problem in the literature on love. Do we love people just in virtue of the properties that they instantiate, such as humor, intelligence, beauty, kindness,

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[19] Janna Thompson, "A Refutation of Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics*: 158.

[20] Brennan and Hamlin, "Conservative Value, Draft," 17.

etc.? If so, why wouldn't we be happy to "trade up" for a beloved who better instantiates whatever properties we find loveable? In other words, why do we seem to have a conservative disposition about love? As many have noted, and I have discussed elsewhere, it doesn't seem sufficient to just point out that one loves *this* particular person, as it's not clear why bare identity claims would call for any particular normative response.[21] However, it does seem plausible that taking up a particular state-relative perspective may indeed reveal some additional value. In taking up such a perspective, it may be revealed that there is value in the *relationship* in which you stand to your current beloved that is not captured in a state-neutral evaluation. Thus, at the risk of providing an antiseptic and over-rationalized description of a complicated phenomenon, we might see why a state-neutral assessment of potential beloveds may make sense in the absence of a current beloved, whereas it would obscure an essential value if one has a current beloved, which calls for a state-relative assessment.

However, what are revealed in the state-relative assessment (i.e. the value of the relationship in which you stand to your current beloved and the history that constitutes it) are features that are also predicated on an *agent-relative* perspective. It's not clear why, from an agent-neutral perspective, state-relative evaluation should reveal any special values, as it's not clear why agent-neutral assessment, in contrast with agent-relative assessment, need be indexed to any particular time.

Thus, we are now in a position to see the full force of Thompson's critique. State-relative assessment also implicates agent-relative assessment, which in the broad environmental context takes the form of *anthropocentric* assessment. Provided it makes sense to engage in a non-anthropocentric assessment of what might be good for the flourishing of life on the planet, for instance, there doesn't seem to be reason to think that a state-relative assessment will reveal any new values, as there's no clear reason why a non-anthropocentric assessment will be concerned with any

[21] Niko Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship," *Philosophical Review* 112, no. 2 (2003): 142; Erich Hatala Matthes, "History, Value, and Irreplaceability," *Ethics* 124, no. 1 (2013): 46.

kind of temporal indexing at all. *And yet*, debates about whether environmental conservation must take up an anthropocentric perspective are raging on I write this.[22] It does not appear that environmental conservationists who take a non-anthropocentric perspective will see any values revealed in a state-relative assessment, and thus such an approach is unlikely to explain what accounts for their conservative disposition, one that is not hitched to the status quo.

This points to the further problem that, as in art conservation, environmental conservation is often pursued via restoration efforts. As Lee, et. al. recently put it: "Approached technically, ecological restoration appears to require that the environment be returned as near as possible to its original, untrammeled state. The common ecological view on restoration reflects this quite explicitly, defining restoration as 'strictly speaking…an attempt to return a system to some historic state.'"[23] So, already, we see a conflict reemerge between the ostensible bearer of conservative value and the status quo. However, on top of this problem, there is a further issue that is not present in the case of art restoration. Putting aside difficulties that emerge in the restoration of antiquities, in art restoration, we typically do not confront conceptual problems in identifying the original state of the artwork: it's the state it was in when the artist produced and presented it for appreciation. But what is nature's original state? The problem of establishing a non-arbitrary historical benchmark for setting ecological restoration goals is known as *the baseline problem*.[24]

The baseline problem has seemed to many to be intractable. Popular historical benchmarks, such as particular human migration dates or the industrial revolution, risk ruling out by fiat species and ecosystems that have coevolved with human communities, and which otherwise seem like

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[22] For a recent example, see Daniel F. Doak et al., "What Is the Future of Conservation?," *Cell* (2013).

[23] Alex Lee, Adam Perou Hermans, and Benjamin Hale, "Restoration, Obligation, and the Baseline Problem," *Environmental Ethics* (2014). Embedded quotation from Donald Palmer, Margaret Folk, and Joy Zedler, *Foundations of Restoration Ecology* (London: Island Press, 2007).

[24] For discussion, see Ben Ridder, "An Exploration of the Value of Naturalness and Wild Nature," *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 20 (2007); Lee, Hermans, and Hale, "Restoration, Obligation, and the Baseline Problem."

plausible candidates for conservation.[25] This problem draws our attention to the fact that *not only* does the status quo seem like an arbitrary bearer of a special conservative value, but *any* temporally indexed state of the world runs up against the problem of arbitrariness. Thus, even if we were to grant that the a nominal conservative disposition should not attach special value to the status quo, it does not seem as if there is any alternative state to which such an account may plausibly attach conservative value. In response to the baseline problem, a number of environmental ethicists have proposed recasting our thinking about environmental conservation in a manner that is not predicated on ascribing value to any particular state of the world. In the next section, I will consider how a similar approach to the conservative disposition in general might offer an alternative to nominal conservatism, and thus avoid the problems for it that I have presented so far.

Before moving on, however, I should note the following: One might object that the problems I have raised so far do not put pressure on nominal conservatism because I have misconceived the project. I have taken too broad an understanding of the conservative disposition, and if we narrow our understanding of the *explanandum*, we will see that it must be essentially tied to the status quo, as some of the philosophers discussed have suggested.[26] Thus, there is no risk in ruling out the cases of the conservative disposition that I have claimed cannot be accounted for by nominal conservatism. If cases of restoration in art and ecology are not concerned with maintenance of the status quo, then they are simply not instances of the conservative disposition.

I have tried to motivate the idea that these cases should be core to a general understanding of the conservative disposition. I would also appeal to the many quotes from philosophers with which I opened this paper: although all express a conservative disposition with respect to *value,* none

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[25] Note that ecosystems that are isolated from human activity sometimes have lesser biodiversity than human managed equivalents. See Thomas Heyd, "Nature, Culture, and Natural Heritage: Toward a Culture of Nature," *Environmental Ethics* 27 (2005).

[26] Brennan and Hamlin are explicit about the narrow focus of their investigation into the conservative disposition in Geoffrey Brennan and Alan Hamlin, "Analytic Conservatism," *British Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 4 (2004).

make explicit reference to the status quo as an essential element of the conservative disposition. To these points I would add the following, more theoretical defense. Part of the problem with characterizing the conservative disposition too narrowly, even when that task is only descriptive, is that descriptions of basic attitudes and dispositions often end up playing a foundational role in normative arguments. So, for instance, pain is descriptively characterized as bad based on the phenomenology of pain experiences, and we quickly move from that description to the normative claims that pain is bad *full stop*, that anyone has a reason to prevent pain, etc.[27] Or consider that in arguing against the position that metaphysical analysis ought to entail revisions of common practice in the case of personal identity, Mark Johnston appeals to the fundamental nature of patterns of self-referential concern. He writes:

> Much is justified only in terms of such concern. Indeed, in order to get into the frame of mind in which limited self-concern and loyalism need justifying at all, one has to take the view that to justify a concern is to show how having it would make the world go better. But we may as well ask, what justifies the concern that the world go better? Nothing does, or at least nothing else does—the concern that the world go better, like self-referential concern, is a basic pattern of concern.[28]

Thus, when we turn to thinking about how to *justify* the conservative disposition, or whether one *ought* to adopt a conservative disposition (a task that we have not been concerned with here), the way in which the conservative disposition is described (its characterization as a "basic pattern of concern") will play an influential role in that task. So, although one might push off the objections that I have raised here by claiming that they are not relevant to the conservative disposition construed more narrowly as pattern of concern that is *essentially* focused on maintenance of the status quo, we have reason to worry about the downstream consequences of such a narrow construal if it leaves out the kinds of basic conservative concerns that I have argued are not captured by nominal conservatism. Even though the current task is descriptive, the normative stakes are high,

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[27] For example, see Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*.

[28] Mark Johnston, "Reasons and Reductionism," *Philosophical Review* 101, no. 3 (1992): 599.

and we risk errors with significant practical consequences. For instance, a conservative disposition tied to the status quo may be subject to criticism on the basis of its status quo bias.[29] The alternative explanation of the conservative disposition that I offer below promises to avoid such objections.

3. Adjectival Conservatism Revisited

Given the problems that I have presented for nominal conservatism, it behooves us to consider an alternative explanation of the conservative disposition. As mentioned above, I will take a cue from some recent philosophical work on ecological restoration that avoids the nominal construal of natural value, which is threatened by the baseline problem, by characterizing the conservative disposition in virtue-theoretical or deontological terms. While I suggest that the particulars of these approaches will not adequately translate to a characterization of the conservative disposition generally, they point the way to an alternative explanation of the conservative disposition in virtue-theoretical terms. This approach is best characterized as what Brennan and Hamlin call "adjectival conservatism," as it offers an explanation of the conservative disposition not in terms of the identification of a special conservative value, but rather, in terms of "the appropriate response to underlying values, whatever they may be."[30]

John Basl has recently argued that a central element of environmental restoration is *restitutive,* making up for the "moral debt" that we incur by "degrading nature."[31] One requirement of restitutive restoration is that it be *remediative*, aimed at remediating an agent's character to improve their relationship with nature and alter behavioral dispositions that lead to environmental degradation. While approving of the direction taken by Basl and other, Lee, et. al. suggest that "a

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[29] See Nick Bostrom and Toby Ord, "The Reversal Test: Eliminating Status Quo Bias in Applied Ethics," *Ethics* 116, no. 4 (2006).

[30] Brennan and Hamlin, "Conservative Value, Draft," 2.

[31] John Basl, "Restitutive Restoration: New Motivations for Ecological Restoration," *Environmental Ethics* 32 (2010).

comprehensive understanding of restoration includes directly relating our restorative response to our prior wrongdoing," in a way that must be understood in terms of deontological accountability, and so they propose an intersubjective account of obligations to engage in environmental restoration.[32] The details of these proposals need not concern us here: however, they suggest a promising approach to explaining the conservative disposition in a manner that is not tied to the nominal attribution of value to any particular thing.

As noted, the approach to environmental restoration suggested by these philosophers cannot be directly applied to an explanation of the conservative disposition in general. As we can see from the brief description above, these approaches conceive of environmental restoration as essentially aimed at a response to wrongful anthropogenic degradation of nature. While the conservative disposition may well stand against anthropogenic harms or intervention in a range of cases, the disposition is also conservative with respect to losses that do not implicate wrongful human behavior. So, whatever power a deontological or virtue-theoretical approach to explaining the conservative disposition might have, it cannot be cashed out in wholly restitutive or remediative terms.

In what follows, I will sketch an account of a general conservative disposition as a human virtue. This account will, I argue, capture the range of attitudes and behaviors involved in the conservative disposition broadly conceived, while also explaining why the conservative disposition often gives the appearance of being concerned with maintenance of the status quo.

The virtues are classically understood as dispositions to actions and emotional responses, and so there is a certain philosophical naturalness to thinking of the conservative disposition as a virtue.[33] Indeed, we might take a cue from Aristotle and attempt to characterize conservatism as a

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[32] Lee, Hermans, and Hale, "Restoration, Obligation, and the Baseline Problem," 176.

[33] See, for instance, Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

virtue in terms of a mean between two extremes.[34] On the one extreme, we might find something like *profligacy*, a reckless consumption of valuable things with no regard for their conservation. On the other extreme, we might find the opposite, what we could call *preservationism*: a concern for the conservation of valuable things that is so robust that it stands opposed to their consumption wherever this should involve their degradation or loss.[35] Profligacy is dangerous because it is wasteful, and involves attitudes that are inconsistent with the intuitive reverence we hold for valuable things. Preservationism is dangerous because it forecloses on our ability to reap many of the benefits that make valuable things meaningful to us in the first place. This point requires some further explanation.

Consider the following distinction: we can preserve valuable things, and we can *engage* with valuable things. Preservation might be thought to belong to the more general category of respect for valuable things—this might include giving a valuable object appropriate psychological acknowledgement, protecting it, and preserving it. Respecting and preserving an object are typically thought to be the required response to the mere *fact* that an object is valuable—even if you yourself don't value something, you ought to respect it and refrain from interfering with it just in virtue of its being valuable.[36] Engagement, on the other hand, accompanies a more intimate relationship with a valuable object that is often characterized as *valuing*: a complex of interests, attitudes, and dispositions of which reasons to engage are part and parcel. How you engage with a valuable thing

[34] There are of course problems with the doctrine of the mean as a general account of all virtues, but this does not entail that using the mean as a rubric will not be instructive. Moreover, I would note that the account I offer here is not predicated on the idea that the doctrine of the mean is a necessary feature of virtue-theoretic analysis.

[35] This is modeled roughly on an historically common distinction between conservation and preservation in environmentalism, preservation understood in non-anthropocentric terms, conservation understood as maintenance for the use of humans. For discussion and a challenge to this dichotomy, see Bryan G. Norton, "Conservation and Preservation: A Conceptual Rehabilitation," *Environmental Ethics* 8, no. 3 (1986).

[36] Cf. Samuel Scheffler, "Valuing," in *Equality and Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Raz, *Value, Respect, and Attachment*; R. Jay Wallace, "The Publicity of Reasons," *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (2009).

will be highly specific to the thing in question, but will include, for instance, studying and viewing painting, spending time with a friend, weeding your garden, etc.[37]

As a consequence of this directed attention and interaction, engagement is the process by which value is appropriated.[38] Ice cream and piano playing, for instance, are good, and engagement is how we make them good *for us*. This is why engagement must be responsive to the specific features in virtue of which something is valuable. In order for ice cream to be good for me in the *way* that ice cream is good, I need to taste it, as opposed to, say, sticking it in my ear. Notice, in contrast, that while respect is a way of acknowledging the *fact* that something is valuable, and hence that it can be good for *someone*, it is not a way of partaking in its value. Even if I hate playing the piano, I can respect the fact that piano playing is good, even though it isn't good *for me*, and indeed, respecting its value does not make it good for me. Granted, piano playing might be good for me, even if I hate it, in the sense that I would benefit from playing nonetheless. But even so, the good of piano playing cannot accrue to me unless I play.[39]

Engaging with valuable things is an essential aspect of our evaluative lives. As Raz provocatively puts it: "The idea is that the point of values is realized when it is possible to appreciate them, and when it is possible to relate to objects of value in ways appropriate to their value. Absent that possibility, the objects may exist, and they may be of value, but there is not much point to that."[40] However, many forms of engagement are inconsistent with the preservation of valuable

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[37] Cf. Raz, *Value, Respect, and Attachment*, 165.

[38] This is similar to, and indebted to, Raz's claims that personal attachments appropriate value: ibid., 19. However, though engagement is constitutive of valuing and personal attachment, engagement can be independent of and precede these more intimate evaluative relations. I can engage with piano playing and appropriate its value before I value it or have a personal attachment to it. Think of a child who slogs through lessons but only comes around to valuing the activity later in life. In this vein, see the following note.

[39] It should be noted that respect and engagement do not represent a strict dichotomy. Rather, we can imagine a maximally distant form of respect, a maximally involved form of engagement, and all manner of reasons for respect and engagement in between.

[40] Joseph Raz et al., *The Practice of Value*, The Berkeley Tanner Lectures (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press, 2005), 27-28.

things. Touching, tasting, even the light required for viewing, are not consistent with the preservation of artworks, fine foods, natural spaces, etc. In light of this, we can see that the extreme of preservationism will preclude many important dimensions of our relationship with valuable things. Preservationism will forbid engagement where it is inconsistent with the maintenance of the valuable object.

It matters both that we conserve valuable things and that we have opportunities to engage with them. Hence conservatism as a virtue will occupy the space between profligacy and preservationism. It will be a disposition towards conserving valuable things that does not preclude opportunities to engage with them, even when this is ultimately inconsistent with their preservation. Notice that this is not a form of risk-aversion.[41] We can assume that this is a disposition that operates under full knowledge of the relevant facts. After all, the loss of valuable things as a function of engagement with them is not merely a possibility: it is a known quantity.

We are now in a position to see why the conservative disposition, understood as a virtue, will often take the appearance of a status quo bias, even though it is not essentially concerned with preservation of the status quo. Valuable things that do not exist, that are not part of the status quo, cannot typically be engaged with. Thus, insofar as a conservative virtue requires balancing opportunities for engagement with valuable things with the preservation of valuable things, it will typically be focused on those valuable things that currently exist. However, there is nothing about a conservative virtue that is essentially opposed to, for instance, the reclamation of lost value in the quest for balance between engagement and preservation. Indeed, such a task might be seen to serve both ends: restocking the store of valuable things, which expands opportunities for evaluative engagement. This aim will of course be moderated to the extent that it might conflict with the

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[41] Compare the risk-averse construal of adjectival conservatism discussed by Beckstein, "What Does It Take to Be a True Conservative?."

preservation of currently existing things, but that's just part and parcel of what the conservative disposition involves on this analysis. Thus this analysis can recapture Cohen's own admission that "some desire to do this [viz. restore lost value] is certainly part of what we should normally consider the conservative attitude."[42]

It is worth nothing that this analysis also makes sense of why the conservative disposition might concern *any* valuable things, as opposed to things that just have intrinsic value. Cohen, as well as other philosophers expressing support for a conservative disposition, have often focused on the idea that it is intrinsically valuable things that we really ought to be conservative about. In light of recent work on intrinsic value, it seems plausible that such a focus is more aptly focused on things that we value *non-instrumentally*, regardless of whether the relevant properties of the object are intrinsic or not, or whether we value it for its own sake or for the sake for something else.[43] Intuitively, at least, this preoccupation seems to follow from the fact that those things that we value merely as a means seem the most replaceable (we would value whatever gets the job done), and hence perhaps we don't have reason to preserve such things. However, I believe this is too quick: as I have argued elsewhere, the fact that something is replaceable (in the sense that it is valuable in precisely the same way as a candidate substitute) need not imply that it wouldn't be bad for that thing to be destroyed, and thus is consistent with there being reason to preserve it.[44] Indeed, we might think that lacking a disposition to preserve useful tools, merely instrumental though they may be, is objectionably wasteful. It is the profligate extreme, among other things, that a conservative virtue endeavors to moderate against.

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[42] Cohen, "Rescuing Conservatism."

[43] Rae Langton, "Objective and Unconditioned Value," *Philosophical Review* 116, no. 2 (2007).

[44] Matthes, "History, Value, and Irreplaceability."

4. Conclusion:

This is, to be sure, just a sketch of how we might understand the conservative disposition as a virtue. The essential task of determining how best to balance preservation with engagement is one that I am pursuing in other work. However, as a characterization of the conservative disposition, I believe the virtue-theoretical approach serves well. It can capture the breadth of the conservative disposition as it appears in the world without ruling out those instances that do not seem directly related to maintenance of the status quo, and despite the fact that there is not always a clear bearer of conservative value to which a conservative might latch on. Moreover, to the extent that it can explain the conservative disposition as an attitude toward familiar values, it makes appeal to a special conservative value otiose. Given the challenges that confront the notion of conservative value, I suggest this is a welcome consequence.

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