

Response to ‘What Conservatives Value’

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I want to begin by thanking Dr O’Hara for reading my work so carefully and for providing such provocative reflections on it. His ideas have greatly enriched our understanding of conservatism, and it has been a privilege to exchange thoughts on the subject. In my response, I will devote particular attention to two issues that we have both considered: the ‘adjectival’ quality of conservatism and the way in which conservatives think about risk.

Conservatism, as O’Hara rightly suggests, is situational; it defines itself in relation to what it is not. The conservative identifies forces of change and resists them on the grounds that they will disturb arrangements that are of value. Inevitably, the nature of those forces will be different in different societies, so we cannot expect conservatives to hold the same beliefs in all contexts. But as I have argued, this feature of conservatism does present a problem for the conservative. How can they make judgements about the necessity of change without having some values that they are committed to? Surely they need to be able to assess the value of the status quo in order to determine whether it is worth conserving? Importantly, these values have no necessary relationship with the kinds of arguments (‘cp+kp’) that are distinctly conservative. This is perhaps where O’Hara and I part company. In O’Hara’s view, the ‘cp+kp’ formula is a kind of over-arching disposition that serves as a starting point for conservative thinking. My view, by contrast, is that such conservative arguments are ‘empty’ until they are brought into a dialogue with values and beliefs that have no relationship with conservatism. In turn, I argue that the latter are the starting point for conservative thinking and thus the determinants of conservative dispositions about change.

O'Hara makes some potent and perceptive criticisms of my argument. When he suggests, for instance, that tolerance and humility are conservative traits, he gestures towards the idea that conservatives may hold their values less fervently than the advocates of other ideologies. It may also be the case that conservatives are more pluralistic than their progressive counterparts (Kekes, 1997: 361). Put simply, we might claim that conservative values will tend to follow from their conservative beliefs about change. There is something in this. But I am not entirely convinced that conservative dispositions will always prevail. The $cp+kp$ formula cannot help the conservative to determine, say, the appropriate distribution of power. And because it is their values that ultimately determine how they evaluate change, conservatives may, in the last instance, be just as radical in defending those values as anyone else. Like the anti-abortion Catholic living in contemporary Britain, a pluralist living in an authoritarian society will have no reason to be conservative.

O'Hara seems to anticipate this kind of claim when he writes the following:

What about a society in which innovation was prized? Maybe they change all laws every third Tuesday? If the society has been around for a long time, and appears to function, with happy people and a high standard of living and no obvious injustice or evils, then it can be defended conservatively.

In a compelling way, this passage points towards a distinctly conservative defence of change, and it is entirely coherent if we assume that there are certain features of human societies that are always desirable (Kekes, 1997: 362). But I am not convinced that this is always the case. There might be certain phenomena that most individuals in a society would find objectionable or preferable. Decisions about the functionality of a social order and the standard of living within it are not, however, objective facts; they need to be determined by

subjective beliefs about the world and the things we should value. Public reason could perhaps enter into the equation to guide the conservative mind on these matters. Put simply, if most people in their society value something, the conservative might be more inclined to think that it is worth preserving. But if the conservative lives in a society where most people are rationalist innovators, surely they must abandon their change and knowledge principles and accept life in an unconservative world.

Consider the case of Edmund Burke. O'Hara is correct to claim that when Burke railed against the French Revolution, he was challenging a new order and seeking to restore a very recent one. But it is also the case that his critique of that new order required him to demonstrate the superiority of the one it had usurped. Doing this required Burke to make arguments against the post-revolutionary order that were based on his own beliefs about what was of value and what was not. It might have been easier for Burke to make these arguments in 1790 than it would have been once the new order had come to be accepted. But even in the immediate aftermath of the events in France, Burke was drawing upon beliefs about the nature of good government and the necessity for social hierarchy. These values could not be provided by O'Hara's 'cp+kp' formula, and importantly, they possessed a 'first order' status in his thought. They were, that is, the basis for Burke's ideas about whether change was desirable. Burke did not place a greater burden of proof upon the innovator because he was convinced that the post-revolutionary order was worse than the one that it replaced.

Let us move on to consider the concept of risk. It is not contentious to claim that conservatives dislike risk, but it is also the case that the things the conservative values emerge from risk-taking. O'Hara acknowledges this when he rightly claims that 'doing nothing is a risk'. The implications of this are, however, rather troubling for those that claim conservative is a disposition towards the familiar and the known. For it threatens to strip conservatism of its impulse to conserve. Another example that O'Hara notes is useful here: the varying

responses to the apparent crises of the 1970s within the British Conservative party. The likes of Nigel Lawson and Margaret Thatcher thought that maintaining the status quo was too much of a risk, while figures like Ian Gilmour and Francis Pym believed that the proper conservative thing to do was to preserve the institutions of the post-war settlement. While it is certainly the case that both camps could justify their positions with conservative reasoning, their dispute stemmed from their different value judgements about the status quo. Indeed Thatcher and Gilmour disagreed with each other because they valued different things. Gilmour valued the paternalistic features of the post-war policy settlement and Thatcher did not. Conservative arguments thus had little to do with the dispute. Their conceptions of risk were entirely dependent on their views of the status quo.

What is at stake here is the distinctiveness of conservatism. Is conservatism a distinctive ideological family, or is it a kind of disposition that gets tacked onto other ideologies? It could certainly be claimed that conservatives are more likely to find common cause over means as much ends, and O'Hara's conservative ('C') who wants to persuade others of their argument will be willing to engage in the kind of compromises that progressives may be hostile to. But we must also acknowledge that the conservative's values will ultimately determine their views about change. A social democratic conservative and a liberal conservative might share a common enthusiasm of the change and knowledge principles but will nonetheless disagree about the desirability of a particular innovation.

My claims are informed by an abstract reading of conservatism, and there is good reason to believe that thinking about the ideology in this way is problematic. As O'Hara rightly claims, when we make conservatives less abstract and place them in concrete historical conditions, it becomes easier to see the coherence of conservative reasoning. Take the change and knowledge principles. I am sure that in concrete circumstances, most conservatives will regard these principles as some kind of brake on their commitment to

particular values. Nonetheless, I do think there is value in testing conceptions of conservatism in philosophical, rather than historical, ways. O'Hara's definition (2011) is perhaps the most sophisticated one that has been produced since Michael Oakeshott (1991) published his famous essay in 1962, and I happen to agree with almost all aspects of it. But I have tried to show that it can be used to explain some of the apparent paradoxes of conservatism.

Again, I would like to thank Dr O'Hara and the editors of *PSR* for this rewarding exchange.

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