

Hayek's Conservatism: The Possibility of a Conservative Liberal

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I Stage setting

I am by disposition, and increasingly by academic self-identification, a “PPE person”. By this I mean that, though my home discipline is Economics, I am especially interested in the intersections between Economics and Philosophy, and Economics and Political Science. In this enterprise, I like to think of myself as a kind of fellow-traveller with Friedrich Hayek – who stands as a forerunner and a role-model in the PPE enterprise. And for this reason especially (though for many others as well) I feel deeply honoured to have received the medal that bears his name.

Interestingly, among the many so-called “inter-disciplinary” projects that litter the contemporary academic landscape, PPE is unique in bearing explicitly its disciplinary origins. Many so-called inter-disciplinary efforts are, in my experience, not so much *inter*-disciplinary as *non*-disciplinary – even aggressively *anti*-disciplinary. At its best (as I at least perceive “best”) PPE takes disciplines seriously and with presumptive respect. Perhaps that is because, like Adam Smith, PPE scholars understand the importance of the division of labour in the organization of enquiry – and see disciplines both as a feature *of* specialization and as part of the institutional fabric helping to garner the net benefits that specialization offers.

Among the various disciplinary intersections that PPE includes, the most established and heavily trafficked is that between Politics and Philosophy. In that sense, it might be thought to be the least interesting. Still, there are some intriguing differences between Political Philosophy as practiced in Philosophy departments and Political Theory as practiced in Political Science departments; and though it is not my purpose here to describe these differences in any detail, I do want to mention a few specific aspects because one is germane to my topic. One difference is that “political theory” tends to be much more oriented towards intellectual history than Political Philosophy is. Another difference lies in the array of figures that are a focus of attention in political theory but who are virtually invisible in Political Philosophy: Macchiavelli and de Tocqueville are two that come to mind. A third lies in their treatment of conservatism. The interesting fact here is that political theory as practiced in Political Science departments recognizes and offers much discussion of conservatism as a political position, whereas conservatism hardly registers as a recognized Political Philosophy.

This fact strikes me as puzzling. And I have set myself a late-life project of unearthing something like an analytically grounded defense of conservatism – not

because I consider myself a conservative (and this partly because I am not entirely sure what a political conservative is committed to) but because I would like to achieve some clarity as to what exactly conservatism is and why it might be philosophically interesting.

II Hayek's Conservatism

Hayek's famous appendix to *The Constitution of Liberty* seems to me an excellent place to start in this enterprise. Indeed, tonight's presentation does little more than explore and attempt to sharpen some of Hayek's observations in that essay and to draw out some of what I see as the more important implications.

Let me observe at the outset that the exercise of developing an analytically grounded defense of conservatism as a political philosophy doesn't seem to endear itself to most self-claimed conservatives. Conservatism has typically prided itself on being "anti-foundationalist" – and by association resistant to the kinds of analytic techniques characteristic of modern Anglo-American philosophy. It has tended to see "analysis" as threatening a kind of reductionism, and this has often given conservative writing (especially that emergent from the Oakeshott tradition, though less I think Oakeshott's own) an obscurantist character.

Recall that Hayek himself expresses a certain irritation at this feature of conservatism. As he puts it,

Personally, I find that the most objectionable feature of the conservative attitude is its propensity to reject well-substantiated new knowledge because it dislikes some of the consequences which seem to follow from it - or, to put it bluntly, its obscurantism.

In the circles I move, I often come across self-described conservatives and often find myself trying to interrogate them as to "what exactly the basic argument *is*". And I no less often come away frustrated. I get responses like: "no, it's not quite that"; and then when I try to offer some other helpful suggestion: "no, it's not that either"! It is as if conservatism is not a well-grounded body of thinking but rather a "set of intimations" that defy standard means of interrogation -- so that it seems better often to talk of a "conservative *mystique*" than of a conservative political *philosophy*. This may of course be my fault; or the fault of the brutish intellectual categories that I inherit from my economics training and my late-life associations with analytic philosophy. But if the task of applying analytic tools to the understanding of conservatism is to be neglected by conservatives themselves, it will by necessity fall to others.

There is another challenge to this exercise – reflected in a view that Hayek himself registers at the close of his essay, when he expresses a doubt as to "*whether there can be such a thing as a conservative political philosophy*". As Hayek sees it, "*conservatism may often be a useful practical maxim, but it does not give us any guiding principles which can influence long-range developments*". He thinks that

conservatism may help us understand “*what is now politically possible*” but does not provide any “*general principles*” of the kind that would be required of a genuine political philosophy.

I do not find this claim compelling. If there are general things that one can say about “what is politically possible” (and what social theorist would think otherwise) then one might well think that political philosophy ought to absorb such considerations into its general principles. To take a slightly *ad hominem* example, if there are limitations on what well-meaning social planners can *know*, don’t those limitations reflect just such “general principles” with which the analysis of alternative political arrangements ought to reckon?

Hayek’s doubts as to whether conservatism can be a political philosophy suggest that political philosophy is properly concerned only with the *ends* that politics is supposed to serve. And a casual glance at contemporary political philosophy might support that view. There is “liberalism” in its many guises; there is “egalitarianism”; there are various theories of “justice”; there is “utilitarianism”; there is “communitarianism”. These all serve to specify which aspect of the political landscape is worthy of normative attention and ought to be promoted. Conservatism doesn’t do this.

And of course, it is this failure to specify an end that represents the centerpiece of Hayek’s objections to conservatism. As he puts it:

*“Let me now state what seems to me the **decisive** objection to any conservatism which deserves to be called such. It is that by its very nature it cannot offer an alternative to the direction in which we are moving. It may succeed by its resistance to current tendencies in slowing down undesirable developments, but, since it does not indicate another direction, it cannot prevent their continuance. It has, for this reason, invariably been the fate of conservatism to be dragged along a path not of its own choosing. The tug of war between conservatives and progressives can only affect the speed, not the direction, of contemporary developments.”*

But focus on this last sentence. Note that the opposite of “conservative” here is not “liberal” or “utilitarian” or “egalitarian”, but rather “progressive” – or as I prefer to describe it “radical” or perhaps “idealist”. And just like “progressive”, “conservative” is in the first instance to be understood *adjectivally*.

In other words, I think Hayek is entirely right to claim that conservatism doesn’t offer an end – right even to see this as an identifying feature of conservatism; but wrong to regard this as decisive grounds for its rejection. On the contrary, as I shall hope to show, Hayek despite his protestations to the contrary arguably *is* conservative in the sense that his analysis, properly pursued, suggests.

So, my agenda here is to draw out some implications of Hayek’s understanding of conservatism – which is I think entirely accurate as far as he takes it; and then to

develop some implications of that understanding for what seems to me to be at least one plausible way to think about conservatism as a political philosophy.

III Fixing the Target

First to fix the target. I here shall define the conservative as one who treats the *status quo* as having some normative authority by virtue of its *being* the *status quo*. I take this to capture what Hayek means when he talks of the conservative as having a “*distrust of the new as such*”, “*a dislike of too rapid change in institutions and public policy*” and as urging “*the case for caution and slow process*”.

Several things are important in this definition. First, the claim is that the *status quo* has some normative authority: the preference for the status quo does not exhaust the normative domain. That is why it is appropriate to think of conservative in its adjectival form: one might be a conservative classical liberal; or a conservative egalitarian or a conservative utilitarian – as distinct from the radical/idealist/progressive counterpart. As we might put it, conservatism (and equally, radicalism) expresses something not about the political end one endorses but about one’s *posture towards that end*. Conservatism makes claims about why a certain posture towards one’s political ends is appropriate.

And this brings me to my first point. Hayek sets his essay in terms of a clash between classical liberalism and conservatism. But the general effect of his essay is to demonstrate that these two views are not on the same plane. As he hints in talking of the various locations of liberalism, conservatism and democratic socialism, conservatism should not really be thought of as occupying the same space as liberalism and socialism. As Hayek puts it:

*“The picture generally given of the relative position of the three parties does more to obscure than to elucidate their true relations. They are usually represented as different positions on a line, with the socialists on the left, the conservatives on the right, and the liberals somewhere in the middle. **Nothing could be more misleading.** If we want a diagram, it would be more appropriate to arrange them in a triangle with the conservatives occupying one corner, with the socialists pulling toward the second and the liberals toward the third.”*

I like this diagrammatic reference because it emphasizes that the conservative/radical distinction invokes a different *dimension* of political value than is captured by the socialist/liberal distinction. The latter is a matter of different ends sought: the former is something different – something that deserves to be uncovered and analysed.

What this means is that Hayek is surely right to emphasize the difference between conservatism and classical liberalism. Almost every modern writer on conservatism makes a similar point. The alliance between classical liberals and conservatives that has been present in political partisanship for most of the last century has been a marriage of convenience. And one might think that now, with the collapse of

communism abroad and the increasing embrace of free markets by parties of the left at home, it would be proper for liberals and conservatives to get back to their old wrangles. But such wrangles can be profitable only if there is clarity as to what they are really about. And to treat conservatism as just another specification of political ends seems to me a mistake. And that this *is* a mistake is something that Hayek's treatment seems to me to suggest.

Now if conservatism is to be understood adjectivally, there can be nothing necessarily inconsistent (or especially problematic) about being a "conservative libertarian". The clash here is with the *radical* libertarian, as much as it is with the conservative socialist. There are just two different dimensions in play – and what we need to do is to understand and explicate the second dimension.

Before I get to that however, I want to emphasize a couple of other features of our definition of conservatism.

Note that the normative aspect of the status quo arises by virtue of its being the status quo – not by virtue of any substantive features it happens to have. So a hardline Communist in 1988 East Germany who wants to hang onto the established order *because it is communist* is not a conservative in the relevant sense. If one's preferences for the status quo is because of the substantive properties of that status quo then the conservative element just derives from the political end sought: it is not doing any independent work. The conservative, I take it, may be opposed to certain changes from the status quo, even when they are directed towards ends he supports. [This is a point emphasized by Torbjorn Tannsjo – who is not, by the way, a classical liberal.]

Finally, note that there is an issue about how the status quo is to be understood. The status quo has many features. Which are the ones that the conservative especially seeks to preserve? The focus on conservatism as a *political* philosophy will serve to restrict the domain somewhat. But that restriction may not help much.

A simple example will illustrate. Suppose that the world price of some commodity plunges and that this development threatens to put out of business a significant number of firms in the domestic industry. An 'outcome conservative' will want to preserve the status quo in terms of substantive conditions (say, by instituting a tariff on the import of that commodity). A 'policy conservative' by contrast will want to hold the existing free-trade policy regime in place. While an 'institutional conservative' might insist that we should hold constant the basic institutions of society: so that if the political pressure within the existing democratic regime proves irresistible then one should allow the democratic processes to take their course. The definition in itself does not specify which of these three aspects of the status quo – substantive, policy, or institutional – should be the focus of conservative effort. Of course, silence on this aspect may be appropriate: such specification may be a task for that aspect of the normative scheme that identifies the political end to be served. But we need to be alert to the fact that the status quo is not self-identifying.

One final preliminary thought. Conservatism may come—almost certainly does come – with its emotional and psychological support. People may have a taste for the familiar or have well-ingrained social habits that lend a disposition towards holding things the same – perhaps holding them the same unless the weight of argument for change is sufficiently heavy. And for certain kinds of substantive political philosophies (preference-based utilitarianism for example) this taste for the familiar will register as being something to be taken into account by virtue of the fact that people have a preference for it. But the question that is relevant for developing conservatism as a political philosophy is not whether people do or do not have a disposition to favour the status quo but whether they *should* have it. The challenge is to *justify* conservatism, not merely to describe and acknowledge it.

I have said that conservatism occupies a separate *dimension* in the value domain – one that lies at the opposite end of a spectrum from radicalism or idealism. It is now time to try to sharpen this thought. Like Hayek, I will appeal to a diagram – but in my case it will be necessary to draw it. Fig 1 depicts along the horizontal axis the domain of substantive value: well-being or liberty or justice or whatever. On the vertical axis are levels of value associated with different levels of liberty, well-being, justice or whatever. The idea here is that we can rank social outcomes according to the extent to which the relevant political end is realized. I assume that there is a broad continuity property in the sense that states that are close to any given state generate similar levels of the political ends.

Now, for the sake of argument, consider two individuals, *c* and *r*. These individuals have a great deal in common. They have the same ideal, *I*, and they place the same value on that ideal. They also have the same metric of distance from the ideal. Further, there is a worst imaginable situation *W* on which they are both agreed and on which they also place the same value. The status quo *S* lies somewhere between the worst state and the ideal.

But *c* and *r* differ with respect to the posture they take towards the ideal they seek: one is ‘conservative’ and the other ‘radical’. The conservative value function is convex from above – the radical convex from below. That is, the conservative value function is like a smooth hill – steep further from the ideal, and gradually becoming flatter as one approaches the ideal. The radical value function is relatively flat far away from the ideal but as you approach the ideal it becomes steeper and steeper: and the ideal itself is a sharp point in value space (unlike the conservative’s ideal which is an almost level spot at the top of the smooth hill).

IV Conservatism and Risk-aversion

Now, it is a characteristic feature of the shape of such curves that they differ with respect to attitudes to risk (or uncertainty). To see this, consider a policy/action that has a 50/50 chance of moving the world closer to the ideal and of moving the world an equal distance away from the ideal. And suppose the belief that the policy/action has this property is shared by *c* and *r*. This policy/action will be a bad bet for *c*: if the policy is successful, it will move the world from *S* to *S+*, and for *c*,

value will increase from V_S to V_2 . If the policy is unsuccessful, the world will move from S to S^- and value for c will fall from V_S to V_1 . But convexity from above means that the downside loss ($V_S - V_1$) is larger than the upside gain ($V_2 - V_S$). So c will think this policy/action on balance a bad prospect.

Exactly the opposite is true of r . For r , the upside gain in moving from S to S_2 ($V_2' - V_S'$) – closer to the ideal – is greater than the downside loss in moving from S to S_1 ($V_S' - V_1'$). For r , the more important thing is to move closer to the ideal; for c , the more important thing is to avoid moves *away* from the ideal.

Consider another comparison. Suppose that there are two policies – policy A has a 50% chance of moving a certain distance towards the ideal and a 50% chance of achieving nothing; policy B moves you half the distance towards the ideal with certainty. The conservative will prefer policy B involving the smaller, more certain move; the radical will prefer policy A involving the larger, more uncertain move.

This is just a slightly more formal way of representing Hayek's observation that "*one of the fundamental traits of the conservative attitude is a fear of change, a timid distrust of the new as such*". But the distrust of the new is justified here because of a certain epistemic privilege associated with the status quo. On this reading, it is an awareness of the possibility of mistakes and sensitivity to their costliness that grounds the conservative disposition – it is this that makes conservatism something more than a mere preference for the familiar.

There are three elements involved here. The first is an awareness of lack of human knowledge – especially in areas related to the workings of policy and basic institutions. For many radicals, there simply is no issue of uncertainty about the effects of their favourite policies or institutional changes: to them it is simply obvious that such policies are required and that their effects will be in the desired direction. Conservatives by contrast tend to be highly alert to human limitations – both in knowing what the right thing to do is and in predicting what the effects of various changes will be. Hayek himself can surely not be accused of the latter kind of unawareness: the socialist calculation debate -- and much of Hayek's writings on the virtues of the market order -- is driven by just this kind of insistence on epistemic constraints.

But there is a second element, which involves not so much the recognition of "unintended consequences" as the attitude to them. Unintended consequences are significant for the conservative because they remind her of the risk of bad consequences. Unintended consequences are much less significant for the radical because after all they could just as readily be in a desirable as an undesirable direction. Economists of all people are likely to be alert to the possibility that unintended consequences can be desirable because we are familiar with the idea that the good outcomes associated with market transactions are largely "unintended" and that the market order itself arose as an unintended consequence – perhaps of the natural propensity to truck and barter (as Adam Smith conjectured). In other words, the market order is an "invisible hand" in two distinct senses: one, that it

operates by invisible processes; and the other, that it itself emerges by invisible processes. If unintended consequences are indeed as likely to be in a desirable as an undesirable direction, the radical will be entirely relaxed about the prospect of them. For the radical, uncertainty is a potential friend not an enemy – and this perhaps explains why radicals are not inclined to pay unintended consequences much attention.

The third element involves a tendency in moral and political philosophy to frame political ends *categorically*. As John Broome remarks, philosophers have an inclination to think categorically, while economists think comparatively. I think Broome is right on this; and right too to think that economists have the better of the difference. So philosophers tend to think in terms of truth and falsehood; goodness and badness; rightness and wrongness -- while economists tend to think in terms of epistemic warrant; or betterness; or more or less egregious transgressions of the moral law. Consider for example the literature on justice – which since Rawls has occupied a large part of the political philosophy domain. Many philosophers seem to think of justice in what I shall call “deontic terms”. That is, there is a classification of situations as simply “just” or “unjust” – in much the same way as deontic moral theories operate with a tri-partite classification of actions as “permissible”, “impermissible” and “obligatory”. Strictly speaking, this language has no scope for “degrees of impermissibility”: every impermissible act is equally impermissible. And so if acting unjustly is impermissible, then the concept of degrees of injustice is a morally irrelevant concept: all that matters is to secure the ideal (or some situation that can plausibly be construed as ideal). Note what this implies about the shape of the value function in Fig 1. It achieves its maximum at I (and perhaps a minimal threshold around I); but all other points are equally wrong (or equally bad). It is flat at value V_w , except at I. Accordingly, the only relevant observation is that the status quo is imperfect – less than ideal. And if imperfect, then it *necessarily* ought to be changed. The idea that we inhabit an inherently imperfect world – that the status quo will always exhibit some degree of imperfection -- is alien to this mode of analysis. The notion of “doing the best we can” in a world where that “best” will always fall short of the best we can *imagine* – that notion is not readily accommodated within the categorical frame. Of course, economists tend to think of all normative issues as exercises in optimization, in which various constraints are operative – including not just constraints on resources but also on individuals’ preparedness to act as morality requires even when what morality does require is clear and agreed. So economists tend to frame normative problems in comparative terms. They need for that purpose a metric of goodness (a measure of betterness, as Broome puts it): the ideal appears only as the limiting case of that metric. And actually, the specification of that limiting case is neither necessary nor sufficient in generating the relevant metric. This categorical/comparative contrast is a larger issue than the distinction between radicals and conservatives; but it does seem clear to me that there is a connection between utopianism and radicalism (as I have depicted it, in what I take to be a Hayekian spirit) that is worth underlining.

To summarize, conservatives might engage with those who think of themselves as radicals on three fronts:

1. They may remind would-be radicals of the relevance of uncertainty about the effects of policies. To the extent that individuals assume a radical stance towards their political end because they fail to take adequate account of the possibility of mistakes, then they are in principle persuadable in any case where uncertainty is a demonstrable (if not immediately obvious) fact of the choice environment.
2. Conservatives may accuse radicals of having the wrong attitude to the size of downside risks. Radicals might just fail to imagine just how disastrous the consequences of mistakes might be. Being persuaded that downside risk is possible, radicals may then be induced to think more seriously about how dire the consequences may be.
3. Conservatives may seek to persuade radicals that radicalism reflects the influence of a certain kind of framing problem. The radical may be a radical simply because habits of thought in political philosophy encourage the focus on the end in question, and not on the metric of betterness that the end presupposes.

I have said that conservatism is associated with risk aversion in a broad sense. But I do not think that the value function of the conservative necessarily has the shape it has *because of* a primal attitude to risk/uncertainty. In at least some cases, I think, the shape of the value function reflects the character of the value itself. For example, preference-utilitarianism ought to reckon with the convexity of ordinary preferences: if demand curves slope downwards, it follows automatically that errors in achieving optimality impose losses that are quadratic in the size of the error. I suspect that certain forms of egalitarianism have a similar character. Take for example Rawls' maximin criterion. And suppose one is faced with a choice between two institutions: A, which provides a 50/50 chance of a level of primary goods for the worst off of say 1000 or 5000; and the other, B, which provides a certainty of primary goods consumption by the worst off of 2000. I take it that maximin will regard A as worse than B. Individuals behind the veil of ignorance will on Rawlsian assumptions choose with an eye to how they would be if they happened to be the worst off. (Although Rawls is reluctant to treat maximin as an extreme form of risk-aversion behind the veil of ignorance, I take it that maximin has that effect).

V From "Conservative" to Conservatism

Suppose that this is correct – that conservatives are characterized by having a value function of the relevant form illustrated in Fig 1.

As I have emphasized, this does not preclude having a political end: on the contrary, it presupposes it. You cannot assess outcomes as being better or worse without an evaluative criterion. Conservatism in itself may not provide "a direction" (Hayek's term) but any conservative must have one.

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which conservatives have something in common that radicals do not. To see this, consider two pairs of individuals, differing in terms of each of the dimensions in the normative plain that we (in Hayek's spirit) have identified. A and B are say classical liberals; and C and D are egalitarians. Each pair focuses on a different attribute of the social situation; and each member of the pair has the same ideal and places the same value both on that ideal and the worst situation they can conceive. Now suppose that A and C are conservatives; and B and D are radicals. We can depict this situation in Fig 2: L is the liberal ideal; E is the egalitarian ideal.

Now consider the political relations that exist among the four individuals; and specifically between the conservatives A and C. Suppose the status quo lies somewhere between L and E. That is, both the egalitarian and the classical liberal seek to make changes but there is a dispute about the direction in which change ought to go. It can well be the case that both A and C can agree on staying at the status quo in preference to a battle that will locate at L or E with equal probability. They will agree because the downside cost of moving from S to L for the conservative egalitarian is greater than the upside gain of moving from S to E. A will be prepared to sustain a rather lower probability of getting his ideal in order to prevent the possibility of ending up at C's ideal (E); and equally C will be prepared to sustain a rather lower probability of getting his own ideal in order to prevent ending up at A's ideal (L). So while A and C cannot agree on the direction of proper moves from S, they can agree to settle on S rather than pursue a policy that would give either ideal with more or less equal probability.

Exactly the opposite is the case for the radicals. For them, achieving their respective ideals is the relevant objective. They will each be prepared to sacrifice a lot in terms of the things they value in order to secure their respective ideal. In other words, not only can B and D not agree on any move from S, but they will be prepared to invest a great deal in fighting to achieve their respective ideals.

In short, there are mutual gains from agreement among conservatives that are not present among radicals. It is the radicals who are more likely to fight to get their own way. Whereas it is more likely that conservatives can agree to compromise. In other words, there is a connection between conservatism and "moderation". Conservatives as I have described them are natural moderates – and this not because they value their ideals any the less, but because they are concerned asymmetrically about losses involved in giving up what in terms of their ideals others might seek to take from them.

It is here that I believe Hayek gets something importantly wrong. He thinks conservatives have no basis for compromise – no basis for living with others with whom they disagree on important political matters. It seems to me that this is wrong and that the conclusion sits oddly with the logic of his own definitions. As he puts it:

[the conservative] *has no political principles which enable him to work with*

people whose moral values differ from his own for a political order in which both can obey their convictions. It is the recognition of such principles that permits the coexistence of different sets of values that makes it possible to build a peaceful society with a minimum of force...

To live and work successfully with others requires more than faithfulness to one's concrete aims. It requires an intellectual commitment to a type of order in which, even on issues which to one are fundamental, others are allowed to pursue different ends."

This claim seems to me to be just misguided. Of course, to the extent that classical liberalism involves a substantive commitment to toleration, to supporting a plurality of views or to the design of institutions that accommodate different substantive political ends, then the liberal may well be disposed to support compromise. But recall that we are dealing with political philosophy here; and a feature of politics is that it involves singularity of policy/institution or whatever. "Live and let live" is a possible deal if both sides are committed to it; but it does take both parties to agree. And for Hayek, this amounts to the requirement that, whoever classical liberalism's enemies are, they are prepared to adopt liberal dispositions. A *radical* classical liberal will be prepared to fight for the libertarian ideal. It is hard to see how that attitude is hospitable to "*building a peaceful society without excessive use of force.*"

To be sure, the considerations that bind conservatives are pragmatic rather than principled. Conservatives do not prefer the status quo because it is ideal; nor (on my view of Hayek's logic) because they have no ideals anyway. They prefer the status quo because there is profound disagreement about political ends and because their posture towards their ends is "conservative" rather than radical. If there is scope for compromise between radicals, it can only be the compromise of turn-taking: each might agree to a process in which each gets his turn at calling the political shots. Conservatives by contrast are, if I am right, inherently disposed to seek out the middle ground: they are what we might term "moderates". Conservatism is the political philosophy of which moderation is the natural fruit.

Any coalition of conservatives will of course include individuals with rather different substantive views about where "we ought to be heading". Some may be egalitarians, some liberals, some utilitarians, some communitarians. But it is not that feature that binds them in common: it is rather their opposition to extremism. And this opposition derives from the fact that they have greater opposition to the extremisms of others than they have delight in any extremism of their own. None of these conservative individuals will be against change per se; all of them want change in some direction or another. It is just that each prefers his own change less than he dislikes the changes that others would make. And this situation tends to give rise to a coalition around a general principle of no change – or as little as one can get away with.

VI Is Hayek a Conservative?

We come at last to the question that most naturally arises out of all this, concerning whether Hayek is to be understood as a conservative or a radical in my typology – bearing in mind that I have derived that typology essentially from elements of Hayek’s essay.

I think the jury has to be out. His opposition to conservatism depends of course on his looking to conservatism to provide something that it cannot and does not seek to provide: a substantive political position – a statement of the direction in which movement ought to proceed. Liberalism as such cannot oppose conservatism on this basis. To oppose conservatism one has to be a radical (or progressive). A conservative liberal is perfectly coherent on this reading. So the issue is rather whether Hayek is a radical (or to use his term “progressive”) liberal.

And here the evidence is mixed. He is sympathetic to much that conservatives stand for – caution in policy, a respect for evolved practices like language and law and so on. But he says specifically of the timidity of conservatives in the face of unpredictable changes:

“the liberal position is based on courage and confidence, on a preparedness to let change run its course even if we cannot predict where it will lead.”

I would say that that is true only of radical liberals. I think it is a mistake to identify all liberals as such with that position. I think liberals generally *can* predict where change will lead – not in terms of specifics but in terms of the effects of the change on the things they care about (and most particularly on liberty itself). And changes that only might (but also might not) hit that target will strike the conservative liberal not as courageous and confident but as reckless and foolhardy. And as I see it, nothing in the liberal lexicon as such would require them to do otherwise.