

Conservatism, preservationism, conservatism and mentalism

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The following epistemic principle has received much attention (for a classical defence, see Harman 1986):

Conservatism: If S believes A, then S is *prima facie* rational in continuing to believe A.

According to one way of interpreting Conservatism, there is an asymmetry in the process of belief revision: reasons are needed to give up a belief, but no reason is needed to retain it. So, according to Conservatism, if a subject has no reasons for or against a belief, retaining that belief will be rational, and giving it up will be irrational.

There is a kind of case that is of special interest in evaluating Conservatism: scenarios where the subject doesn't remember how the belief was acquired – many philosophers call these cases of 'forgotten evidence'.¹ We can distinguish two different kinds of case of forgotten evidence: 'good' forgotten evidence cases, where the belief was initially acquired in a rational way, and 'bad' forgotten evidence cases, where the belief was initially acquired in an irrational way. Conservatism treats these two cases alike: if the subject hasn't acquired or retained any defeater for the belief, he is rational in retaining that belief.²

There is another epistemological view that does distinguish between good and bad cases of forgotten evidence (see Burge 1993, 1997):

Preservationism: If S formed a belief in A rationally, then S is *prima facie* rational in continuing to believe A, and if S acquired A irrationally, then S is *prima facie* irrational in continuing to believe A.

Preservationism and Conservatism agree about good cases of forgotten evidence: they both deliver the verdict that the subject is *prima facie* rational in continuing to hold beliefs that he acquired rationally. But Preservationism has it that if the belief was acquired irrationally, then the subject is *prima facie* irrational in continuing to believe, whereas, as we have seen, Conservatism has it that he is *prima facie* rational.

- 1 Many philosophers also cite Harman 1986 (41) as the origin of the phrase, but although Harman does discuss the phenomenon, he doesn't use the phrase anywhere in that book.
- 2 What about cases where the subject is aware of the irrational origin of his belief? What Conservatism implies about these cases depends on whether being aware of the irrationality of the origin of one's belief gives one a reason to give it up. Conservatism itself is silent about this.

Let us for a moment concentrate on the position agreed upon by both Conservatism and Preservationism, the claim that, once acquired rationally, a belief is *prima facie* justified even if the subject forgets how it was acquired. Call this position ‘Conservationism’:

Conservationism: If S formed a belief in A rationally, then S is *prima facie* rational in continuing to believe A.

Conservationism is common ground between Conservatism and Preservationism. It is also of independent interest, for one may think that whereas it is not clear what to believe about bad cases of forgotten evidence, Conservationism is right in that rational origins by themselves provide beliefs with *prima facie* rationality.³

There is another epistemic principle which has been ably defended (see Conee and Feldman 2001; Wedgwood 2002):

Mentalism: If S and S' are mentally alike at *t*, then they are rationally alike at *t*.

Mentalism has it that epistemic rationality supervenes on mental states. The intuitive idea behind Mentalism is that if two subjects differ on, say, whether they are rational in believing that A at a certain time *t*, then they must have different background beliefs, or experiences, or sensations, or other mental states at *t*. If their minds are identical, then it cannot be the case that only one of them is rational in believing (or continuing to believe) A.

I will argue that Conservationism and Mentalism entail Conservatism. To see that this is so we should concentrate on a bad case of forgotten evidence. We also need to assume that whenever a belief is acquired irrationally it could have been acquired rationally without affecting the subject's mental states sometime down the road. More precisely, we need to assume the following:

Principle of Possible Rationality (PPR): If S acquired a belief that A irrationally and at a later time *t* retains this belief without awareness of where it came from and without acquiring or retaining any defeaters for it, then there is a possible subject S' who is mentally exactly like S at *t* but who acquired the belief in A rationally.

PPR seems eminently sensible. If someone acquired a belief irrationally and then forgot about how he acquired it, then he could have acquired it rationally and ended up with the same total mental state. After all, the only difference between the cases is a difference that the subject has forgotten about and, therefore, cannot now make any mental difference. The only reason to

3 This doesn't mean that everyone accepts Conservationism. Evidentialists à la Conee and Feldman deny it – see especially Conee and Feldman 2001. See also Matthew McGrath 2005 for a defence of Conservatism against both Preservationism and Evidentialism.

doubt PPR that I can think of is the possible existence of propositions belief in which cannot be acquired rationally. Perhaps the proposition *I do not exist* and related propositions have this characteristic. But this is not, after all, a good reason to abandon PPR. For if there are propositions belief in which cannot be acquired rationally, then that is arguably because they can come with unavoidable built-in defeaters. The defeaters would have to be built into the propositions themselves, because one is irrational in believing them regardless of how one acquires them. If so, then it would be impossible for the subject to fail to retain those defeaters together with the belief. In that case, the antecedent of PPR will not be satisfied.

The argument that Conservationism and Mentalism entail Conservatism proceeds as follows:

- (1) S irrationally acquired a belief that A at t and retains this belief at t' without awareness of where the belief came from and without acquiring or retaining any defeaters for A. (Assumption)
- (2) Conservationism. (Premiss)
- (3) Mentalism. (Premiss)
- (4) PPR. (Premiss)
- (5) There is a possible subject S' who is mentally like S at t' and who acquired the belief in A rationally. (From 1 and 4)
- (6) There is a possible subject S' who is mentally like S at t' and who is rational in continuing to believe A at t'. (From 2 and 5)
- (7) S is rational in continuing to believe A at t'. (From 3 and 6)
- (8) If S irrationally acquired a belief that A at t and retains this belief at t' without awareness of where the belief came from and without acquiring or retaining any defeaters for A, then S is rational in continuing to believe A at t'. (From 1 through 7)

Given that Conservationism and Conservatism differ *only* in that the latter but not the former is committed to 8, the argument shows that Conservationism and Mentalism entail Conservatism.

What lessons can we learn from this argument? There are a few open possibilities. First, we may accept Conservatism. Second, we may reject Conservatism but also one or both of Conservationism and Mentalism. One possible reason for rejecting Conservationism is that it doesn't require awareness that the acquisition of one's belief was rational. One possible reason for rejecting Mentalism is that it makes past and futures mental states of the subject irrelevant to the rational status of his beliefs at present. For my part, I do not find either of these reasons convincing. My aim, however, has not been to argue for Conservatism, but rather to draw attention to an important but so far unnoticed connection between influential epistemological theses.⁴

4 Thanks to Stewart Cohen and Carolina Sartorio for helpful comments and conversations.

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You can call me ‘stupid’, . . . just don’t call me stupid

DELIA GRAFF FARA

1. “Sloppy, colloquial speech”

As most of us know, Quine was the author of the wonderful twentieth-century philosophy book *Word and Object*. Most of us also know that the following is true:

- (1) The author of *Word and Object* was called Willard.

Saul Kripke would complain that although what I meant to convey with (1) is true, I expressed that truth in “sloppy, colloquial speech”.¹ He would say that I have made the horrifying philosophical blunder of confusing use and mention: in using the phrase ‘was called Willard’, I used the name ‘Willard’ where I should have mentioned it instead.² The proper statement of that truth

1 See Kripke 1980: 62, n. 25.

2 My quotation conventions are these. Single quotes are used to form quote names of the words or characters they enclose. To form quote names of quote names, I use nested single quotes: my husband’s name is ‘Michael’; the name of that name is ‘‘Michael’’. Double quotes are reserved for direct quotation of another’s writing or speech. I should mention that in this article, there is never a need or use for Quine’s quasi-quotation, much less