

# Dynamic Conservatism

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## Introduction

Our beliefs often exhibit a kind of self-perpetuation. That is, once we have formed a belief, we have a tendency to maintain it beyond what our evidence alone seems sufficient to explain. This tendency manifests in a number of different ways. It is harder, often *much* harder, to change the mind of someone who has *already* come to an opinion about something than to prevent them from forming that opinion in the first place. Minor influxes of evidence against our settled views rarely dislodge them, even when our original reasons were only marginally sufficient to justify those views, and we often continue to hold our beliefs even once we have lost track of those reasons. When presented with previously unconsidered alternatives to what we believe, we are inclined towards our original position even though we may be unable to articulate why that position is superior.<sup>1</sup>

In each of these cases, the mere fact that we already believe something seems to play a crucial role in the explanation of why we continue to believe it. Let us call this psychological tendency towards the perseverance of our beliefs *doxastic inertia*.

Especially when one reflects on the most extreme cases of stubborn belief, where agents act impervious to mountains of evidence against their settled views, it is easy to feel pressure to dismiss doxastic inertia altogether as a cognitive vice. But a number of philosophers have argued that doxastic inertia in some form is a rational phenomenon. According to a family of views under the label of ***epistemic conservatism***, the mere fact that one already believes something can positively affect an agent's rationality in believing it going forward.<sup>2</sup>

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1 More formal psychological investigation into belief perseverance can be found in the work of C.A. Anderson (1980).

2 Writers on the topic often give definitions of epistemic conservatism that are more committal about why behavior

I will begin this paper by gathering together a set of core motivations for epistemic conservatism in the literature, all of which recommend the view as the best way to capture the implications for rationality of the ways we face constraints on our limited cognitive resources. Then I will look at the way conservatism has traditionally been developed and discussed and the reasons why many philosophers have been skeptical about how it could, in this form, be true. The main task of this paper will be to develop an alternative conservative view that can capture the core motivations for conservatism without incurring the costs associated with the standard approach.

My solution turns on identifying a widespread assumption among both conservatives and their critics – that there is a standing rational requirement for an agent to have beliefs with some appropriate epistemic merit – which leads to conservatism being understood in the problematic, standard way, and showing that this assumption is optional. The key to seeing that it is optional involves distinguishing norms that govern *states* of mind like beliefs from norms that govern *processes* like consideration, and developing a view which uses norms of the latter type in place of norms of the former type.

According to such a view, our epistemic life is governed by at least two distinct sets of norms: norms governing *when to initiate the process* of considering whether some proposition P is true, and norms governing *how that process operates, once initiated*. A robust version of conservatism can be vindicated, I will argue, provided that the right kinds of conditions must be met before one is required to reconsider a question.

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displaying doxastic inertia is rational than the one I have provided. For instance, Christensen (1994) takes conservatism to be the view that “an agent is in some measure justified in maintaining a belief simply in virtue of the fact that the agent has that belief.” Vahid (2004) considers it to be the thesis that “It is irrational to change beliefs without good reason”. I choose my looser formulation here for two reasons. First, it is a common core in theories discussed under the mantle of conservatism by both proponents and critics, across their various formulations. Second, I do not want to prejudge the proper form of the explanation of rational doxastic inertia by building too much theory into our definition, for reasons that should become clear later in this paper.

I will show that the resultant *dynamic* conservatism a) better captures the canonical motivations for conservatism than the standard view, b) is consistent with an attractive principle about the epistemic supremacy of evidence that the standard view must reject, and c) has special resources that allow it to sidestep the major objections and worries raised against conservatism.

## 1.1 - The Canonical Virtues of Conservatism

That one's evidence matters for determining rational epistemic behavior is denied by no one. That anything else matters, on the other hand, is far from clear. The conservative thesis in particular, that the *mere fact that one already believes the proposition in question* matters, is a surprising one. We have names for people who obdurately resist changing their minds, none of them flattering. We call them (out of earshot, if we are polite) dogmatic, pigheaded, and, indeed, irrational. Conservatives are not committed to licensing the most unpalatable instances of such behavior, but it is easy to conclude that milder cases are simply less extreme failures of the same kind. So it will be important to survey the reasons many have found conservatism attractive, both to feel the force of such a counterintuitive claim and so that we may move forward with a sense of the degree and type of rational inertia the conservative must license in order to secure the advantages that motivate their view.

## 1.2 - Cognitive Costs

In this paper, I'll focus on two purported virtues of conservatism. The first, defended in Lycan (1988), emerges from the observation that changing one's mind involves *cognitive costs*. A rational agent with limited cognitive resources, it is claimed, will be responsive to these costs. Since these costs attach to *changes* of mind, they will tend to lead agents who already believe something to continue to believe it. Since conservatism recommends just this sort of behavior, it is argued, the view allows us to be properly sensitive to the costs our cognitive limitations impose on us.

### 1.3 - Lost Evidence

The second virtue, discussed in depth by McGrath (2007), concerns the way conservatism deals with *lost evidence*. Because we are forgetful creatures, we do not always remember the reasons for which we formed a belief. But intuitively, we are rational in continuing to believe things we learned as children even if we no longer remember our grounds. What can explain our rationality in maintaining these beliefs?

According to an *evidentialist* view about memorial justification, like the one defended by Christensen (1994), we are rational because despite losing our original evidence, we now possess some new, independent evidential grounds for our belief.

But what is the nature of these grounds? It does not seem plausible that the grounds could be some sort of quasi-perceptual experience, for there is no distinctive memorial phenomenology we undergo throughout the period we maintain our belief. Neither, on reflection, does it seem right to say that we are rational on the basis of our own past trustworthiness. For there may be agents, like children, who do not even have sophisticated second order beliefs about such things, and they too are intuitively rational in their remembrances.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, even when such a justification is *available* to the agent, it cannot make the agent rational unless the agent's actual belief is in some way *based* on that justification. And it is doubtful that agents in cases of forgotten evidence typically base their memorial beliefs on relatively sophisticated considerations about the reliability of their past selves. These were not, after all, part of their basis when they formed the belief, and they have never reconsidered the question in a way we would expect to add to their grounds. If they were to *question* their belief, then they might be able to *use* evidence about their past reliability to reaffirm it, by incorporating those considerations into our grounds. But

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3 See McGrath (2007) who also raises the preceding points.

this would not tell us why they were rational all the way up until that point. So even if such evidence was sufficient for maintaining a belief, this kind of view could only tell us at best why it is rational for agents who *have* such evidence to *actively reaffirm* a belief once questioned about it. It would not explain why agents are rational to *passively* hold onto those beliefs when we have not yet used that kind of evidence to form or reaffirm them.<sup>4</sup>

An alternative to evidentialism called *preservationism* (Burge 1997, 2003) holds that our beliefs inherit the epistemic credit they had when we originally formed them. But for ancient evidence to reach forward and do work on our rationality today is an odd sort of epistemic action at a distance. More sharply, it is natural to think that part of what distinguishes rationality from externalist phenomena like knowledge is that your rational responsibilities are constrained by what is available to you and your success or failure by rational standards does not depend on things that are beyond your ken. The evidence possessed by our childhood selves, however, is not now available to us any more than that of a distant stranger and thus cannot bear on our current rationality. If preservationism were correct, then two agents who are identical but for their distant histories, who currently have the exact same information and experiences, will nevertheless differ in whether it makes rational sense *now* for them to hold a given belief, purely due to facts about their remote history to which neither has any access. This is intuitively the wrong result.

Conservatism, McGrath argues, promises to capture our commonsense judgments about the rationality of memorial belief without running into the problems faced by the views just discussed. The conservative suggests that the mere fact that one already believes something can affect the rationality of continuing to believe it, even when the other evidence alone is not sufficient. If this pressure towards doxastic inertia is strong enough, we can secure rationality in cases of memory without appealing to other evidence at all, and therefore without choosing between implausible

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4 We will return to the distinction between passive and active inertia of beliefs in section 5.

candidates for our evidential basis in our current perspective, as the evidentialist is forced to do, or in our remote and inaccessible past, as the preservationist is forced to do.

The leakiness of our memory, moreover, is not a mere misfortune. Since our minds have limited storage, Harman (1986) argues, we must be selective about which beliefs to keep around, which to allow to be forgotten, and which evidential relations between beliefs to track. A rational agent will *avoid mental clutter*. Often, the beliefs we consult in forming a conclusion are less important than the conclusion itself, like a ladder that may be thrown away after it has done its work. All that work, however, will have been for naught if the agent is required to drop the belief as soon as she loses her evidential justification for it. Respecting the need for clutter avoidance, then, requires allowing the beliefs of rational agents to outlast the evidence for them. In light of our limited storage, our forgetting of evidence is not a bug but a feature.

I will call the advantages conservatism has in treating these two subjects – the cognitive costs of belief revision and cases of lost evidence – the *canonical virtues* of the conservative view. I do not mean to suggest that they are the only reasons one might be attracted to conservatism. But they are widespread, cited by almost everyone who has defended a conservative view.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, they form an interesting class. They are concerned with the ways we are *cognitively limited* – in the first case, by the fact that changing our beliefs is costly, and in the second case, by the fact that our memories are both finite and leaky. In this paper, I will be interested only in forms of conservatism which can capture the canonical virtues.<sup>6</sup>

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5 Harman (1986), Lycan (1988), McGrath (2007), McCain (2008), and Poston (2012) are a sample, all of whom appeal to the canonical virtues.

6 It is for this reason that I will not consider standard Bayesian accounts of rational credence, which might understandably be labeled a kind of conservative picture. Such views have quite different motivations than the ones I am concerned with here. Because of the strict demands of probabilistic coherence they place on our credences, they are in a particularly poor position to reflect sensitivity to our cognitive limitations. Nevertheless, the view I consider on page 16 is in important ways structurally analogous to the Bayesian view.

Some authors have suggested that in addition to what I call the canonical virtues, conservatism could help solve general problems of skepticism (Sklar 1975, Lycan 1988, McCain 2008, Poston 2014). I will briefly discuss this motivation later in the paper, but I warn the reader in advance that if they are looking for a response to the skeptic, they will not find it in the view I endorse. If you are disappointed, read this paper as an argument that it's useful to distinguish two sets of putative epistemological advantages of conservatism which need not go together, and therefore that those who want to use conservatism for extremely ambitious philosophical payoffs should be wary of appealing to its more mundane advantages in order to motivate the view.

## 2.1 - Standard Conservatism and its Costs

Individual conservative accounts can be distinguished by their explanation of why doxastic inertia is rational. Although they differ significantly in their details, many writers on both sides of the topic seem to assume, explicitly or implicitly, that the explanation of rational inertia takes a certain form. Their characterization of conservatism suggests that there is rational pressure in favor of holding on to your beliefs because the fact that you already believe something confers some sort of epistemic merit on your belief – or as I will put it, contributes to it being epistemically *worth believing*, in a distinctly non-evidential way.

***Standard Conservatism:*** The mere fact that one already believes P can positively affect whether P is worth believing in a non-evidential way.

Different views formulated along the standard line may take different stances on the exact contribution that the existing belief that P makes – providing a reason for (Adler 1996, Crook 2000), justifying (McCain 2008), or granting prima facie rationality to (McGrath 2007). “Worth believing” is meant to be neutral between these, and I do not mean, by lumping them together, to suggest that

there are no important contrasts to be made between views depending on which of these relations is treated as the relevant one. But all of them suggest that the mere fact that one holds a belief contributes some epistemic merit to it. The qualification that this contribution is distinct from that of the evidence serves to differentiate the view from run-of-the-mill evidentialism, though a view on which existing belief is evidence of a special kind might count as distinctively conservative. We will examine the prospects of such a view later in the paper as an alternative to the standard approach.

It may be that some of the authors who have formulated conservatism along standard lines are not ultimately committed to understanding their view in this way. And others have simply not been clear or consistent about what form of conservatism they intend to discuss.<sup>7</sup> But this way of understanding the view is widespread enough that it has become a common currency between conservatives and their critics, and as I will argue, this is not without consequence.

I will save a diagnosis of the prevalence of this approach for later in this paper. Ultimately, my goal is to develop an alternative model of conservatism. But why should a conservative look elsewhere, if the standard view is such a natural approach? In the following two sections, I will discuss the costs that one incurs by accepting the standard model.

## **2.2 - The Evidence Restriction**

The first major cost of the standard conservative thesis is that it directly conflicts with a plausible principle we may call the *evidence restriction*.

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<sup>7</sup> Harman (1986) sometimes seems to characterize conservatism in a way that implies the standard view, for instance, as involving the claim that propositions “acquire justification simply by being believed” (pg. 30), elsewhere in a way that does not (pg. 46). McGrath (2007) recognizes that conservatism could be formulated in a non-standard way (pg. 2), but proceeds under the assumption that these would be equivalent.

***Evidence restriction (ER):*** The only considerations that, from the perspective of epistemic rationality, contribute to P's being worth believing are *evidential* – they bear positively on the belief's truth.

I will argue later in this paper for a kind of conservatism that is consistent with ER. But first, it is important to say a little about why we should take the evidence restriction seriously. After all, we have just been presented with a battalion of arguments in favor of conservatism. If the most natural accounts of conservatism are in tension with ER, one might think, so much the worse for the latter. But I do not think we can afford to be quite so cavalier.

First, we may note that the evidence restriction has more surface plausibility than conservatism, which is a rather counterintuitive view. More importantly, however, ER can be motivated by reflection on cases where agents believe for manifestly pragmatic reasons. Suppose you are offered a million dollars to believe that the next election will be won by the incumbent. There is, perhaps, *some* sense in which the offer counts in favor of the belief or makes the belief worth having. But the nigh-universal response to this case is that considerations like the promise of money, or the threat of torture, do not count in favor of a belief in the right way for epistemic rationality. An agent who formed a belief in response to such considerations might be admirable from a practical standpoint, but they would violate their distinctly epistemic responsibilities. And a natural thought further identifies just *why* such considerations do not make an epistemic contribution: what distinguishes epistemic requirements from requirements of other sorts is precisely their concern with truth and falsehood. The fact that I will receive money for believing something does not bear in any way on whether that belief is true, and for that reason does not make the proposition worth believing from the epistemic standpoint. Since those considerations which are connected in this way with truth

and falsehood are just what I am calling evidence, the evidence restriction is implicit in this natural explanation of the epistemic inefficacy of threats and rewards.

It is worth noting that the evidence restriction is both weaker than a view that many philosophers have found plausible and stronger than what one needs to generate a worry for standard conservatism from a similar direction. It is weaker than the view we might call *pure evidentialism*, according to which an agent's epistemic rationality supervenes entirely on their evidence. To get that stronger view, we would have to add a bridge principle from beliefworthiness to rationality of the sort I will go on to reject. Indeed, the view I defend in this paper is one way to accommodate ER while rejecting pure evidentialism. So those skeptical of pure evidentialism should not for that reason alone reject ER. And even if one is unsure of ER, it would be enough to raise doubts about standard conservatism if *the mere fact that one believes P* seems like the wrong sort of thing to make P worth believing, whatever other non-evidential factors might plausibly matter.

I do not claim that the considerations here are dispositive. My point is just to emphasize that abandoning ER is a real cost of the view. If there is an alternative picture that could preserve the motivations for conservatism while remaining consistent with ER, it is worth exploring.

### **2.3 - Three Objections to Standard Conservatism**

Besides being inconsistent with ER, conservatism in its standard form has been subjected to several powerful criticisms. In this section, I will survey the three I take to be most threatening, all of which have at various points been raised by David Christensen (1994, 2000), and argue that the responses available to the to the standard conservative either fail or threaten to undermine their ability to secure the canonical virtues.

The first objection concerns our practices of *explicit justification*. When asked to justify our belief, or tell someone why something is worth believing, it is natural to refer to the evidence in favor of that belief. It is intuitively *inappropriate* to cite the fact that you already have that belief, just as it is

inappropriate to cite the fact that someone offered you money to believe it. This objection cuts most sharply against the kind of standard conservative<sup>8</sup> who takes ones' current belief to provide a *reason* for continued belief, since reasons are paradigmatically the sort of thing one lists to others when justifying oneself or weighs explicitly in deliberation. But any standard conservative thinks that current belief confers *some* sort of epistemic merit on continued belief. And yet there does not seem to be a natural context where “because I already believe it” is appropriate as an answer to a question like “what justifies your belief?”, “Why should you believe that?” “What are your reasons for believing that?” or “What makes that the right thing for you to believe?” Neither does this sort of consideration seem to come up when we are deliberating privately about what to believe. As long as we take the considerations that we are willing to cite in favor of our beliefs as at least a presumptive guide to the considerations which in fact count in favor of them, this gives us reason to be skeptical of standard conservatism.

In response, the standard conservative may try to appeal to pragmatic considerations to explain why such appeals are infelicitous. Poston (2012) suggests, for instance, that in normal contexts of justification, citing a consideration implicates pragmatically, though does not literally convey, that it is a special piece of evidence. But pragmatic implicatures are typically *cancellable* – when we make explicit in our utterance that we do not mean to suggest the content that would otherwise be implicated, the implication disappears. However, adding “I don't mean to imply that this is evidence, but...” to assertions like “the fact that I already believe it justifies my believing it” does not seem to render them any more acceptable. Such citation sounds bizarre however it is qualified. So it fails the standard test for pragmatic implicature. Furthermore, even if dialectical norms of conversational implicature could explain why it seems inappropriate to say things *to others* that, on the standard conservative model, are

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8 See Adler (1996), Crook (2000).

strictly true, they don't explain why in purely first-personal contexts, when we are merely thinking *to ourselves*, it still seems wrong to consider mere belief in P among our reasons or justifiers for P.

The second worry is that standard conservatism seems to license a kind of objectionable bootstrapping.<sup>9</sup> The conservative holds that some beliefs that it would not be rational to form from scratch given ones' evidence are rational to maintain if one already has them. But suppose that an agent who doesn't have sufficient evidence to form a belief goes ahead and forms it anyway. Now, in addition to their evidence in favor of that belief, they may add to the considerations favoring it the fact that they already believe it, heightening its epistemic merit and, in marginal cases, making it rational for them to keep believing it. But forming a belief irrationally seems like an illegitimate way to give that belief an epistemic boost.

Some conservatives (McCain 2008, Poston 2014) respond by proposing limitations on the conditions under which mere belief provides its epistemic boost. Ted Poston (2014, Ch. 2), for instance, limits the contribution of mere belief to cases of empty symmetrical evidence – when there is no evidence one way or the other about P. The most objectionable kinds of bootstrapping, where one might bootstrap oneself into believing *against* the evidence, could thereby be avoided.

One worry about this kind of move is that such constraints can look ad hoc. If mere belief can contribute to epistemic merit, why would this contribution vanish in precisely these cases? More importantly, however, there is a tension between this strategy and one of our canonical motivations for conservatism. Note that once a belief has been formed on insufficient evidence, the agent is in the same subjective situation as one who formed a belief rationally and then lost track of the evidence for it. It was supposed to be a virtue of the conservative view that it could allow us to hold on to our beliefs in cases of that sort. Since there is this symmetry between cases of irrational belief formation

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<sup>9</sup> More discussion of bootstrapping and epistemic conservatism can be found in Foley (1983), Feldman (2003), and Fumerton (2007).

and cases of forgotten evidence, however, the very feature of standard conservatism which let it explain rationality in cases of forgotten evidence commits it to bootstrapping poorly formed beliefs. Poston's suggestion may avoid the worst sorts of bootstrapping, but only by limiting justified cases of lost evidence to exceedingly rare instances where we end up with no evidence once way or another. In general, placing conditions on the contribution of mere belief substantially limits bootstrapping at the cost of equally substantially surrendering the cases of lost evidence conservatism promised to explain.

Finally, standard conservatism is accused of violating demands of *epistemic impartiality*. Impartiality demands that we not treat our own beliefs as special, from an epistemic point of view, compared to the beliefs of others, merely because they belong to us. It is fine to regard one's own beliefs as special if, for instance, one takes oneself to be in a better epistemic position than other people. To do so *merely* because they're one's own, however, looks like epistemic narcissism. But the standard conservative does seem to endorse this kind of asymmetry – the fact that *I* believe something confers some positive status to my continued belief, but the fact that *you* believe something does not. But what's so special about *me* that makes my current opinions worth emulating?

McGrath (2007) makes the suggestion that we *should* treat the beliefs of others as conferring the same sort of epistemic value on our beliefs as those beliefs confer upon themselves, by taking the epistemic contribution of mere belief to parallel that of testimony. The mere fact that others believe something can, on such a view, justify our accepting it. But there are reasons to worry about this move. First, if the role of our beliefs in justifying themselves is to match that of testimony, and conservatism is to survive as distinct from ordinary evidentialism, then a proponent of this strategy must commit to a view on which testimony rationally justifies in a way different in kind from ordinary evidence, since non-conservatives are happy to grant that existing belief can sometimes make that sort of contribution (Christensen 1994). While such a view is by no means obviously wrong, it introduces

additional controversy. Second, unless we accept a preservationist account, which would make conservatism redundant for explaining the rationality of memory, the beliefs of others make us rational in believing things only through our own *beliefs about what others believe*. A fully symmetric approach to conservative justification, then, will say that it is through our *belief that we already believe P*, rather than the mere belief that P itself, that we are rational to continue to believe P. But this is not how conservatives, including McGrath himself, have understood their view, and worries would be raised about cases where we lack the relevant second order beliefs or where we are mistaken about what we believe, since it would suggest that there cannot be conservative justification in such cases. And the need to account for the rationality of memorial belief in cases where second order beliefs are not present was precisely the sort of thing conservatives would like to use as leverage against the *evidentialist* account of memory. If we want to avoid these problems, we will have to commit to at least one striking asymmetry between the way our own belief that P makes continued belief rational and the way someone else's belief that P does, and this puts pressure on the idea that testimony and doxastic inertia are two sides of the same coin.

These objections are, again, not intended to be entirely conclusive. A devoted standard conservative may be willing to take on radical commitments about the pragmatics of justification or the nature of testimony to avoid them, or to make sacrifices to the canonical virtues that give conservatism much of its appeal. But I've tried to argue that the responses will not be cheap or easy, and represent genuine costs of the standard approach.

### **3.1 - State-oriented Worth Believing: A Diagnosis**

Standard conservatism, we have seen, carries serious costs, as it must reject the plausible Evidence Restriction and has no easy reply to a number of forceful objections. If we are attracted by the canonical virtues, then, we have strong reason to look elsewhere. Yet alternatives to the standard model are largely unexplored. In this section, I will try and diagnose why the standard view might have

seemed the only plausible option for the conservative by identifying a common assumption which provides the basis for an argument for the standard view, and arguing that rejecting other premises is an unattractive option for anyone seeking to secure the canonical virtues.

The standard view is as standard as it is, I suspect, because many philosophers at least implicitly accept a norm to the effect that an agent is irrational for believing something that is not justified or supported by their reasons.<sup>10</sup> These are versions of the norm I will call *State-oriented Worth Believing*, with different conceptions of the conditions of believability filled in:

***State-oriented Worth Believing (SWB)***: It is irrational to believe something that is not worth believing (from one's perspective).

This norm has two notable features: it connects an agent's rationality with the considerations bearing on believability, and it is *state-oriented* – rendering an agent irrational in virtue of features of the mental states they are in (in particular, the beliefs they have) at individual times. This norm may seem trivial; we will soon see that it is not.

It is only a short jog from this principle to the conclusion that conservatism must take a standard form. Consider the following argument:

P1) ***Conservatism***: The mere fact that one already believes that P can make it rational for one to believe P going forward. That is, there are cases of rational doxastic inertia.

P2) ***SWB***: It is irrational to believe something that is not worth believing.

P3) In cases of doxastic inertia, if one did not already believe that P, P would not be worth believing.

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<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Broome (2007), Way (2009), Lord (2014) for explicit endorsements of principles of this sort.

P4) (From P1, P2, P3) There are cases where the mere fact that one already believes that P can make P worth believing.

P5) The mere fact that one already believes that P is not evidence that P.

C) (From P4, P5) ***Standard Conservatism***: There are cases where the mere fact that one already believes that P non-evidentially makes P worth believing.

There are two ways one might try to resist his line of reasoning from conservatism and SWB to standard conservatism. The first way is to reject P3. This requires claiming that in cases of rational doxastic inertia, the belief would be worth having even if the agent didn't already have it. In order for the view to be *conservative*, though, the fact that one already believes P must *make a difference*. So, such a view would require some independent norm that at least sometimes prohibits one from adopting perfectly worthy beliefs if one does not already have them. But whether or not such a norm is plausible, this sort of conservative view won't be able to capture the canonical virtues we identified for conservatism. This is because in many cases of lost evidence where we are intuitively rational in maintaining our belief, the evidence we have is very meager or nonexistent, and it is singularly implausible that when one has very little or no evidence for P, P could be worth believing on the evidence alone. The reason we do not form beliefs on the basis of little to no evidence is *not* to avoid being inconsistent over time – it's that the evidence *isn't good enough* to warrant it.

The second way is to deny P5, and assert that mere belief is *evidence* for itself. However, when this claim is distinguished from other claims that superficially resemble it, such as that certain *appearances* can be evidence for beliefs with the same content (Huemer 2013), that a *coherent system* of beliefs might justify its members (Elgin 2014), or that beliefs *together with information about our general reliability* can justify themselves (Christensen 1994), it looks rather implausible. In the absence of any reason to think that I'm reliable or that my belief is well-formed, it is doubtful that my belief is evidence

at all – we certainly don't cite it as such. If it is, it is plausibly very weak evidence at best. This, again, threatens the view's ability to explain the range of cases of lost evidence we want, which include cases where our current evidence is insufficient by a fairly wide margin. Moreover, this view is in an even poorer position to respond to the first two objections to conservatism than the standard picture, because a) evidence is precisely the sort of thing we'd expect to be dialectically appropriate to cite in explicit justification, and b) the bootstrapping worry is particularly forceful against the view of mere belief as evidence – such a view implies that merely forming a belief is a way of gaining *evidence* for it, which is even more implausible than the claim that merely forming a belief could non-evidentially justify it.

So if SWB is true, we must either reject conservatism (of a form that can capture the canonical virtues) or accept the standard view. This, I propose, is why the standard view is so widely assumed. This is further evidenced by the fact that authors on both sides of the debate often *define* conservatism in a way that presupposes that mere belief must contribute to the belief's epistemic merit to rationalize doxastic inertia, a presupposition that only makes sense if something like SWB is lurking in the background. McCain (2008) and Christensen (1994) both define conservatism as the view that mere belief confers justification, and Poston (2012) identifies it as the claim that characterizes it as “the mere holding of a belief confers some positive epistemic status on its content”.

If we want to hold on to the canonical virtues without incurring the standard costs, then, we must reject SWB. Purely on its face, it must be admitted, SWB certainly looks more appealing than conservatism. It may be hard to see how one could even deny it. But both the benefits a robust conservatism can secure and the challenges the standard view faces are considerable. Instead of abandoning conservatism or accepting the standard view, warts and all, then, I want to explore what happens if we take the road less traveled and reject SWB.

## 4.1 - The Dynamic Strategy

Throwing out SWB places us in a position of some disarray. On the standard conservative model, SWB is an important part of the explanation why doxastic inertia is rational – according to the standard view, the fact that one already believes something contributes to believability, and SWB tells us that a belief's worthiness is crucial to determining the agent's rationality in continuing to hold it. Without SWB, it is not at all obvious how a conservative view will be reconstructed. In addition, rationality surely has *something* to do with being responsive to the considerations that make things worth believing. SWB was the most natural way to cash this out. Some sort of replacement is required that will not simply regenerate the problems that led us to reject SWB in the first place.

The view I am about to sketch exploits a distinction that other authors have emphasized for different purposes – one between considerations that bear directly on the question of whether p and those that bear on the question of whether to make up one's mind or engage in deliberation about p.<sup>11</sup> Making this distinction does not, by itself, provide us with a way to avoid the pitfalls we have discovered, for it remains an open question what relevance these different types of consideration have for assessing the rationality of agents. As long as the upshot for rationality still includes a version of State-oriented Worth Believing,<sup>12</sup> we have made no progress.

What I propose is a *dynamic* interpretation of the rational relevance of both types of consideration. It is dynamic because it appeals, not to norms that police an agent's mental *states* at particular times, like SWB, but rather to norms that govern *processes*, essentially diachronic causal

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11 See, for instance, David Owens (2000, p. 157-158) on “two-dimensional rationality” during a defense of a preservationist view of memory, Pamela Hieronymi's discussion of the “wrong kind of reasons” problem (2005), and the discussion of “two-stage” theories in the exchange between Mark Schroeder (2012, 2013) and his critics (Hieronymi 2013 Shah and Silverstein 2013 Hubbs 2013)

12 Schroeder's (2012) and Owens's (2000) formulations of the two-stage view are examples of views that do maintain SWB.

patterns of mental activity, over intervals of time.<sup>13</sup> In particular, I want to focus on the process of *considering whether P*, for a given proposition P.

We may distinguish two kinds of norms governing a process of consideration. First, there are norms that determine when a rational agent *initiates* such a process. Second, there are norms that determine the rational *operation* of that process, once initiated. On my view, considerations of one type will feature in norms on the initiation of the process, and considerations of a different type will feature in norms on the operation of that process.<sup>14</sup>

I will present a simplified model on which consideration is the only process by which we rationally form or give up beliefs, so we may see in an uncluttered way how a dynamic model operates, and take for granted that whatever other belief-forming processes there are, either they are governed by similar norms and will therefore function in a similar way, or they are not intrusive enough to undermine the general patterns I describe. This illustrative model is only a partial sketch of the full story of norms governing even the single process of consideration. But I will begin to fill the gaps left by our rejection of SWB and show how the conservative picture it generates is attractive as a model of rational doxastic inertia.

## 4.2 - Dynamic Conservatism

I begin with a dynamic replacement for SWB – a norm that describes how our epistemic behavior must be sensitive to the considerations that make things worth believing.

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13 That a broadly dynamic approach to rationality would have implications for the conservative project was recognized by Barry Lam (2007), though he does not develop the thought in detail and his understanding of the nature of dynamic requirements differs in important ways from mine, for instance in whether such requirements apply to processes or mere changes of attitude.

14 My own view is that we should go in for a *purely* dynamic picture, on which there are no norms on states at all. But that is beyond the scope of this paper. What matters for our purposes is that there isn't a standing requirement like SWB requiring us to have beliefs with sufficient merit. We may leave open whether there are, for example, requirements not to have contradictory beliefs.

***Dynamic Worth Believing (DWB):*** It is irrational to conclude consideration of whether P by forming or reaffirming the belief that P if P is not worth believing (from one's perspective).

If SWB is true, then so is DWB. But the reverse does not hold. DWB places constraints on an agent only in the course of a process of considering whether P, and only when the agent is *forming or reaffirming* a belief during such a process. This is crucial, for it is what allows the view to resolve the tension between conservatism and ER.

To see how this works, we must explain how our dynamic picture secures conservatism. All it takes, I suggest, is this general claim about the norms surrounding the initiation of consideration:

***Inconsiderate:*** One is not always rationally required to initiate consideration whether P when one believes that P and one's evidence does not make P worth believing (from one's perspective).

If Inconsiderate were false, then whenever one believed P and one's current evidence wouldn't justify forming that belief from scratch, one would be required to reevaluate whether P (and, consequently, give up that belief). That's no good for conservatism.

But if Inconsiderate is true, then there will be some cases where one's evidence does not make P worth believing, one believes P, and one needn't reconsider that belief. For as long as that state of affairs lasts, the mere fact that one already believed P (together with the fact that one was not required to reconsider) explains why one is rational in continuing to believe P, at least until one *is* required to reconsider.

If one *didn't* already believe P, then to believe P, going forward, one would have to *form* that belief. To *form* that belief (on our simplified picture at least), one would have to *consider* it. And DWB tells us that the formation of the belief during such a process must be sensitive to whether the belief

is worth having, which in this case it is not. So the behavior demanded of an agent who already believes P, in such cases, going forward, is very different from the behavior demanded of an agent who does not.

The key point here is that vis a vis the process of consideration, an agent who does not believe P can be rational in coming to believe P only in *one* way, by rationally considering whether P and then forming that belief. An agent who already believes P can be rational in continuing to believe P in *two* ways, by rationally considering whether P and then reaffirming it (the same way the nonbeliever has), or by rationally not reconsidering whether P. So, at least as far as consideration is concerned, it is strictly easier for it to be rational to believe P going forward if one already believes it. This is, of course, a characteristically conservative position.

### **4.3 - Strengthening the View: Dynamic Worth Considering**

We have seen that if Inconsiderate is true, then the dynamic approach justifies a form of conservatism. And Inconsiderate is a relatively weak claim. All it takes for it to be true is a single case where one may permissibly fail to reconsider a belief in P while one's evidence doesn't make P worth believing. As one case of this sort: suppose one comes into possession of a large amount of new evidence sufficient to undermine the justification of a large number of beliefs, which one cannot consider all at once. If Inconsiderate were false, then it would be impossible for one to avoid irrationality in such a case. But intuitively, agents in this position, who are forced to prioritize which questions to consider now and which to leave for later, are not irrational. While it may be that *sometimes* a defect of one's belief must trigger reconsideration – when, for instance, the agent is in a position to easily recognize the defect and to improve their position in a straightforward manner (when they have blatantly contradictory beliefs, perhaps), to expect this of agents in all cases of evidential insufficiency would be extremely demanding. And while not all philosophers take demandingness seriously as a constraint on epistemic theorizing, it is implicit in the core motivations for conservatism.

The downside to the weakness of Inconsiderate is that the form of conservatism it guarantees is correspondingly weak. It is consistent with the existence of only a handful of cases of rational doxastic inertia. But a conservatism which justifies rational inertia only in some very small or theoretically uninteresting range of cases is not the success we want from a view which involves so drastic a rethinking of the norms on rational belief. Ideally, we want a conservatism strong enough to secure the advantages proponents of standard conservative views have long touted for their own views. To achieve this, we will have to say something stronger than Inconsiderate. In what follows, I will propose some plausible developments of the view and show how, thus bolstered, it can capture the canonical motivations for the conservative outlook concerned with our cognitive limitations.

We can begin our development with the following observation: just as there are things that bear positively or negatively on whether something is worth believing, there are things that bear positively or negatively on whether a question is worth opening for consideration. And there will be corresponding norms that connect an agent's rationality to the way they respond to such reasons. For instance:

***Dynamic Worth Considering:*** It is rationally required to consider whether P only when it is worth considering whether P.

In general, those things that make P *more* worth considering will push in the direction of rationally requiring the agent to consider, and those that make P *less* worth considering will push in the direction of making such consideration optional or prohibited. We are in a position, then, to work out the contours of dynamic conservatism by thinking about what sorts of things bear positively or negatively on whether it is worth considering whether P. Here are some plausible candidates.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> I should note, importantly, that we are interested in what is worth considering *from the agent's perspective*, so these are

**More Worth Considering:**

- 1+) It is now especially important that I believe truly regarding P.
- 2+) I am now in a significantly better epistemic position regarding P than I was when I last considered P (for instance, by having recently received evidence regarding P, or because my current belief that P was formed in unfavorable circumstances, like when I was drunk).
- 3+) I am now in a significantly better epistemic position regarding P than I will be in the future (for instance, by having evidence available that I expect to lose).

**Less Worth Considering:**

- 1-) It does not matter whether I believe truly regarding P.
- 2-) I am now in a worse epistemic position regarding P than I was when I last considered P (for example, because I have lost evidence regarding P, or because I am now tired or under the influence of drugs).
- 3-) I am now in a worse epistemic position regarding P than I will be in the future (for example, because I anticipate crucial evidence is forthcoming, or because I am now tired or under the influence of drugs).
- 4-) Considering P is an expenditure of time or cognitive effort.

The lists are only a suggestion and only a start, and the reader is invited to disregard those entries they find questionable and include others they find compelling. A fully mature dynamic theory, which we do not have space to develop here, will unify and explain the items on these lists in a

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considerations which are believed by the agent or otherwise cognitively available to her, and they needn't be *true*.

principled way.<sup>16</sup> For now, it will suffice to note that which lists we accept tells us, in some qualitative way, what the resultant conservatism will look like. In particular, we expect rational cognitive inertia to be *less* prevalent when items from the first list are present, since those will make rational agents more inclined to reconsider and therefore keep up with their evidence, and *more* prevalent when items from the second list are present, when they will be inclined to hold on to their existing opinions.

One additional question to ask is whether by default; that is, without special reasons one way or the other, consideration is rationally required, permissible, or prohibited. I suggest the following thought: we spend much of our time not considering any question of belief at all. The rest of the time, we consider at most a small number of beliefs. If we are not being irrational in acting this way, as is, I think, the appropriate presumption, then either failing to consider is at least *default permissible*, or the things that count against considering are ubiquitous enough that for practical purposes we may treat it as if it were so. Whatever it takes to make consideration required is, in the normal case, fairly substantial, or the default permissibility would be too often overridden to make sense of our intuitively reasonable practices of consideration.

With the substance of a dynamic view (partially) filled out in this way, we are in a better position to see how it handles the cases of interest to conservatives.

## 5.1 - The Canonical Virtues, Revisited

If, as I suggested, not considering has at least a de facto default permissible status, then there will be a kind of general, permeating *presumptive conservatism*. We are not required to consider a question until we have some special positive reason to do so. So agents will be rational in maintaining any given belief for at least as long as they do not encounter such a reason. Atop this presumptive conservatism,

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<sup>16</sup> At the end of section 5.1, I propose a thought that may serve as the beginning of such a theory.

our view warrants an additional push towards doxastic inertia in the presence of items from our second list, reasons *against* considering.

Now, recall the canonical virtues of the conservative approach. The first suggested that conservatism represented a way for rational agents to be sensitive to the fact that *changing beliefs has cognitive costs*. The second suggested that conservatism reflected our rational need to *trust our memory* and *avoid clutter*, by letting us maintain our belief and thereby take advantage of the original justification we had for our views even when it has been lost.

Because of the presumption of rationality for not considering, our version of conservatism substantially limits the burdens on our cognitive resources, and frequently spares us the cost of changing our minds. In fact, I suggest, our dynamic approach is a *better* account of how the cognitive costs of giving up our belief justify doxastic inertia than the ones built to explain that very fact. On some standard conservative accounts, we have our evidence for various positions, and then because there are costs to changing one's mind, there is a little extra justification sprinkled atop those propositions we already believe. Rational agents are responsive to the sum total of the evidence and this extra justification, and thereby exhibit cognitive inertia.

But this effectively locates the important cognitive costs in the wrong place. Once we have assessed our evidence, the additional cost of merely changing our opinion is miniscule. Indeed, it tends to happen automatically and almost instantaneously. The expenditures involved in changing one's mind are primarily expenditures involved in the processes of *assessing the evidence* leading up to the change in belief. An approach that treats existing belief as something that *goes into* the calculation of on-balance justification with other familiar evidential factors requires us to be conscientious in taking the evidence into account *anyway*, and spares us only the trouble of switching beliefs when the evidence turns out to be very close. Our view, in contrast, spares us the costs of assessment itself, which is as it should be.

The presumptive conservatism our view generates is also strong enough to imply that in a range of cases, we may persist in our beliefs after we have lost our evidence. As long as an agent lacks any special reason to reconsider that belief, she is rational to hold on to it even if, due to the need to minimize mental clutter or through sheer forgetfulness, she no longer has the same evidence available to her. And we secure this without needing to locate the source of this rationality in either her current evidence or in her past evidence.

So dynamic conservatism is able to capture the most important case judgments involved in these arguments for conservatism. But it does much more than this. Notice that we have secured these judgments by appeal only to the default rationality of not considering. This presumptive conservatism bears some structural similarity to standard conservative proposals (McCain 2008, McGrath 2007) which claim that the mere fact of belief renders it *prima facie* rational, a status which is then undermined by defeaters of various kinds. Those views also offer a way to limit strain on our cognitive resources and allow us to believe when we have lost our evidence, as long as the conditions for defeat are sufficiently strong. But when one looks at the *mechanics* of these views, one finds no reference to the costs of belief formation, to clutter avoidance, or to the limitations of our memory. To the extent that defeat conditions are developed at all, one finds general evidential defeaters like “If S has better reasons for believing that  $\sim P$  than S's reasons for believing that P, then S is no longer justified in believing that P” (McCain 2008, pg. 186) These are plausible enough as defeaters go. It is obscure, on these views, however, how the fact that forming beliefs is costly, that we must avoid clutter, or that our memories are limited might *explain* the existence and extent of rational doxastic inertia. Why these particular defeaters? Why not stronger ones? Why not weaker ones?

Our cognitive limitations are contingent facts about us. But on such views, no sense is given of how our conservative practices should change if, for example, the costs of belief formation were less, or we did not have to worry about mental clutter, or we had perfect memories. These views may

get the cases right, but they seem to operate in isolation from the thoughts that motivated those cases, and so seem to get them right *by coincidence*.

On our view, on the other hand, once we move past the basic presumptive part of the dynamic picture and begin to look at the list of candidates for reasons against consideration, we find those very thoughts reflected back at us directly. 4-, for instance, tells us that some degree of conservatism is warranted in virtue of, and to the extent that, considering a question represents a burden on our cognitive resources.

In addition, not only can we explain our rationality in the face of losses of belief that occur as a *consequence* of clutter-avoidance, our view suggests an independent mechanism *for* clutter avoidance, in the form of 1-. Our original state concerning most beliefs, after all, is nonbelief. The vast majority of beliefs are acquired, not innate. So a tendency not to consider a question when it lacks importance manifests on balance as a tendency not to have beliefs about such things, that is, precisely a tendency not to clutter ones' mind with trivialities. So our view is *especially* well placed to appeal to those who take clutter avoidance as a serious concern for rational agents.

Furthermore, 2- tells us that the degree to which doxastic inertia is warranted is sensitive to the ways our condition as finite human agents may lead our epistemic position to deteriorate over time. One way, of course, our epistemic position may deteriorate over time is through the loss of memory. And the thought that our rational norms should reflect this by inclining us to trust our beliefs is precisely the sort of thing underlying the attractiveness of conservatism as an account of the rationality of memorial belief.

In fact, I think we may understand the conservative insight about memory as merely a special case of a more general, more fundamental motivation for our dynamic picture. Our norms on rational epistemic behavior, I suggest, should lead us to do work on our beliefs at precisely those times when that work will be most epistemically effective. In the end, we want our beliefs to reflect the best

response to the most information, and then lock them in until an even more optimal situation comes along. This is reflected in the interaction of considerations like 2+, 3+, 2-, and 3-. If I expect I may have lost evidence, or become less competent as an evaluator, I should not begin a process that I expect will mislead me. This allows my beliefs about each topic to reflect the epistemic peaks in my history on that issue.

So our view makes manifest not only how rational doxastic inertia is possible, but how it is sensitive to those features of the human condition that made endorsing it attractive. If updating our beliefs were less costly, if we could easily store arbitrarily many beliefs, or if our memories were perfect, the extent of rational inertia would be reduced.

It bears emphasis that the list of reasons for and against consideration was not simply constructed ad hoc to build our abstract motivations for conservatism into the view – each item is, I think, independently and intuitively plausible as the sort of thing that bears on whether it's worth considering whether P. That it would, then, have such a tight connection with the very things that motivate the conservative project would be a coincidence bordering on miraculous unless it were capturing something very deep about the conservative insight.

## **5.2 - Passive vs. Active Inertia**

One notable feature of dynamic conservatism is that it makes significant the difference between two kinds of inertia. *Active inertia* occurs when an agent continues to hold a belief due to the fact that they already hold it, *through active consideration*. *Passive inertia* occurs when an agent continues to hold a belief due to *not reconsidering*. On the dynamic picture we have sketched, the only kind of doxastic inertia which is rational is passive inertia. Dynamic Worth Believing tells us that once we have decided to consider whether P, we are beholden to the considerations that make P worth believing. And according to the evidence restriction, only evidence can make P worth believing. So once we are engaged in active consideration, the mere fact that we already believe something no longer has any

weight in determining whether we'd be rational to keep that belief. The view does not, then, license any kind of active inertia.

In this respect, dynamic conservatism is more modest than some versions of standard conservatism, which, by allowing mere belief to count in its own favor, rendering it all-things-considered worth having, allow an agent to maintain their belief even when actively considering it, and indeed, even when aware of the evidential shortcomings of that belief.

One might worry that this makes the view *too* modest. In some cases of forgotten evidence, it seems, we *do* actively consider the question, and find ourselves unable to recall our reasons. And yet it still seems rational for us to hold on to our beliefs. Because dynamic conservatism does not explain active inertia, we must turn to other tools, like those appealed to by the evidentialist, to explain these cases. If we must make this appeal anyway, the worry goes, why not do without dynamic conservatism altogether?

It is true that a dynamic conservative will use more familiar evidentialist tools to handle these cases. But that does not mean that it fails to improve on those views. The standard evidentialist explanation of memory, recall, appeals to second order evidence (about, for instance, the general reliability of memory). One major problem with this explanation, we saw, was that this sort of evidence could not contribute to our rationality unless our belief was *based* on that evidence. So while we could use this evidence to rationally actively reaffirm our belief, this would not explain our rationality when we do not perform some such reaffirmation. But this is just to say that evidentialism fails to explain passive inertia. It is a gap that dynamic conservatism has the perfect shape to fill. So it is complementary with, and not redundant to, the evidentialist strategy. Moreover, while the evidentialist cannot explain why agents who lack relevant second order information at all can lose evidence and rationally maintain their beliefs, the dynamic view can at least explain why such agents can exhibit *passive* inertia. The cases the view doesn't endorse as rational are those where an agent *actively* reaffirms

their belief *without* relevant second order information. And these are the cases where it is least intuitive that doxastic inertia is rational. Nevertheless, if these are taken to be core cases, it must be admitted that this is a genuine disadvantage of the dynamic approach.<sup>17</sup>

The distinction between active and passive inertia also lets us see why the dynamic view won't explain the rationality of maintaining ordinary beliefs in the face of skeptical challenges, a common motivation for conservatism we have so far set aside. (Sklar 1975, Lycan 1988, McCain 2008, Poston 2014). We want a way to *respond* to the skeptic – to *justify* our belief to her, or to ourselves; to restore our confidence when we *do* consider whether a skeptical scenario is true. A view that lets us defy skepticism only by not thinking about it will not satisfy. This is not to say that a dynamic conservative can't respond to the skeptic – but their solution will not flow from their conservatism.

Whether this is a major strike against dynamic conservatism will depend on how seriously one takes the anti-skeptical ambition. There is good reason to think that the cognitive cost, clutter-avoidance, and memory motivations are fundamentally independent of the anti-skeptical hope. The skeptical problem, after all, appears even for agents who are cognitively flawless – perfect, instantaneous reasoners with limitless cognitive resources. So the problems that the dynamic view helps us solve form an interesting and unified class.

Furthermore, I think there is more grounds to be skeptical of the rationality of active belief perseverance than that of passive perseverance. Any conservative, remember, will want to distinguish rational inertia from those types of belief perseverance that we criticize as cognitively vicious. And a characteristic criticism of this sort is an accusation of *stubbornness*. To be stubborn is not merely to hold on to a belief despite having, in the background, insufficient evidence for belief; it is to hold on

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<sup>17</sup> A related worry goes as follows. If whenever one thinks about P, or retrieves a belief from memory, one counts as considering whether P, then it will be extremely easy to stop the inertia of belief, and we won't have captured the interesting cases of forgotten evidence. I mean to use "consideration" in a more robust sense than this. Merely checking or recalling ones' belief on a matter is not sufficient to be considering whether P in my sense, which is a more involved process involving the weighing of evidence. "Deliberation" would be the practical analogue.

to that belief *in the face of* evidential insufficiency. Someone who exhibits merely passive inertia, then, is immune to charges of epistemic stubbornness in a way someone who exhibits active inertia is not. Someone who believes in the rationality of active inertia may, of course, have a way of distinguishing objectionable epistemic stubbornness from acceptable sticking-to-one's-guns. But the fact that by sacrificing a response to the skeptic, the dynamic picture can easily dismiss a characteristic cognitive vice as fundamentally different in kind from rational inertia and not merely in degree is a reason to suspect that its limitation to justifying passive forms of perseverance is a feature, not a bug.

## **Part VI: The Standard Costs, Revisited**

We have seen that the dynamic view can cite the canonical virtues of conservatism in its favor, and indeed, that it has a better claim to these virtues than the standard view itself. Now we will consider the costs of the standard view and see whether the same problems arise for dynamic conservatism.

First, we can see that unlike the standard view, dynamic conservatism is consistent with ER. Notice that the explanation of rational inertia on the dynamic view is crucially different from the one given by the standard conservative. On that view, an agent was rational to continue believing *because that belief was worth having*. That belief had something non-evidentially *counting in favor* of it. This was a violation of the evidence restriction. On the dynamic conservative picture, the belief the agent has need not be worth having. There needn't be anything counting in favor of it. The belief the agent already had is not related to the belief they have going forward as justifier to justified, or as a reason, or as a conferrer of epistemic merit of any kind.

This version of conservatism is able to capture ER because by rejecting state-oriented norms demanding the worthiness of our beliefs, we allow that there are periods of time where what a belief

has going for it *simply doesn't matter* for an agent's rationality. This lets us maintain that the only thing that counts in favor of a belief is the evidence for it while allowing for rational doxastic inertia.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to add that if we are skeptical of the evidence restriction for other reasons, we need not keep it. The dynamic approach is equally handy for those who reject ER but nevertheless think that *mere existing belief* is not the right sort of non-evidential consideration to contribute to beliefworthiness. We may even, if we are perverse, take the dynamic view on board *and* hold that the mere fact that one believes something counts in favor of believing it. Dynamic conservatism is compatible with any view about what makes a belief worth having.

Finally, let us reconsider the three traditional objections to conservatism, as challenges to the dynamic rather than the standard model of the view.

First, conservatism is accused of having the unacceptable implication that it should be appropriate to cite the fact that one already believes something when justifying one's belief to others or deliberating about what to believe. What resources does the dynamic conservative have to respond?

Let us consider the nature of the practices of justification and deliberation. We ask for justification from others when we are looking for a basis for our own beliefs, or examining the basis of theirs. Justification, in other words, is paradigmatically a process of demonstrating to others what is good about what one believes. Deliberation, in turn, is a kind of first-person analogue of justification – we are identifying and balancing those considerations which bear on the question of what to believe. That is, we are *considering* some matter of belief. On our dynamic picture, by the evidence restriction, the fact that I already believe something does not count in favor of the belief – it is not part of the basis or the grounds for my belief. It is not, furthermore, something we are allowed to appeal to when engaged in the process of considering whether to hold the belief. The role of mere belief in rationality

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<sup>18</sup> It is worth emphasizing a distinction between the dynamic view and a superficially similar view – one that maintains SWB and claims that mere belief only confers epistemic merit *while an agent is not considering*. Such a view would not be consistent with the evidence restriction.

is just fundamentally different from that of a justifier of any kind. Unlike the standard conservative, then, the dynamic conservative is under no pressure to claim that in such practices it is appropriate to cite the fact of mere belief in favor of the belief itself.

Second, conservatism is accused of licensing bootstrapping, by which a person may, by irrationally forming a belief, thereby make it rational for him to continue believing it.

It was noted when we introduced this objection that it put the conservative in an especially awkward position dialectically, since the situation of a person who has formed a belief on insufficient evidence is, afterwards, the same as one who formed a belief on good evidence and then lost that evidence. And one of the reasons to favor the conservative approach to memory over preservationism is that it allows us to maintain that our rationality now does not depend on facts about our distant history. Since as far as the present is concerned, the rational forgettor and the agent who formed a belief irrationally are indistinguishable, the conservative who wants to exploit such an internalist requirement must insist that agents after rational forgetting and irrational formation are on a par. I accept this as a commitment. Any view that takes internalism seriously will have to do the same. But I think the sort of “bootstrapping” the dynamic view allows is not of an objectionable sort. Recall that the dynamic picture licenses only *passive* inertia. The agent who forms a belief irrationally is later rational in holding on to that belief, but only as long as he does not reconsider the question. When she again asks herself whether her belief is correct, she begins a process that ends with her giving up that belief on pain of irrationality. This does not sound crazy. The really objectionable kind of bootstrapping comes with views, like standard conservatism, that justify *active* inertia. On such views, it seems, an agent could irrationally form a belief, and then keep on *actively reaffirming* that belief, thereafter, without repeating their original irrationality. In contrast, the dynamic picture does not allow mere formation of a belief in a proposition to take that proposition from being unworthy of belief to

being worthy of belief, preventing an irrationally formed belief from being actively reaffirmed. So it is immune to the most serious charges of bootstrapping.

Finally, conservatism is accused of violating a constraint of impartiality by treating the rational force of our own beliefs asymmetrically from that of the beliefs of others.

It's clear on the standard conservative picture how the asymmetry occurs – my beliefs count directly in favor of my own beliefs, but yours do not. But what is the asymmetry on our dynamic picture? Neither my mere beliefs nor anyone else's count directly in favor of the proposition believed. Nor do they bear on the worthiness of considering whether something is true. In fact, the only way that the identity of an agent matters to our norms is in identifying *whose beliefs are being considered*. I treat my beliefs differently than yours only in the sense that I reconsider *my* beliefs but I don't reconsider *your* beliefs. But to complain that this is objectionably asymmetrical would be absurd. I *can't* reconsider *your* beliefs any more than I can (directly) raise *your* hand. So the partiality objection cannot even get off the ground against the dynamic view.

## **Recapitulation**

Let me summarize the case I have presented. Conservatism is attractive for the way it reflects a proper rational sensitivity to our cognitive limitations. Standard conservatism, however, is associated with several significant costs – it must reject the well-motivated evidence restriction and it is vulnerable to several serious independent objections. The conservative is forced to accept the standard version of the view, however, only if they accept State-oriented Worth Believing. By rejecting SWB, we open the door to a view on which the relevant norms of rationality govern dynamic processes like consideration instead of state-oriented attitudes like belief. The dynamic conservatism that emerges allows us to maintain the evidence restriction, and captures the canonical motivations for conservatism in a way that is in many respects better than the standard conservative views that originally sought to exploit them. Furthermore, the dynamic conservative picture is immune to the arguments that threaten

standard conservatism. Its failure to secure the conservative ambition of responding to worries about skepticism is grounded in its rejection of the rationality of active doxastic inertia, of which we have independent reason to be skeptical. In light of the gains made possible by endorsing a dynamic approach to the rationality of belief, a project whose potential is yet to be fully explored, the long philosophical entrenchment of norms like State-oriented Worth Believing would be irrational not to reconsider.

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