SOCIAL CHANGE AND STATUS QUO MAINTENANCE IN APPLIED ETHICS

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INTRODUCTION

Much work in applied ethics responds to technological developments that promise to change our way of life. Other work frequently buttresses advocacy for social movements that would also produce change. The centrality of social change to problems in applied ethics indicates the importance of addressing resistance to change, particularly when such resistance is not justified on the basis of some other value but regarded as a value in itself. Comparatively little attention has been paid to this problem, with a notable exception being Nick Bostrom and Toby Ord's identification of the role played by "status quo bias" in ethics and their suggestion that this bias can be addressed by use of a "reversal test" in which the status quo is imagined as a novel intervention.

In this paper, I identify how a desire for maintenance of the status quo in the face of social and economic change plays a role in debates in applied ethics. In Part I, I discuss how social change plays a role in applied ethics arguments. In Part II, I discuss Bostrom and Ord's strategy for combating bias toward the preservation of the status quo. In Part III, I examine other arguments for giving weight to status quo maintenance, and makes the case that although it is more than the mere psychological bias Bostrom and Ord describe it as, it is a less compelling interest than those identified by those calling for revisions in our social practices. In the Conclusion, I make some more speculative suggestions about how applied ethics might make progress in the face of the psychological and political attractiveness of maintaining the status quo.

PART I: STATUS QUO MAINTENANCE AND APPLIED ETHICS

Applied ethics is typically understood as the project of answering normative questions raised in specific real-world contexts. It contrasts, broadly speaking, with normative ethics (the project of answering normative questions in more abstract context) and with metaethics (the project of explaining the meaning, epistemic accessibility, or metaphysical status of normative claims).

Frequently, the real-world phenomena under discussion in applied ethics involve changes in the natural world, changes in our ability to affect the natural world, or changes in social norms. This contrasts with settled or highly unlikely phenomena, which are less often the subject of ethical analysis—for instance, there is much more interest in applied ethics in the ethical issues posed by the farming of chickens (an ongoing practice) than in the ethical issues posed by the treatment of passenger pigeons

(a past practice). There is similarly more interest in the ethical issues posed by climate change (a current problem) than by the ethical issues that would be posed by a reduction in the Earth's gravitational field (a highly unlikely problem).

Because applied ethics deals with real-world phenomena, the consequences of accepting recommendations in applied ethics have implications for real people. Furthermore, problems that are of interest in applied ethics typically involve trade-offs among important goods. Both David Hume and John Rawls identify certain "objective circumstances of justice" as preconditions for the relevance of distributive justice.[1] For my purposes, the most relevant circumstance of justice is what Rawls calls relative scarcity of resources—the fact that changes in social arrangements that provide more resources to some individuals frequently provide fewer resources (in relative or in absolute terms) to others. The fact of relative resource scarcity means that few applied ethics recommendations promise what economists call Pareto improvements, in which some people gain but none lose, and even fewer produce Pareto improvements that also do not change anyone's relative position in terms of resources.

My interest here is in three broad categories of social change that applied ethics deals with. One category is where applied ethics itself proposes social changes. In the other two categories, social norms or natural forces produce changes to which applied ethics responds. Consider these examples:

1. Some applied ethicists argue that our obligations to animals drastically reduce or eliminate meat production in favor of switching to a vegetarian diet. This would impose burdens on meat eaters and meat producers, even while it creates opportunities for individuals working on new sources of food and may expand options for vegetarians.
2. Climate change threatens to inundate some areas or render them unsuitable for economic uses such as growing crops. In response, some applied ethicists have suggested measures to prevent or mitigate the effects of climate change.
3. Advances in self-driving automotive technology promise to reduce the economic need for human drivers, including taxi and truck drivers. This could impose burdens on those currently working in those occupations, even as it expands opportunities for consumers and for transportation and delivery firms.

In all of these cases, proposals in applied ethics can serve either to increase or decrease the extent to which these changes affect the status quo.

PART II: BOSTROM AND ORD ON STATUS QUO MAINTENANCE

[1] See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1999), p. 109.

In a 2006 article, Nick Bostrom and Toby Ord discuss the prevalence of status quo maintenance as a justification for arguments in applied ethics. They focus on the case of genetic enhancement of human capacities, which many authors criticize on the basis that it disrupts the status quo. Bostrom and Ord define status quo bias as an "inappropriate (irrational) preference for an option because it preserves the status quo."[2] Notably, this is a *moralized* definition of status quo bias—rather than simply defining status quo bias as a preference to preserve the status quo, they define it as an erroneous preference to do so. They suggest several examples in which individuals display apparent status quo bias:

- Choosing to retain a gift one receives rather than exchanging it for another gift of comparable value
- Keeping an inherited sum of money invested as is, rather than reinvesting it
- Maintaining their current balance of electric power cost and reliability, rather than changing it
- Preferring an outcome framed as prevention of a loss over the same outcome framed as a loss

They then propose two debiasing interventions. One is what they call the *Reversal Test*:

> *Reversal Test*: When a proposal to change a certain parameter is thought to have bad overall consequences, consider a change to the same parameter in the opposite direction. If this is also thought to have bad overall consequences, then the onus is on those who reach these conclusions to explain why our position cannot be improved through changes to this parameter. If they are unable to do so, then we have reason to suspect that they suffer from status quo bias.[3]

The example they discuss is the case of cognitive enhancement: if it's thought to be objectionable to improve cognitive capacity, and also objectionable to worsen cognitive capacity, it must be explained why our cognitive capacity should remain as it is. They consider four arguments for preserving the status quo:

- Our having biologically evolved to the status quo suggests that it's optimal for us
- Moving away from the status quo will impose transition costs
- Moving away from the status quo will impose risks
- Moving away from the status quo will change us into different individuals[4]

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[2] Nick Bostrom and Toby Ord, "The Reversal Test: Eliminating Status Quo Bias in Applied Ethics," *Ethics* 116.4 (2006): 656–679, p. 658.
[3] Bostrom and Ord, "The Reversal Test," p. 665.
[4] Bostrom and Ord, "The Reversal Test," pp. 665-72.

The first argument is quickly and rightly disposed of by Ord and Bostrom. To respond to the other three, they suggest various arguments, in particular a modification of the Reversal Test:

> *Double Reversal Test*: Suppose it is thought that increasing a certain parameter and decreasing it would both have bad overall consequences. Consider a scenario in which a natural factor threatens to move the parameter in one direction and ask whether it would be good to counterbalance this change by an intervention to preserve the status quo. If so, consider a later time when the naturally occurring factor is about to vanish and ask whether it would be a good idea to intervene to reverse the first intervention. If not, then there is a strong prima facie case for thinking that it would be good to make the first intervention even in the absence of the natural countervailing factor.[5]

They use the Double Reversal Test to argue that the status quo advocate who would argue for enhancing our capacities in the face of some danger to them must then explain why it's good to then eliminate the enhancement when the danger subsides. They motivate this claim using the following case:

> A hazardous chemical has entered our water supply. Try as we might, there is no way to get the poison out of the system, and there is no alternative water source. The poison will cause mild brain damage and thus reduced cognitive functioning in the current population. Fortunately, however, scientists have just developed a safe and affordable form of somatic gene therapy which, if used, will permanently increase our intellectual powers just enough to offset the toxicity-induced brain damage.[6]

Ord and Bostrom assume that it is obviously acceptable to prevent the toxicity-induced damage through the therapy. They then question whether there is any compelling justification for eliminating the therapy once it has been used.

Ultimately, although Ord and Bostrom ambitiously state that the Reversal Test is a way of "Eliminating Status Quo Bias in Applied Ethics," I am less sanguine. There are at least three problems with their claim that the Reversal Test will serve to eliminate status quo bias.

1. The first is that even the Double Reversal Test doesn't fully dispose of the problems posed by risk, transition cost, or becoming different sorts of individuals. If the status quo—understood as a given level of cognitive ability—involves fewer transition costs, no unpredictable risks, and no risk of becoming a

[5] Bostrom and Ord, "The Reversal Test," p. 673.
[6] Ibid., p. 672.

different sort of individual, then there is a plausible explanation for why we would preserve the status quo by removing the therapy once the therapy would lead to a change in the status quo.[7]

2. The second is that Ord and Bostrom only consider consequentialist objections to applied ethical proposals; they do not consider objections that individuals are wronged in some non-consequentialist way by departures from the status quo. One of the objections I consider below seems to assume that individuals are entitled to the status quo.
3. The third is that Ord and Bostrom (unrealistically) seem to only be imagining changes that affect the entire population in the same way.[8] In contrast, many real-world changes discussed or proposed by applied ethicists—as suggested in Part I—affect people differently, subjecting some people to absolute or relative downward mobility while improving the position of others. That the impact of social change is individualized provides a basis for defenses of status quo maintenance that Ord and Bostrom do not consider.

PART III: ADDITIONAL ARGUMENTS FOR STATUS QUO MAINTENANCE

In this Part, I critically evaluate several arguments for preserving the status quo that Ord and Bostrom do not discuss. These arguments make the case that preserving the status quo is prudent insurance; that not doing so harms individuals; that not doing so hampers long-term-planning; that individuals subjectively enjoy the status quo; and that maintaining the status quo allows for individuals' lives as a whole to have better trajectories. In the end, I conclude that none are adequately supported, though many are more compelling than the defenses Ord and Bostrom consider.

Is status quo maintenance prudent insurance?

Brian Barry suggests that every individual should be insured against "loss of earning capacity" because of the "underlying notion . . . of every human being having 'a property in his person' and that the risk of damage to this property is one that any prudent man or woman should wish to be covered against."[9] This would entail that social policy should compensate individuals—such as oil producers or dairy farmers--who lose earning power due to social change or the adoption of recommendations in applied ethics.

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[7] A similar point is made in Christian Weidemann, "Towards a Heuristic for Nanoethics." *Size Matters: Ethical, Legal and Social Aspects of Nanobiotechnology and Nano-medicine* 8 (2008): 117.

[8] They discuss a case where benefits and burdens of social change are differentially distributed at p. 675 n. 25, but only consider egalitarian arguments against differential distribution. The arguments I consider in Part III are not egalitarian, but straightforwardly status-preservative.

[9] Brian Barry, "The Welfare State Versus the Relief of Poverty," *Ethics* 100, no. 3 (1990): 520-21.

Barry's argument is unpersuasive, because prudent individuals in fact would not choose the sort of status quo maintenance he defends. First, individuals' earning capacities reflect interactions between their own abilities and market demands, so the idea that insuring one's abilities entails insuring one's earning capacity is false. Second, even were individuals' earnings capacities to depend purely on their own abilities, there is no obvious public interest in insuring individuals' earnings capacities against decline. For instance, we do not and should not publicly subsidize the insurance policies professional athletes purchase as insurance against loss of earning capacity, in part because these athletes are likely to still be well off absent such insurance.[10] I see no reason why the public subsidy of earnings insurance for other workers should be any different. Workers may certainly privately insure against drops in earning capacity, but this insurance should not come at public expense. Public protection for workers should come not in the form of insurance against lost earning capacity, but insurance against outcomes all prudent individuals would elect to avoid, such as destitution or exclusion from labor markets.[11]

David Miller similarly suggests that societies should and do provide "insurance against some of the main risks and uncertainties that citizens face, particularly those endemic to capitalist societies."[12] However, Miller also observes that in many of these insurance programs "the redistribution is simply from the fortunate to the unfortunate—there is no attempt to redistribute income from high earners to low earners."[13] Provision of status quo maintenance at public expense redistributes away from everyone—both fortunate and unfortunate—to prevent some people from becoming *formerly-fortunate* unfortunate. They do little or nothing to help those who have *never* been fortunate, instead focusing their assistance on those who have gained goods or status and now stand to lose them unless the status quo is preserved. Status quo maintenance is therefore not a form of prudent insurance.

Does not maintaining the status quo inflict wrongful harm?

Aaron James argues that workers who lose out from the social changes produced by trade liberalization are unjustly harmed:

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[10] For a discussion of such policies, see Glenn Wong and Chris Deubert, "The Legal and Business Aspects of Disability Insurance in Professional and College Sports," *Villanova Sports and Entertainment Law Journal* 17 (2010): 473.

[11] Ronald Dworkin develops an argument like this one in more detail in *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2000). See Robert Van der Veen, "Equality of Talent Resources: Procedures or Outcomes?" Ethics 113, no. 1 (2002): 55-81 ("Dworkin argues that under conditions of equal ex ante risk, prudent individuals are most likely to choose levels of coverage that recommend a decent level of basic social protection against low pay and unemployment risk.")

[12] David Miller, "What's Left of the Welfare State?" *Social Philosophy and Policy* 20, no. 1 (2003): 92-112.

[13] Miller, ibid.

> Job loss *may* be perfectly fair if the larger nonmarket institutions, including the social insurance scheme, *do in fact* ensure overall benefit to the unemployed worker over the course of his or her life. When this condition is not met, however, there is an unfairness case to make. It is insufficient that "losers" could, hypothetically, be compensated: they must *actually be compensated* if trade is to be fair to them. Suppose the unemployed worker is severely and irreparably harmed, being afforded no way to restore anything close to the economic trajectory he or she would otherwise be on, through no real fault of his or her own: the opportunities are just not there, or not arranged.[14]

Interestingly, James's argument is anticipated by Ernest Henderson's 1927 article in *Ethics*:

> [a] man who has prepared for a vocation in which the customs of society assure certain rewards has a right to feel aggrieved when this vocation is destroyed or rendered of less importance by changes which society voluntarily brings about. A naval officer deprived of his calling by a 'peace wave' may well complain at the reform that pays its costs largely by breaking its implied promises to him. So, too, we cannot help feeling that there is a certain rightness, albeit narrowness, in the hostility of workmen to labor-saving machinery and devices which to them are the parents of unemployment.[15]

Henderson goes on to state that "This right of service to its customary reward is based on the necessities of intelligent planning. If one is to work for a long while to master a craft or to learn a profession, he should not have the cup dashed from his lips as he is about to drink. We feel mistrustful of the maxim 'let the buyer beware.' Shall we not even more deplore that rule of caution in a changing world, 'let the producer beware'?"[16]

James and Henderson both seem to suggest that individuals are entitled to the economic rewards they receive under current social arrangements, and that they are entitled to individualized status quo maintenance in the face of social change. (Though James discusses trade, his arguments are equally applicable to social change produced by advances in automation, human enhancement, or regulations on current industrial practices.) I will argue that this claimed entitlement has no compelling normative basis, and that James's description of the social change in question as harming is tendentious.

James is unclear about what it means for the worker whose status quo position is disrupted to be "severely and irreparably harmed." If he means that the loser is in a harmed state according to a *non-comparative* notion of harm, such as those advocated by

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[14] Aaron James, *Fairness in Practice: A Social Contract for a Global Economy* (New York: Oxford UP, 2012): 72.
[15] Ernest N. Henderson, "Ethical Bases for Economic Reward," *International Journal of Ethics* 37, no. 4 (1927): 351.
[16] Henderson, ibid.

Seana Shiffrin and Elizabeth Harman,[17] this would only apply to workers who are reduced to a bad absolute position, and would not justify status quo maintenance for those who merely lose position. Furthermore, workers who are reduced to a bad absolute position would be harmed in the same way that workers who never have been in a good position are: both workers have a claim not to status quo maintenance, but to assistance that would remove them from the non-comparatively harmed condition.

A counterfactual-comparative notion of harm would provide a basis for status quo maintenance, since such maintenance would protect individuals against dropping relative to the economic trajectory they would have otherwise been on. However—unlike non-comparative harms—there is no obvious basis for regarding such counterfactual-comparative harms as wrongful ones. What James needs to justify status quo maintenance is the additional premise that individuals have a moral *entitlement*, assertible against others, to what they would have had absent a social change such as trade or automation. (That is, he needs to show that losers from trade are harmed under a *moralized* notion of harm, like the one Joel Feinberg discusses.[18]) But James provides no argument for such an entitlement, and I can see no obvious reason to believe one exists. Absent such an entitlement, trade is no doubt *worse* for some individuals, but not on that basis *unfair* to them—the worker who loses out from trade is like the driver who loses the parking space she would have preferred to have because someone else parked there first. While she loses out relative to what she would have preferred to have, she is not morally entitled to what she would have preferred. So this part of James's argument, properly understood, cannot move us toward providing the loser individualized status quo maintenance.

James goes on to offer an additional argument in defense of maintaining the status of higher-paid workers threatened by free trade, which is no more persuasive:

> And suppose the higher-skilled worker whose position is improved by the newly-created export-industry job is only slightly better off, while a small number of consumers see only small gains (e.g. slightly better big-screen TV sets). We do not otherwise think it is fair to harm one person simply in order to benefit another, especially if the harm is severe, the benefit slight, and the beneficiaries few. We would not regard "free trade" as a structurally equitable market reliance practice if the resulting employment restructuring were generally like this—if many people were routinely, irreparably harmed for the sake of very small benefits to a huge number of people.[19]

Again, James's argument depends on an ambiguous concept of harm. We do not think it is fair to harm someone *in a moralized sense* simply in order to benefit others, and we

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[17] Seana Valentine Shiffrin, "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm," *Legal Theory* 5 (1997): 120-26; Elizabeth Harman, "Can We Harm and Benefit in Creating?" *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004): 93-98.

[18] See Joel Feinberg, *Harm to Others* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984), ch. 3.

[19] James, *Fairness in Practice*, 72.

may not think it is fair to harm people in a noncomparative sense in order to gain small benefits either. But it can frequently be fair to routinely and irreparably harm people in the *merely comparative* sense, even when the ensuing benefits are small. Here James's example of big-screen TV sets is prejudicial, because it makes the potential gains seem not only small but morally unimportant. Consider a version of Ord and Bostrom's example: We develop a better mechanism for slight cognitive enhancement in children: this could be either a medical mechanism or some sort of educational mechanism, such as a more effective way of teaching reading or writing. A few people who were working on the current mechanism lose out, as their current career path is seriously disrupted. (Imagine specialists in teaching old-fashioned cursive.) But society as a whole, including the children, experience many small benefits from the slight improvement in cognition.

In this case, it is permissible to worsen a few people's situation and thereby harming them in the comparative sense—not because incumbents deserve to be harmed, but because society gains from an improvement in capacities. Ultimately, James's argument relies on an equivocation about the definition of harm. A noncomparative conception of harm would merely show that those who lose very severely from social change have the same moral claims as those who have always been badly off. A moralized conception of harm would justify his claims, but James provides no argument that losers from social change are harmed in a moralized sense. And, although James shows that losers from social change are harmed in a counterfactual-comparative sense, mere counterfactual-comparative harm does not do the moral work James needs.

Is status quo maintenance essential for long-term planning?

Robert Goodin argues that the furtherance of long-term life plans justifies status quo maintenance:

> . . . [A] life of fluctuating fortunes is less good—for the person living it, and for others around him whose fates are linked to his—than one characterized by more stability. . . . Someone who has to hedge against more possibilities, and keep more options open, will have a life that is internally less purposeful and coherent and externally less predictable and dependable. Such a life is less satisfying to the person leading it and less useful to others depending upon him. It is that, I submit, that makes it reasonable for people to expect the state to step in to provide stability to people's lives.[20]

[20] Robert E. Goodin, "Stabilizing Expectations: The Role of Earnings-Related Benefits in Social Welfare Policy," *Ethics* 100.3 (1990): 530-53, p. 553. See also ibid. 549 ("[T]here is a certain value—both to individuals and to society—from people's being able to enter into long-term commitments. Insofar as those commitments require rough stability of a person's earnings over time, that value will be well served by social welfare programs paying people benefits proportional to their past earnings, at least in cases of temporary interruptions to their ordinary income stream.").

The simplest and most compelling argument against providing status quo maintenance in order to enable more coherent lives appeals to the opportunity costs of maintaining the status quo. In the enhancement examples that Bostrom and Ord discuss, for instance, preserving the status quo for those who value it involves others losing out on opportunities to improve their lives. Goodin himself recognizes the force of this concern:

> The value of promoting security and stability in people's lives is only one value among many that we would like our social arrangements to serve. Pursuing that goal . . . necessarily conflicts, in ways sketched at the outset, with goals of equality, of community, and perhaps even of welfare maximization. Nothing I have said here should be taken to imply that the values of security and stability either override or even weigh substantially more heavily than those others. In cases of conflict, those other considerations may well, on balance, prove decisive.[21]

Goodin's concession here challenges the normative relevance of his claim that a less stable life is "less satisfying to the person leading it."[22] A life without a Ferrari may also be less satisfying to the person leading it, but if providing her the Ferrari means consigning others to lives less satisfying than hers *sans* Ferrari would be, we would be normatively well-advised to assist them rather than her.[23]

Furthermore, while status quo preservation can enable one sort of security and stability (namely stability of one's specific position), improvements such as enhancements provide other forms of security. A society without status quo maintenance will certainly look *different* from a society with it. But the lives of its members will not obviously be worse, much less be incoherent jumbles in which individuals are unable to depend on one another. Andrei Marmor points out that we do not need "complete certainty . . . we frequently plan our conduct under conditions of (partial) un-certainty."[24] Rather than eliminating all certainty, desirable changes of the sort defended by applied ethicists provide different certainties than those provided by the status quo. Ord and Bostrom make a similar point in their defense of enhancement:

> [W]hile cognitive enhancement may create certain novel risks, it may also help to reduce many serious threats to humanity. In evaluating the riskiness of cognitive enhancement we must take into account both its risk-increasing and its risk-reducing effects. Mitigation of risk could result from a greater ability to protect ourselves from a wide range of natural hazards such as viral pandemics. There may also be threats to human civilization that we have not yet understood, but

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[21] Goodin, "Stabilizing Expectations," 548.
[22] Ibid.
[23] For a similar observation that we should not make the worst-off even worse off in order to make others better off, see Frances M. Kamm, *Morality, Mortality, vol. 1: Death and Whom to Save from It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 254.
[24] Andrei Marmor, "The Rule of Law and Its Limits," *Law and Philosophy* 23, no. 1 (2004): 23.

which greater intelligence would enable us to anticipate and counteract. The goal of reducing overall risk might turn out to be a strong reason for trying to develop ways to enhance our intelligence as soon as possible.[25]

Is status quo maintenance important to subjective welfare?

Elizabeth Anderson claims that "once people get used to a particular standard of living, they have a very hard time adjusting to drastic falloffs."[26] Anderson's suggestion seems to be that status quo maintenance prevents psychological stress and pain—that people suffer unhappiness when they lose relative to the status quo, and that this unhappiness justifies protecting them against it. This connection between status quo maintenance and psychological satisfaction gains additional support from contemporary research in psychology and economics, which suggests that people experience more suffering from losses than they do pleasure from similarly sized gains, and that they become habituated to their present state of consumption and find it difficult to decrease consumption when their financial circumstances change.[27] As the economist Frank Knight points out, "expectations, and feelings of desert, may . . . turn the same level of income from a grievance into a basis for conscious satisfaction, and conversely."[28] In a recent article, Dan Moller similarly suggests that while traditional economics counsels that "little harm is done by an occasional bust bringing 'creative destruction' in its wake, because the long-run gain outweighs a small immediate cost," modern behavioral science suggests that "[t]he short-run psychological cost of fluctuations in employment is great."[29]

However, there is reason to doubt that the form of psychological stress that status quo maintenance prevents truly makes an urgent claim on our moral attention. Consider the category of psychological burdens hat political philosophers call "expensive tastes." The canonical example here is Dworkin's Louis, who develops a taste for some good—fine food, opera, or skiing—and will suffer welfare losses unless he receives that good.[30] That Louis has no special claim to have his expensive tastes met is common ground between a variety of theoretical perspectives. The same seems true for someone who develops a psychological attachment to the life she enjoyed prior to some justified social change: the stress downward mobility causes her, unless bolstered

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[25] Bostrom and Ord, "The Reversal Test," p. 670.
[26] Elizabeth Anderson, "What Game Would You Rather Play?" Posting to Left2Right (Feb. 8, 2006). Available at http://www- personal.umich.edu/~eandersn/blogpoliticaleconomy.html.
[27] Daniel Kahneman et al., "Anomalies: The Endowment Effect, Loss Aversion, and Status Quo Bias," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* (1991): 193-206. For earlier discussion of similar topics, see James S. Duesenberry, *Income, Saving and the Theory of Consumption Behavior* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1949).
[28] Frank H. Knight, "Economists on Economic Ethics," *International Journal of Ethics* 48, no. 1 (1937): 104.
[29] Dan Moller, "Wealth, Disability, and Happiness," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39, no. 2 (2011): 177-206.
[30] Ronald Dworkin, "What Is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10, no. 3 (1981): 229.

by some sort of normative claim, seems analogous in moral terms to the stress that stems from a frustrated expensive taste.

That status quo maintenance is analogous to an expensive taste does not speak against the permissibility of *privately* making efforts to maintain the status quo. But it does counsel against publicly subsidizing it. Compare Scanlon's case of religious worship versus food. Many people value the ability to worship, and would even endure malnutrition in order to worship more effectively, but—unlike their interest in proper nutrition—their interest in worship does not support a claim for others' help.[31]

Is status quo maintenance important to having a good life trajectory?

Some philosophers have suggested that an upward trajectory in one's life is to be preferred *as such* over a flat or a declining trajectory—even if the flat or declining trajectory contains a greater amount of good when considered additively, a life with an upward trajectory may be preferable in itself. In a recent article criticizing this claim, Antti Kauppinen observes that some variation of this claim is endorsed by a variety of philosophers, including Franz Brentano, A.C. Ewing, Michael Slote, David Velleman, and Frances Kamm.[32] As Brentano puts it,

> Let us think of a process which goes from good to bad or from a great good to a lesser good; then compare it with one which goes in the opposite direction. The latter shows itself as the one to be preferred. This holds even if the sum of the goods in the one process is equal to that in the other.[33]

Kauppinen goes on to explicate Brentano's view, observing that "Brentano terms this the principle of *bonum progressionis*. If the shape of a life is such that things improve for the individual, it is better for her than if things get worse, even if it contains the same amount of goods. If something like *bonum progressionis* is true, a person's well-being over a period of time is not just a function of local benefits, but depends also on their trajectory."[34] This view might provide some support for resisting social changes that produce a net benefit, but subject some people to declining life trajectories.

Even if a declining shape really were worse in itself, the preference to avoid it might still sometimes be (as discussed in the previous section) an "expensive taste"—something that is desirable, but not a moral entitlement. However, there is also compelling reason for skepticism about the badness of a declining shape. David Brink, for instance, suggests that it is acceptable to flip a coin between two plans of life that are on a par, even if one (say, becoming a professional athlete) would lead to more good early on in one's life and another (say, becoming an orchestral conductor) to more good

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[31] Thomas M. Scanlon, "Preference and Urgency," *The Journal of Philosophy* 72, no. 19 (1975): 655-669.
[32] Antti Kauppinen, "Meaningfulness and Time," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84, no. 2 (2012): 345-377.
[33] Franz Brentano, *The Foundation and Construction of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1973): 196-97.
[34] Ibid.

later on.[35] Brink notes that Sidgwick defended a similar view, arguing that one should show an impartial regard for all parts of one's life, and that therefore "a smaller present good is not to be preferred to a greater future good."[36]

Kauppinen, meanwhile, suggests that a narrative of "Noble Failure"—where someone acts in consistency with justice but nonetheless experiences a downward trajectory—can be superior to a life with an upward trajectory.[37] On Kauppinen's view, while rising life plans may be preferable when they lead to a better narrative, what is desirable is the narrative rather than the bare shape of the life plan.

Conclusion

In this project, I have tried to demonstrate the relevance of status quo maintenance to a wide swath of problems in applied ethics. In doing so, I have presented Bostrom and Ord's examples of arguments in favor of status quo maintenance; suggested limitations of their "reversal test" strategy for responding to those arguments; and considered and critically evaluated additional arguments for status quo maintenance.

I conclude that the additional arguments for status quo maintenance are not compelling reasons to block social changes or specially compensate those who lose out from them. While prudent individuals would ensure that they are not impoverished or socially excluded by change, they would not subsidize the maintenance of the status quo. Individuals also are not wrongfully harmed by the loss of a status quo position, nor does the disruption of the status quo obstruct life planning. Last, even if there is value for individuals involved in retaining their status quo position (whether directly or via effects on life trajectory), this sort of value is not the type of good to which there is a moral entitlement. The only compelling argument for status quo maintenance I can see is one that establishes that the risks or transition costs of departing from the status quo would be unacceptable from the perspective of justice, rather than from the perspectives of some specific individuals.

However, even though the arguments for status quo maintenance are not morally compelling, they do have real-world motivating power. For applied ethics to be effective in non-ideal circumstances, it must also overcome these real-world obstacles. I close by briefly and speculatively mentioning a variety of strategies for overcoming the tendency toward status quo maintenance:

1. *Highlighting the benefits of change to all*. Sometimes social change may appear to worsen the absolute position of some individuals, but in actuality would improve everyone's medium-term or long-run position when considered

[35] David O. Brink, "Prudence and Authenticity: Intrapersonal Conflicts of Value," *The Philosophical Review* (2003): 238.
[36] Ibid., 217.
[37] Kauppinen, "Meaningfulness and Time," 351.

broadly. In these cases, by highlighting the benefits of change for individuals who may wrongly perceive themselves as losing out, applied ethics may weaken the psychological pull of the status quo.

2. *Organizing and mobilizing the beneficiaries of change*. Often, status quo maintenance is effective because those who will lose out are familiar with what they are losing, but those who will gain are unfamiliar with what they are gaining. By making the benefits of change more vivid and focused, applied ethics may be able to counteract status quo maintenance.
3. *Making social change less abrupt.* Rather than rapidly changing the status quo, it may be less controversial to change the status quo slowly and with advance notice. Doing so would separate the predictability of one's future from the maintenance of status itself, and would assist individuals facing an economic shock to form future plans and adjust themselves to a new standard of living, even though it would also delay the benefits of social change. Such an approach may find some empirical support in psychological research: psychologists suggest that individuals "feel less unhappy the slower a negative change."[38] However, psychological research also suggests that people find progressive illnesses more difficult to adapt to than one-off bad events.[39]
4. *Compensating the losers.* Sometimes, where the gains from social change would be great but specific individuals have a lot to lose, it may be prudent—even though not morally required, and even sometimes complicit with moral wrong—to simply pay off those who would otherwise lose from social change. John Stuart Mill famously believed that slaveholders should have been compensated for the loss of their slaves after emancipation.[40] Even if we disagree with Mill that the slaveholders were morally entitled to compensation, we might agree with his proposed course of action if it turned out to be the most efficient way of achieving social change. When we compensate those who lose out from social change even though they are not morally entitled to such compensation, however, we must remember that we are making a compromise for the sake of the greater good, rather than giving people what they are morally entitled to retain.

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[38] Christopher K. Hsee et al., "Hedonomics: Bridging Decision Research with Happiness Research," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3 (2008): 224, 229.

[39] See, for example, Tyler Cowen, "Caring About the Distant Future: Why It Matters and What It Means," *University of Chicago Law Review* 74 (2007): 5, 25.

[40] See Dale Miller, "Reparations for Emancipation: Mill's Vindication of the Rights of Slave Owners," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 43.2 (2005): 243-65.