Conservatism about Prudential Goods

Michal Masny
mmasny@berkeley.edu

Abstract: Conservatism about the Valuable is the view that we have a distinctive moral reason to conserve certain things which are *valuable simpliciter*, such as the Grand Canyon or the Golden Gate Bridge, even when we could replace them with something better. This paper argues that we also have a moral reason to conserve certain *prudential goods,* such as loving relationships and important personal projects, even when we could replace them with something better, examines the theoretical foundations of this view, and explores its implications for how we should direct our lives in youth, adulthood, and older age.

Keywords: Value; Well-being; Preservation; Conservatism; Relationship; Project; Commitment; Youth; Older Age.

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1. Introduction

Renowned for its architectural beauty, distinctive orange-red colour, and engineering ingenuity, the Golden Gate Bridge attracts millions of tourists annually and connects the bustling city of San Francisco with the idyllic landscapes of Marin County. Suppose, however, that we could demolish it and build an even more impressive structure in its place.

Situations like this have a curious feature. Many people share the intuition that we have a moral reason not to destroy the Golden Gate Bridge even though another architectural marvel would replace it. Crucially, that's not just because this project would be costly, inconvenient, or might not pan out but, more importantly, because the Golden Gate Bridge already exists and has special, non-instrumental value.

These kinds of examples are frequently used to motivate a view known as *Conservatism about the Valuable* (henceforth just 'Conservatism').[1] It holds that we have a moral reason to conserve certain non-instrumentally valuable things, such as beautiful works of art, sublime landscapes, important traditions, or unique languages. At the minimum, this means that we have a moral reason not to destroy them even when they could be replaced by similar things of equal or even greater value. By contrast, we have no moral reason to preserve merely instrumentally valuable things, such as a generic $10 bill, when another $10 bill would replace it.

In the literature, this view has been discussed in contexts such as immigration and cultural change (Scheffler 2007); creation and preservation of art and traditions (Cohen 2012); cognitive enhancement (Nebel 2015); and human extinction (Frick 2017; Scheffler 2018). One striking feature shared by these works is that they focus primarily on just one class of non-instrumental goods: those which are *valuable simpliciter*, such as beautiful artworks, important traditions, or unique languages.

There is, however, another important class of non-instrumental goods that has been neglected in these discussions: things which are valuable for particular people, i.e. *prudential goods,* such as pleasant experiences, loving relationships, or personal projects which culminate in achievements. We may wonder whether they, too, are within Conservatism's scope.

Our ordinary moral discourse hints that this might be the case. Suppose that a friend recruited to advise you on the idea of moving to another country and turning your life upside down asks: "What about the career you've built? And what about our friendship?" Or imagine that, at the end of an unfortunate fight, your romantic partner retorts: "We can't keep sweeping our problems under the rug. We need to fix them. We owe it ourselves and to our relationship." While much can be said about these utterances, one thing that they seem to reveal is that we sometimes exhibit direct concern for our relationships and core personal projects, which is similar to the concern we have for the fate of the Golden Gate Bridge or the Grand Canyon.

[1] Proponents of this view include Scheffler (2007; 2013; 2018), Cohen (2012), Nebel (2015; 2022), and Frick (2017).

In this essay, I offer the first systematic treatment of prudential goods in the context of Conservatism. My discussion has three parts. In the first part, I assess our intuitions about cases structurally analogous to the one featuring the Golden Gate Bridge to argue that we have a moral reason to conserve certain prudential goods even when a superior replacement is available. I call this view *Conservatism about Prudential Goods*. In the second part, I develop theoretical foundations for this view by examining its ground, scope, strength, and content. Finally, in the third part, I provide further support for this view by situating it in a broader normative landscape and showing that it elucidates several puzzling issues about how to direct our lives. These issues include how to balance exploration and commitment in youth and adulthood, whether the reluctance to start new projects and relationships in older age is justified, whether we should ever reject a life-prolonging treatment, and when it is appropriate to move on from a loss.

Before we turn to this discussion, I would like to briefly clarify a few aspects of my thesis.

First, while my formulation of Conservatism about Prudential Goods allows for several different conceptions of well-being, for the sake of concreteness, I want to assume the truth of an *objective list theory* that recognises a plurality of prudential goods, such as pleasant experiences, loving relationships, and personal projects which culminate in achievements.

Second, I will argue that we have a moral reason to conserve certain prudential goods but not all of them. Specifically, I will propose that we have a moral reason to conserve *loving relationships* and *important personal projects* culminating in achievements but no corresponding reason to conserve pleasant experiences.

Third, I claim that we have a *moral reason* to conserve these things. This moral reason is separate from any prudential reasons we might have to the same effect. In fact, one upshot of my discussion is that an individual can sometimes have a moral reason to preserve their loving relationship or important personal project even if it's not in their personal interest to do so.
Moreover, my thesis concerns reasons for action, such as beginning or ending a relationship or a project, rather than reasons for or the fittingness of attitudes, such as love or commitment.

Fourth, I hold that conservative reasons are *pro tanto* moral reason reasons, and so they may be outweighed by other considerations, which might include prudential reasons. For example, if starting a new loving relationship would be vastly better you than preserving the current one, then moving on might be what you should all-things-considered do.

Finally, a brief note on my ambitions. I expect this essay to reach three kinds of readers. Some people already accept Conservatism or find the example of the Golden Gate Bridge convincing—they are 'the sympathisers'. Then, there are readers who will acknowledge that Conservatism has a finger on something interesting but might not be fully onboard yet—'the curious'. Finally, there are those who deny having any of the relevant intuitions and perhaps even deem the idea of conservative reasons preposterous—'the sceptics'. My discussion is primarily addressed to the first two groups. I would like to convince the sympathisers to expand the scope of their view by embracing Conservatism about Prudential Goods and the curious to join the ranks of the sympathisers. Because my arguments presuppose certain intuitions and do not amount to anything like formal proof, they might not suffice to turn a staunch sceptic into a sympathiser. But I hope that even the sceptic will find my discussion interesting and adjust their credence in Conservatism.

2. Evaluative ambivalence

To motivate Conservatism, its proponents often refer to scenarios in which a non-instrumental good that is valuable simpliciter, such as the Golden Gate Bridge, is replaced by a similar thing that is even more valuable, and yet the entire transaction leaves us feeling uneasy or ambivalent in a sense that I will explain shortly.

My first argument for Conservatism about Prudential Goods appeals to our intuitions about analogous scenarios featuring prudential goods.

To begin with, consider the case of Jim Brown, a former fullback for the Cleveland Browns, who recently passed away. In 1966, Brown shocked the football world by announcing his retirement at the young age of 29. His decision was not motivated by an injury or decline in performance. In fact, he had just won the NFL Most Valuable Player award for the third time in nine years. For all we know, it also wasn't motivated by a sudden loss of interest in the sport. Instead, Brown left football because he had an opportunity to pursue a different career, acting, that was incompatible with continuing to play in the NFL. There, he also enjoyed great success, appearing in over 50 movies and TV shows and becoming arguably the first Black action star.

Next, consider the case of Allie Nelson, a character in the bestselling romantic novel *The Notebook* by Nicholas Sparks. At a critical moment for the plot, Allie is years into a happy, loving relationship with Lon Hammond Jr when she fortuitously reconnects with her first love, Noah Calhoun, whom she has not seen for over a decade. After long and painful deliberation, Allie decides to end her relationship with Lon and pursue one with Noah. Crucially, she doesn't do that because she comes to believe that her relationship with Lon is flawed. Instead, she chooses Noah because a relationship with him promises to be even better and more fulfilling.

What should we think about these cases? If you are like me, Brown's story evokes in you the attitude of *evaluative ambivalence*. On the one hand, there is plenty to cheer for: his post-football life was oriented around a valuable personal goal and rich in achievements. On the other hand, Brown's decision seems regrettable in at least one respect. He abandoned a career that was a non-instrumentally valuable personal project that he had pursued for a long time and that he could have continued to pursue in the years to come.

We encounter a similar pattern of intuitions in Allie's case. In one respect, her decision seems wise. Any reasonable theory of value will recognise that relationships are among the key sources of well-being and that they can be better or worse. Indeed, Allie's relationship with Noah seems superior to the one with Lon. But Allie's decision is also troubling in at least one respect. She put an end to a years-long relationship that was valuable in itself and would have continued to be so, for all we know.

I think that the evaluative ambivalence we encounter in these cases suggests the presence of a distinctive reason to preserve important personal projects and loving relationships even when a superior replacement is available. Crucially, this reason does not appear to be tied to anyone's self-interest. Brown had a reason to continue his football career, and Allie had a reason to continue her original relationship even though the new engagements promised to be equally good or even better for them. Thus, the reason in question seems to be of *moral*, not prudential, variety. Moreover, it seems to be a *pro tanto* moral reason. We don't think that Brown should have continued his football career, or that Allie should have continued her original relationship, regardless of how much better their new engagements promised to be.

These considerations lead me to believe that Brown and Allie had *conservative reasons* to preserve their important personal projects and loving relationships, akin to the reason one might have to preserve the Golden Gate Bridge, the Grand Canyon, or the English language. Of course, there might be other moral reasons at play here as well, and I will discuss some of them shortly. But I do think that conservative reasons are one important kind of our moral reasons to preserve prudential goods.

This argument can be questioned. In particular, the sceptic can suggest that our evaluative ambivalence concerning the decisions made by Brown and Allie can be wholly accounted for without having to postulate the existence of conservative reasons. There are several related lines of thought here.

To begin with, the sceptic could acknowledge that Allie and Brown had pro tanto moral reasons against ending their original engagements prematurely but suggest that these reasons have their source elsewhere. For example, there is clearly a moral reason to avoid *harm to others*, and Brown's decision likely had a negative impact on his teammates and fans, whereas Allie's decision must have hurt Lon. Moreover, both Brown and Allie might have had *promissory* reasons to preserve their original engagements, in virtue of earlier explicit commitments or expectations they had created.[2] Finally, perhaps there is a moral reason to make the most of one's talents (a *duty of genius*, if you will), and Brown's early retirement prevented him from fully realizing his extraordinary athletic potential.[3]

I do not deny that these factors could be a part of the explanation for why we find it important to continue one's existing relationships and projects. The moral landscape is rich with reasons, and we are often pulled in any given direction by multiple considerations at once. Still, I believe that this cannot be

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[2] The literature on promises is vast. For an informative overview, see Habib (2022).

[3] In *the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant (1991) famously proposes that "it is a command of morally practically reason and a duty of a man to himself to cultivate his capacities" (6:444). For a recent discussion of this idea, see Johnson (2011).

the whole story. Allie's and Brown's decisions remain regrettable in one respect, even if we tweak the examples in an effort to exclude these alternative explanations. For instance, we could imagine that the Cleveland Browns improved after losing their biggest star and that Lon found another, even better match soon after splitting up with Allie. Likewise, we could stipulate that Brown's departure from the team was announced well in advance and that Allie wasn't engaged to Lon. Neither does it seem to matter that we are talking about Brown, widely recognized as one of the greatest football players of all time, rather than someone like you or me who contemplates abandoning their philosophical career or another core personal project. If we indeed have moral reasons to continue our existing relationships and projects in these circumstances, conservative reasons appear to be an important part of the picture.

The second sceptical line leverages a different set of considerations. Perhaps what explains our evaluative ambivalence is that Allie's and Brown's attitudes were in some sense inappropriate. For example, the sceptic might suggest that Allie's decision to end her relationship with Lon and Brown's decision to end his football career were *reckless*, or otherwise irrational. After all, they abandoned an excellent sure thing for something potentially better but, realistically, might not have worked out.

This explanation seems to me misguided. For one thing, there are few certainties in love and sport, so neither alternative should be considered a sure thing. More importantly, though, I think that this explanation does not do justice to the phenomenology of our evaluative ambivalence. We don't feel the same way about just any gamble a person might take, such as the decision to leave one good show at a music festival to catch another that might be even better. In addition, our concern seems to be directed not just toward Allie's and Brown's well-being, but rather toward their valuable engagements: we are troubled by the fact that a loving relationship and a thriving personal project came to an end.

Alternatively, the sceptic might suggest that Allie's love for Noah was unfitting. To appreciate this concern, note that love seems to be an attitude for which there are reasons. According to a simple quality theory, for example, one's reasons for loving another person are grounded in their desirable qualities, such as attractiveness, demeanour, or wit. But, as many authors have pointed out, this theory has untenable implications. For example, it implies that you have equally strong reasons to love your partner of many years and a mere stranger who happens to have the same qualities. Likewise, it implies that you have a stronger reason to love a stranger who has more desirable qualities than your partner. In short, this theory renders the object of love fungible.[4]

Against this background, one might offer the following interpretation of Allie's case. What makes us, in one respect, uneasy about Allie's decision is that she seems to be within the grip of something like the simple quality theory and mistakenly takes herself to have at least as much reason to love Noah as she has to love Lon. But if what instead gives us reasons for love is the ongoing history of concern and activity shared with the beloved, as one influential theory has it, then Allie has little or no reason to love Noah, who was separated from her for over a decade.[5] Thus, Allie's love for Noah is not fitting.

This explanation does not seem to get to the heart of the issue either. To my mind, there would still be something regrettable about a person's decision to end a valuable relationship even if she had as much reason to love another person. To make that concrete, we could imagine that instead of being separated from Noah for the last decade, Allie had been in a polyamorous relationship with both Lon and Noah. Only recently, Allie and Noah decided that an exclusive relationship would be better for them. In that case, Allie and Noah would share a long and ongoing history of romantic concern. And yet, her decision to end her valuable relationship with Lon would remain, in one respect, troubling. So whether her love for Noah was fitting cannot be the whole story.

Finally, the sceptic might suggest that our evaluative ambivalence in Allie's case has to do with the nature of love, rather than reasons for love. According to one popular view, love is a kind of valuing, where valuing X, in general, involves (i) believing that X is valuable, (ii) being disposed to experience certain emotions regarding X, and (iii) being disposed to treat X-related

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[4] For discussions of this problem, see, for example: Nozick (1989), Grau (2006), Raz (2001), Kolodny (2003), Matthes (2013), and Bagley (2015). For the view that the object of love is fungible, see Badhwar (1987) and Soble (1990).

[5] For this 'relationship' theory, see Whiting (1991), Delaney (1996), Kolodny (2003), Hurka (2016), and Howard (2019).

considerations as a source of reasons for action in relevant deliberative contexts.[6] With this in mind, one could argue that we are ambivalent about Allie's decision because it reveals that one of these conditions was not satisfied and, thus, that her love for Lon was not genuine. Likewise, it has been suggested that being engaged in a personal project involves valuing that project.[7] So one could argue that we feel ambivalent about Brown's decision to leave football because it reveals that his career was not a genuine personal project but rather a mere job.

I don't find this line of criticism compelling either. To begin with, any plausible account of the nature of love must allow for the possibility of ending a relationship with someone while continuing to love them. We have no good reason to think that Allie's decision was any different. She did not abandon her original engagement instantly or unreflectively when the superior opportunity materialised, as someone falling short of valuing it would. Similar considerations, I think, apply to Brown.

Beyond that, I suspect that if Allie did not genuinely value her relationship with Lon and Brown did not genuinely value his football career, we would feel quite different about their decisions. To be sure, we would probably find it surprising that they dedicated years to pursuing these engagements without ever valuing them, or that they suddenly ceased to value them. But we wouldn't feel ambivalent about their decisions to move on in particular. Ending a relationship that wasn't genuinely loving for the sake of one that promised to be, or a career that wasn't genuinely valued for one that would be, would be an unreservedly right thing to do.

This concludes my discussion of the argument from evaluative ambivalence, which is the first pillar of support for Conservatism about Prudential Goods. To summarise, I have argued that the evaluative ambivalence we encounter in cases like those involving Jim Brown and Allie Nelson suggests that conservative reasons are one important kind of our moral reasons to preserve prudential goods. While other considerations might also be relevant to understanding the normative situation of their decisions, they do not tell the whole story.

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[6] See, for example, Kolodny (2003) and Scheffler (2004; 2010).

[7] See Scheffler (2004; 2010).

3. Theoretical aspects

With the initial motivation for Conservatism about Prudential Goods before us, I now want to further explain the ground, character, strength, scope, and content of our conservative reasons.

First, can we ground our moral reasons to conserve prudential goods in more fundamental normative truths? Here is a line of thought that I find attractive. Things which are non-instrumentally valuable warrant a certain kind of response from members of the moral community. This may involve holding specific attitudes or taking certain actions: respecting, protecting, conserving, savouring, etc. These considerations can give rise to moral reasons. For example, we seem to have a moral reason to preserve the impersonally valuable Golden Gate Bridge or the Grand Canyon because this is a fitting response to their value. The examples featuring Brown and Allie suggest that loving relationships and important personal projects also have this profile: we have a moral reason to conserve them when and because this is a fitting response to their value.[8]

Second, conservative reasons to preserve prudential goods have an *agent-neutral* character. In the case of the Grand Canyon, everyone has a reason to preserve it, not just you and me. Likewise, it is not just me who had a conservative reason not to destroy my loving relationship but also you, a third party, if it is within your power to do so.

This picture is reminiscent of the Moorean view about why we should promote people's well-being. Donald Regan (2004, p. 204) characterises it as follows:

> On this approach, any agent's fundamental obligation is to bring about the existence of as much good as possible. The 'good' asserted here is an agent-neutral good, not tied conceptually to any person's

[8] Nebel (2022) distinguishes between three ways of grounding conservative reasons: (i) in fitting response or, as he calls it, respect, as endorsed by Cohen (2012) and Frick (2017); (ii) in valuing attitudes, as proposed by Scheffler (2004; 2007; 2013; 2018); and (iii) the concern for the good of the valuable things, as suggested by Nebel himself. Each of these accounts could support Conservatism about Prudential Goods, but it is helpful to adopt a specific one for the purposes of this paper.

> interests. But in fact the most important goods are certain kinds of events and experiences that occur within individual lives. Therefore, an important part of promoting the good turns out to be promoting certain events and experiences in individual lives.

Of course, Conservatism about Prudential Goods is not concerned with bringing about the existence of loving relationships and important personal projects, but rather with preserving these things if they already exist. Still, it likewise postulates no profound normative distinction between what is good for particular people and what is good simpliciter. We have a conservative reason to preserve certain non-instrumentally valuable things, some of which happen to occur in people's lives. Therefore, an important part of preserving the valuable turns out to be preserving prudential goods.

To be sure, it is much more common for a person to have a conservative reason to engage in a particular way with their own relationships and projects than with other people's. But that's just because one is in a privileged position to influence the trajectory of their own engagements. Only you can advance your relationships and projects, and you have more opportunities to destroy or damage them than I do. Moreover, one will typically have an overall stronger reason to preserve their own relationships and projects than other people's, but that's just because they might have additional duties to their loved ones or to themselves.

Third, conservative reasons are *pro tanto moral reasons*. They are moral reasons in the sense that a person might have a reason to conserve their loving relationship or an important personal project even if it's not in their personal interest to do so.[9] They are pro tanto reasons in the sense that they may be

[9] Note that although whether a person has a conservative reason to preserve their existing engagements does not depend on whether it is in their 'interest' to do so, it does depend on whether they are at least minimally 'interested' in doing so. We have a conservative reason to preserve X only if X would retain its non-instrumental value, and the non-instrumental value of relationships and projects arguably depends on them being valued. Thus, if one day Brown completely and irreversibly stopped caring about football, then he would have no conservative reason to continue that career. And if one day Allie completely and irreversibly stopped loving Lon, then she would have no conservative reason to preserve that relationship. After all, there would be no *important* project and no *loving* relationship to preserve. But I think that such cases are rare. Typically, when we are confronted with the choice between

outweighed by other considerations, which might include prudential reasons. Thus, for example, if starting a new loving relationship would be vastly better for you than preserving the current one, then moving on might be what you should, all things considered, do.

Fourth, let's take a moment to consider which prudential goods are within the scope of Conservatism. As I suggested earlier, we have a moral reason to preserve certain prudential goods, but not all of them.

In the literature on well-being, it is common to distinguish between hedonic and non-hedonic goods. Hedonic goods include simple sensory pleasures like the feeling of a warm shower on your skin and more sophisticated experiences like enjoying a beautiful painting. Non-hedonic goods include loving relationships and personal projects culminating in achievements, among other things. Accordingly, one might suggest that we have a conservative reason to preserve non-hedonic goods, but no conservative reason to preserve hedonic goods. After all, intuitively, there is no reason to be concerned whether the pleasant experience of a warm shower on one's skin continues or is supplanted by another pleasant experience, as long as the replacement is at least as good. By contrast, as we have seen, there is a reason to be concerned with the continuation of loving relationships and important personal projects.

However, this partition is only roughly correct and does not do the relevant explanatory work. To begin with, I think that when we reflect on the full range of possible relationships and projects, it becomes apparent that we do not always have a reason to preserve them. First, some valuable engagements have a natural conclusion point. For example, it's futile to continue pursuing the goal of being the first person to run a four-minute mile if that has already been done, be it by you or someone else. Likewise, it seems perfectly fine to let go of that fleeting summer romance when leaves start to change their colours. This contrasts with many important personal projects and committed relationships which do not have an apparent finish line. Second, only our important personal projects warrant conservation. Minor and tentative engagements, such as half-read books and half-begun papers, do not call for continuation in the same way that careers and other-life defining projects do.

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continuing an existing engagement and starting a new one, we still care about the former to a sufficient extent and, thus, are within the grip of conservative reasons.

Turn now to the issue of explanation. To determine whether a particular object warrants preservation, we must investigate its nature. I think that what's distinctive about hedonic goods, and what confers their special value on them, is that they are essentially *transient*, that they come and go. In virtue of this feature, resisting replacement is generally not warranted. By contrast, many non-hedonic goods are *enduring* or *historical*, for lack of a better term. That is, their special value depends in part on the fact that they stand in specific relation to our past and persist through time. In virtue of this, non-hedonic goods typically warrant preservation in the face of replacement. Thus, I believe that it is the distinction between transient and enduring objects that has explanatory significance in the present context, not the distinction between hedonic and non-hedonic goods.[10]

Fifth, consider the content of conservative reasons. That is, what is it that we have a conservative reason to do with respect to prudential goods? There are two ways in which Conservatism about Prudential Goods is more nuanced in this respect than it may initially seem.

The first issue is that we rarely have a conservative reason to preserve a valuable object '*as is*'. To see that, note that any valuable object has many features, and only some of them are value-conferring features. Plausibly, these are the only features that we have a reason to preserve. Take the example of a loving relationship. The petty arguments you have with your spouse, like the one about what gift to get your mutual friend for their birthday, or the jealousy you sometimes feel about each other's accomplishments, are features that seem to take away from that relationship's value and preserving them is not something required of you.

Moreover, it can sometimes be appropriate to allow for or make changes to the value-conferring features of a valuable object. For example, a runner might settle on a more modest goal for their next race. Allowing such developments to occur is not equivalent to abandoning an existing engagement. After all, like cultures and languages, relationships and projects tend to change incrementally over time, so stopping this process would threaten to undermine their nature.[11] Other changes, however, can destroy

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[10] See Matthes (2013) for an in-depth discussion of the relationship between historical value and irreplaceability.

[11] For a discussion of cultural change and its desirability, see Scheffler (2007).

valuable engagements or turn them into something different. For example, when love between two people is replaced by animosity, they are no longer in a valuable relationship.[12]

The second issue is that what we have a conservative reason to do sometimes goes beyond merely ensuring that certain ingredients of our well-being *continue to exist*. This is so in two related ways. For one thing, when someone lets an extraordinarily valuable relationship deteriorate so much that it survives at a level that is just barely good, their behaviour falls short of being a fitting response. This suggests that it is important to preserve valuable things in a flourishing state. For another, it is essential to cultivate important personal projects. Someone who last ran years ago can hardly call themself a runner. And someone who hasn't come up with any jokes or performed in a long time can't call themself a comedian. Whatever engagement you take on, you have to keep earning the title.

So much for my characterisation of the key theoretical aspects of Conservatism about Prudential Goods. To recap, on this view, we have a pro tanto moral reason to conserve certain prudential goods when and because this is a fitting response to their value. These goods include a range of enduring goods, such as loving relationships and important personal projects, but not transient or ephemeral goods, such as pleasant experiences. We have a reason to preserve these things even when a superior replacement is available, but we rarely have a reason to preserve them exactly 'as is' or merely to ensure that they continue to exist.

There is, of course, much more to say about these features of Conservatism about Prudential Goods. Relationships and projects come in many types, and we may want to know precisely what conservative efforts are called for in each case. We will make some progress on these matters in the following sections.

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[12] In some cases, it is not obvious whether a valuable engagement has been destroyed or merely significantly altered. For instance, suppose that Andreas and Heidi are initially romantic partners but later choose to relate to each other merely as co-parents and friends. It's contentious whether their original bond has been severed altogether or transformed. To determine that in any given case, we need to examine the relevant persistence conditions.

4. Exploration and commitment

In the remainder of the paper, I want to offer further support for Conservatism about Prudential Goods by situating it in a broader normative landscape and showing that it elucidates several old and new problems about how we should direct our lives.

The first issue that I will examine is a novel puzzle about the balance between exploration and commitment at different stages of life.

Consider youth. Conservatism about Prudential Goods might appear to generate a dilemma at this stage of life. On the one hand, if you take on a valuable engagement at a younger age, this choice seems to carry special significance into the future. A budding cellist, for example, appears to be under considerable normative pressure to move forward with her musical education, even if she wishes to turn to boxing instead. Similarly, one appears to have a weighty moral reason to cultivate their first loving relationship for as long as possible, even when further, more valuable romantic opportunities arise. This may strike us as objectionably constraining.

On the other hand, although we could escape the force of conservative reasons by abstaining from relationships and important personal projects in youth, that would greatly impoverish our lives. After all, these goods are some of the most significant contributors to our well-being.

Thus, younger people appear to face the hapless choice between putting on conservative restraints and missing out on some of the best things in life. We can refer to this predicament as *the Dilemma of Youth*.

This problem admits several possible responses. Let's start with two that target the first horn of the dilemma.

One option is to deny outright that the youthful pursuits in question count as genuine, non-instrumentally valuable projects and relationships, perhaps in virtue of their ephemeral rather than enduring character. In that case, these pursuits would not fall within the scope of Conservatism about Prudential Goods, and engaging in them constrain our future choices at all. Call this *the No Value Solution*.

However, this solution comes at a high cost. Although it does not compel us to abstain from valuable engagements in youth, it does imply that this part of life is significantly impoverished anyway, which is difficult to square with our intuitions.

The second possible response to the Dilemma of Youth is subtler. While it concedes that our adolescent engagements are non-instrumentally valuable, this response instead postulates that this part of life is covered by a grace period. That is, conservative reasons do not apply in youth, and we can take on relationships and projects without the fear of having to keep them up once new opportunities arise. Call this *the Grace Period Solution*.

This response may initially seem attractive, but on reflection, it seems ad hoc. It's just unclear why conservative reasons would admit exceptions of this nature, while other kinds of moral reasons do not. Moreover, this solution seems to prove too much. While not all youthful engagements might warrant conservation, some certainly do. Many of us have been fortunate enough to be at a young age in a loving relationship characterised by mutual valuing of that bond, emotional vulnerability, and intuitive understanding of the reasons this connection generates. This kind of bond does seem to warrant preservation.

In light of these attempts unsuccessful attempts, let's ask not if the premises of the argument comprising the dilemma's first horn are true but whether the advertised conclusion follows from them. That is, is it true that the implications that Conservatism about Prudential Goods has in this context are objectionably demanding?

To address this question, I want to begin by noting that the distinctive feature of youth is that we are still learning a lot. For one thing, we are yet to fully appreciate what's out there: what possible engagements the world can offer us, how valuable they are, how much effort and time they require, and so on. But there is also an important self-knowledge component. We must cast our net widely and explore different possibilities to figure out what we are good at, what brings us joy, and how much we can fit in a day, a year, or a lifetime. As our wisdom of this aspect of life expands, we put ourselves in a better position to decide which engagements to take up in adulthood.

In axiological terms, this means that exploring many projects and relationships at this stage of life is of extraordinary instrumental value to us. Once we take this value into account and acknowledge that the prudential reasons it confers on us will often outweigh the moral reasons to preserve our initial relationships and projects, the implications that Conservatism about Prudential Goods has for this stage of life no longer appear to be objectionably demanding. We can call this *the Learning Phase Solution*.

Turn now to adulthood and older age. The preceding insights also apply to these stages of life. By the time we transition into adulthood, the benefits associated with learning about the external world and ourselves begin to diminish rapidly.[13] In contrast, the conservative reasons to continue one's existing engagements retain their weight. As a result, the conservative grip tightens at this stage of life. This, I think, dovetails with our pre-theoretic sentiments: we tend to accept that our adult engagements place significant and binding constraints on our conduct, unlike those pursued in youth.

Thus characterised, our decisions concerning which relationships and projects to take on, and whether to preserve them or move on, are reminiscent of *the optimal stopping problem* familiar from mathematics. Brian Christian and Tom Griffiths (2016, Ch. 1) illustrate this problem as follows:

> You interview the applicants in random order, one at a time. You can decide to offer the job to an applicant at any point and they are guaranteed to accept, terminating the search. But if you pass over an applicant, deciding not to hire them, they are gone forever.

The question, naturally, is when to stop and commit to hiring a candidate. As it turns out, there is a unique solution to this problem. You set a predetermined fraction of the candidate pool—37%, to be precise—for the 'look' phase, in which you learn about your options and categorically do not choose anyone. After that point, you enter the 'leap' phase, during which you commit to the first option that is superior to all you have already encountered. This strategy maximises the probability of selecting the best candidate.

[13] At least if things go well in one's youth and one successfully engages in multiple relationships and projects, which admittedly is not always the case.

Of course, at least in its simplest form, the optimal stopping problem makes several assumptions that are seldom replicated in the context of relationships and projects. For example, it stipulates that the number of available options is known in advance, that a rejected option is gone forever, or that there is no intrinsic cost to continuing to look.

Still, the general lesson remains relevant to the issue of balancing exploration and commitment at different stages of life. As we go about our lives, we should spend a considerable amount of time liberally exploring different loving relationships and personal projects, or else we run a high risk of never discovering the engagements which would be most valuable for us. But it is not permissible for us to keep up this approach for too long because the prudential reasons grounded in the benefits of exploration quickly diminish, and the moral reasons to preserve existing engagements retain their weight. So there will come a time, typically in one's adulthood, when the balance of reasons favours conserving an existing engagement over replacing it.

5. New engagements at the end of life

The second topic that I want to investigate through the lens of Conservatism about Prudential Goods concerns older age. In particular, some elderly people are reluctant to start new loving relationships and important personal projects, even if these would not crowd out their existing engagements. In doing so, they might seem to needlessly deprive themselves of things that would greatly enrich their lives.[14]

While Conservatism about Prudential Goods is mainly concerned with our existing attachments, I believe that it can also elucidate this forward-looking attitude. To see that, note that older age is often marked by cognitive and physical decline, which may make it impossible for a person to maintain their valuable relationships and important personal projects in a flourishing state. This is important because, intuitively, we have a reason not to create new non-instrumentally valuable things when we expect that to happen.

[14] This attitude is also common among those who might be biologically young but nonetheless find themselves at the end of life because of a terminal illness. For the sake of simplicity, however, I focus here on the seniors.

The reason in question seems to be an instance of what Johann Frick (2020, p. 73) calls *standard-regarding reasons*, which, he argues, govern our reproductive choices:

> I claim that any outcome in which I create a new person S is subject to a moral standard (that of S's well-being), which is grounded in the existence of S, a being with moral status. This moral standard is satisfied if S has a life that is worth living, and failed if she has a life that is not worth living. … If I am unable to give S a life that is worth living, I have a standard-regarding reason not to create S.

I believe that loving relationships and important personal projects are also subject to such moral standards. These standards are satisfied when our valuable attachments are maintained in a flourishing state and not satisfied when they are neglected or destroyed. Thus, like bringing a child into this world while knowing that you will not be able to provide for it, establishing new loving relationships and important personal projects with the awareness that you will not be able to cultivate them is something that you have a reason against.

Having said that, it is important to understand that Conservatism about Prudential Goods does not imply that we should be completely passive and austere in older age. First, as noted earlier, conservative reasons are pro tanto reasons, and, at any stage of life, it seems possible to enter a loving relationship or start a project which would make a temporary contribution to our well-being so significant that it ought to be pursued even in the face of impending decline. Second, as we have also seen, not all relationships and projects must be preserved indefinitely or for a very long time. Some attachments are ephemeral or have a natural conclusion point: a summer romance, perhaps, or a project that will take a few months rather than a few years to complete. Conservative standards are easier to satisfy in these cases.

6. Extending and altering life

The third problem that I want to address concerns life and death decisions. To illustrate, suppose that Aisha suffers from a terminal illness. She must choose from two alternatives. The first is to abstain from treatment and die soon, but in a painless way. The second is to undergo an aggressive form of life-prolonging treatment. In the latter case, Aisha will live for another couple of years, which, although in themselves worth living, will be much worse for her than the preceding ones.

Which of these options should Aisha choose? To most people, the answer is not obvious, even if they think long and hard about this case. It seems natural to seek out more information and ask what these extra couple of years are going to look like for Aisha. After all, a life-prolonging treatment could have different kinds of effects on Aisha's life.

In particular, one kind of treatment could be 'just painful' and have no impact whatsoever on the presence or the condition of other ingredients of well-being, such as relationships and achievements. These painful experiences would account for the drop in Aisha's momentary well-being, but their negative contribution would be plausibly outweighed by other good things in her life, such as her relationships and projects. In this situation, the intuitively right thing to do is to go ahead with the therapy.

However, other forms of treatment are not just painful, but instead 'life-altering'. For example, they may prevent you from thinking clearly, sap your energy, change your character, or make you physically unable to do certain things. This may well stop you from engaging in fulfilling social interactions, pursuing athletic goals, and maintaining serious intellectual engagements. Some people describe their experience with chemotherapy in this way. It is precisely in such circumstances that we start to doubt whether we should keep going—even if the additional years of life would be on the whole good for us, in virtue of the pleasant experiences and other goods that would be present in our life once the therapy concludes.

This pattern of attitudes is precisely what Conservatism about Prudential Goods predicts. If the treatment is 'just painful', then no loving relationships and important personal projects will necessarily be destroyed or neglected as a result, and Aisha has no apparent conservative reason to abstain from it. However, if the treatment is 'life-altering' and many existing valuable engagements will perish, then Aisha has a conservative reason not to extend her life.

Of course, if Aisha chooses not to extend her life, her loving relationships and important personal projects will also come to an end. But the manner in which that will happen is very different. It is one thing to let a sacred text rot at a landfill and another to bury or burn it in a ceremonial way. Likewise, it seems more fitting to end a valuable engagement while it is still thriving than to let it crash, and that is why conservative reasons tell against accepting a 'life-altering' treatment.

What does Aisha have overall reason to do, though? That depends to a large extent on how good the extra years would be for Aisha. If the treatment's side effects were so severe as to make this part of her life *much worse* than the preceding ones, then she should abstain. For she would presumably gain little well-being overall but lose many existing prudential goods. On the other hand, if the extra years were only *slightly worse* than the preceding ones, then she should go ahead with the therapy. In this case, she would presumably gain a significant amount of well-being and lose only a few valuable engagements, so the prudential reasons in favour of the treatment would presumably outweigh the conservative reasons against it.

Interestingly, analogous considerations apply to other potentially 'life-altering' treatments which need not be aimed at prolonging a patient's life. According to an anecdote relayed by Derek Parfit (1984), Sigmund Freud, who suffered from oral cancer at the end of his life, refused to take painkilling medication fearing that it might cloud his mind and thus jeopardise his academic work. Conservatism about Prudential Goods provides one possible explanation for the appropriateness of this decision: it views Freud as accepting pain to avoid failing to conserve his important personal projects.

7. Moving on from a loss

The final issue that I would like to address concerns when it is appropriate to move on from a loss. Suppose that, after many years of marriage, your spouse dies unexpectedly. While this relationship has come to an end, some people have the sentiment that you should abstain from entering a new loving relationship, at least for some time. Arguably, our important personal projects are similar: you have a moral reason to refrain from taking on a completely new engagement immediately after the one you are currently pursuing shatters, as when someone aiming to become the first person to run a four-minute mile is beaten to this accomplishment.

These kinds of attitudes also extend to certain things which are valuable simpliciter, such as works of architecture. Consider the example of the 18th-

century Saxon Palace in downtown Warsaw, a former royal residence, which was destroyed by the German troops in retaliation for the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. Close to eight decades later, this space remains unutilised, and many citizens argue that it should never be, even if it could be replaced with a new structure which would be architecturally as impressive as the original.

What's common to these three cases is that something that was once non-instrumentally valuable, but no longer exists, continues to call for a certain kind of response from the members of the moral community. In particular, it calls for preservation—though not so much of the valuable thing itself, but rather of the space it used to occupy in our lives. This suggests that the scope of Conservatism about Prudential Goods is even broader than we might have assumed: we seem to have a moral reason to conserve not only certain *existing* valuable engagements but also some *past* valuable engagements that have ended prematurely.

To be sure, not all attachments have this character. Suppose that you start a new friendship after an old one comes to an end. Or imagine that a woodworking accident puts an end to one of our pastime pursuits, climbing, and you fill the gap by taking up running. In both cases, a valuable engagement comes to an end through no fault of your own, and yet moving on does not strike us as morally objectionable. I think that we can explain this difference by pointing to the character of the valuable object. While many loving relationships and important personal projects (such as certain romantic relationships and life-defining careers) have exclusive character, others are inclusive and can be reconciled with further engagements of the same kind.

I believe that these considerations help us resolve a long-standing puzzle concerning loss that I alluded to at the beginning of this section. To get a grip on this issue, return to the case of your spouse's unexpected death. It seems inappropriate to move on, say, just one day after the death of your loved one, but perhaps it is not inappropriate to do that a year or two later. Moreover, it does not seem appropriate to move on to just any relationship that would be good for you; the new relationship must be *good enough*. What explains this?

To account for the first intuition, one might suggest that conservative reasons diminish in strength over time and possibly even expire eventually. This kind of claim has been made in a related context: reasons for grief. In particular, Krister Bykvist (2009, p. 16) argues that the fittingness of certain sentiments "depends on the 'distance' between oneself and the object", where that includes "personal, modal, and temporal distance".

But I think that this view has implausible implications. As Berislav Marusic (2018) points out, Bykvist's view implies that you have little or no reason to grieve your mother's death that occurred a decade ago if you spent the entire time in a coma. Likewise, the proposed view would imply that, in similar circumstances, it is perfectly appropriate to enter a new relationship immediately after your awakening. Neither of these implications seems right.

A better explanation for why the appropriateness of moving on varies with time appeals to a curious feature of our psychology. C. S. Lewis (2001) describes it aptly in his reflections on the death of his wife:

> I think I am beginning to understand why grief feels like suspense. It comes from the frustration of so many impulses that had become habitual. Thought after thought, feeling after feeling, action after action, had H. for their object. Now their target is gone. I keep on through habit fitting an arrow to the string, then I remember and have to lay the bow down. (p. 47)

As Lewis observes here, even after a relationship ends, it continues to occupy our attention and emotions. In fact, it often makes an even greater claim on our mental life than it used to when the other person was still around. Lewis notes that, too, in the same work:

> Part of every misery is, so to speak, the misery's shadow or reflection: the fact that you don't merely suffer but have to keep on thinking about the fact that you suffer. I not only live each endless day in grief, but live each day thinking about living each day in grief. (pp. 9-10)

These features of grief profoundly affect our ability to form and sustain new attachments. For most people, starting a new valuable relationship is impossible when they continue to act as if the other person is still present in their life and continue to think about their loss. In these circumstances, one cannot exhibit the kind of emotional vulnerability that is required for genuine love. We do, eventually, extricate ourselves from this state of mind. But this process takes time. For some people, it is a couple of months; for others, it might be a decade. Only then we are finally able to take on a new valuable engagement. That alone explains the first puzzling intuition: why moving on from a loss seems more appropriate with the passage of time.

What about the second puzzling sentiment, that the new relationship or project must be 'good enough' rather than just minimally good? I think that to explain it, we must appeal to Conservatism about Prudential Goods. In essence, this view implies that if the new relationship or project is not sufficiently good, one's conservative reasons conferred by their past engagement will outweigh the prudential reasons conferred by the prospective value of the new engagement. That's why not just any valuable relationship or project will do.

7. Concluding remarks

My aim in this essay has been to convince those sympathetic to or curious about Conservatism that, in addition to moral reasons to conserve certain things which are valuable simpliciter, such as the Grand Canyon or the Mona Lisa, we also have moral reasons to conserve certain prudential goods, such as loving relationships and important personal projects.

I have argued that this view, dubbed 'Conservatism about Prudential Goods', plays an important role in explaining our evaluative ambivalence in cases involving abandoning one relationship or project for the sake of another, such as those featuring Jim Brown and Allie Nelson. I have also claimed that this view elucidates several puzzling sentiments, including that it is more appropriate to sample many projects and relationships in youth than in adulthood, that the reluctance to start new engagements at the end of life is often justified, that we should sometimes reject a life-prolonging treatment even if the extra years would be worth living, and that we should not move on from a loss too quickly or to an engagement that is just barely good for us.

This discussion has a couple of noteworthy upshots. On the theoretical side, it gives us an insight into the normative complexity of preserving and ending valuable engagements. Antecedently, the issues addressed in the third part of this essay may have appeared to belong squarely in the domain of prudence. After all, they all concern how to pursue, prioritise, and organise prudential goods over the course of a life. Accordingly, we might have expected to resolve them, for example, by identifying some previously overlooked prudential reasons or by weighing prudential considerations in a novel way.

The picture that I have suggested is quite different, however. Our conduct towards our own relationships and projects is constrained by both prudential and moral reasons, even when other people's interests are not at stake, and the aforementioned issues strike us as puzzling precisely because they involve an unacknowledged conflict between prudential and moral reasons. There is also a practical lesson. If Conservatism about Prudential Goods is true, we cannot start a new life whenever we please.

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