Natural Allies? Mapping the Relationship between Conservatism and Environmentalism

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This article examines the relationship between conservatism and environmentalism, including the viability of an eco-conservative ideology. The discussion emphasizes two major points. First, that there is much greater shared ground between greens and conservatives than is often recognized. Yet second, that there are nonetheless significant obstacles to any harmonious alliance between the two. However, what is also shown is that these obstacles are not necessarily those most commonly cited.

Within the literature on environmentalism, the affinities between green and conservative philosophies are frequently noted, but rarely dwelt upon. This is perhaps unsurprising: despite regularly downplaying conventional left/right labels, environmentalists nonetheless typically operate on intellectual territory at least once occupied by the left, only with some reluctance to admit to sharing ground with the right. However, in light of the abundant attention paid to environmentalism's relationships with socialist and feminist perspectives – together with manifold attempts at hybridization – this deficiency is an especially striking one.

This article represents an attempt to address this failing, by providing a detailed examination of the relationship between conservatism and environmentalism, including the viability of an eco-conservative ideology. The discussion will emphasize two major points. First, that there is much greater shared ground between greens and conservatives than is often recognized. Yet second, that there are nonetheless significant obstacles to any harmonious alliance between the two. However, what is also shown is that these obstacles are not necessarily those most commonly cited.

It is important at the outset to specify the boundaries of the investigation. The primary concern here is with intellectual conservatism rather than conservative politics. The highly intimate nature of the connections between conservative thought and politics means that the discussion will undoubtably possess some bearing upon the latter, but only tangentially. Furthermore, the principal – though not exclusive – focus is to be upon contemporary conservatism, specifically that of the post-Cold War era. A major reason for this is that there has emerged in recent years, largely in response to the parallel decline of traditional left-wing ideologies and the ascendancy of green ones, an especially instructive body of conservative writings devoted to examining both environmental issues and green philosophies.

One notable difficulty that arises in addressing this issue is that conservatism possesses no unitary meaning, with conservatives ranging from arch-traditionalists (typically concerned with defending authority and upholding cultural and social absolutes) to committed devotees of the free market (who emphasize the priority of market relations and individual economic liberty). However, although much of the literature implicitly operates with a simple two-fold distinction between free-market and traditionalist varieties, the realities of contemporary conservatism are more complex. In particular, the concerns of many conservatives do not fit easily within the bounds of their conventionally assigned roles. For example, it is erroneous to suggest that economic liberals pay no heed to non-economic issues today, even in the highly aggressive way (Pilbeam, 2000, pp. 94-8).

Problems are magnified by the fact that green philosophies also come in various shades. Probably the most useful distinction to consider is between 'radical' and 'moderate' varieties, as suggested by the commonly used classification of 'deep' and 'shallow' ecological perspectives. Whereas the former implies a fundamental questioning of humanity's relationship to the environment and the nature of modern industrial societies, the latter is concerned simply with particular issues and immediately available solutions. This type of understanding may indicate the need to question the very way in which terms are conventionally employed. For example, Andrew Dobson argues that 'environmentalism' and 'ecologism' – despite the common identification of the two – are qualitatively different (Dobson, 2000, pp. 2-3). Thus environmentalism argues for a managerial approach that seeks technical solutions to environmental problems without addressing underlying issues, whereas ecologists adopt more radical stances, being willing to argue against present patterns of consumption and production and to recognize that the non-human world possesses intrinsic value.

These distinctions may appear to offer an obvious answer to the question of how to classify conservatives who share a concern for environmental issues. That is, it might be thought that such conservatives, obviously not 'radicals', can simply be placed on the shallow end of the ecological spectrum; or, in Dobson's terms, regarded as the best environmentalists, but not true ecologists. One aspect of conservative writings that may lend credence to this suggestion is that conservatives generally employ only the environmentalist label. Indeed, some American writers have adopted the self-description of 'conservative environmentalists' (Durnil, 1993: Dunn and Kinney, 1996). Similarly, it is rare to find any explicit recognition of the difference between shallow and deep perspectives.

However, one of the contents of this article is that conservatives cannot straightforwardly be mapped onto any shallow/deep spectrum, with conservative writings displaying both shallow and deep qualities, nor can these simply be attributed to different varieties of conservatism. For this reason, and because conservatives themselves rarely use the term ecologism, environmentalism is to be employed here as an umbrella term for green perspectives in precisely the ways writers such as Dobson dislike. In any case, as will be seen, it is necessary to be highly circumspect about relying too greatly upon predetermined definitions. The article will
Towards a green conservatism?

The best place to begin investigating the relationship between conservatism and green philosophies is with a consideration of how conventionally it is presented. Probably the most valuable source to consider is one of the most significant attempts to elaborate a green conservative philosophy, that presented by John Gray. (Although Gray himself has subsequently become far less sanguine as to the feasibility of a green conservatism, his article on the subject remains amongst the most illuminating.)

The first element of the standard view presented by Gray is the belief that contemporary conservatives are largely antagonistic towards environmentalism:

> It is fair to say that, on the whole, conservative thought has been hostile to environmental concerns over the past decade or so in Britain, Europe and the United States. Especially in America, environmental concerns have been represented as anti-capitalist propaganda under another flag (Gray, 1993, p. 124).

Yet second, although conservatives are believed in fact to be hostile to environmental concerns, theoretically Gray perceives a strong affinity between a particular tradition of conservatism and environmentalism. Thus, rather than possessing a ‘natural home on the Left’, concern for the environment is ‘most in harmony with the outlook of traditional conservatism of the British and European varieties’. In fact, Gray suggests that the orientation of traditional conservatism aligns significantly with the perspective of deep ecologists (p. 128). What he also emphasizes is the importance of distinguishing traditional conservatism from economic liberalism, underscoring the distinction by arguing that the points at which the former and a green perspective converge are ‘the very points at which they most diverge from fundamentalist liberalism’ (p. 136).

Similar observations are made by many green writers (Pearce, 1984, pp. 230–2) and there is undoubtedly some truth in this depiction. Nonetheless – and particularly in relation to the post-Cold War era – it is far from wholly true. In fact, it is relatively easy to find approval amongst conservatives for some forms of environmentally aware philosophy (Paterson, 1989; Patten, 1990). Moreover, it may be a mistake to perceive American conservatives as especially suspicious towards environmental concerns (Burns, 1995; Blose, 1996; Vinson, 1996).

Yet what is perhaps most interesting to note is the attitude of the free market’s defenders. Rather than simply dismissing or ignoring environmental issues, a number have sought to incorporate aspects of green ideology within their own, in propounding a notion of ‘free market environmentalism’ (Anderson and Leal, 1991). Similarly, Margaret Thatcher argues that: ‘The core of Tory philosophy and the case for protecting the environment are the same’ (Thatcher, 1990, p. 10). Equally, Newt Gingrich avers that he has been a lifelong advocate of environmental protection (Gingrich, 1993, pp. 193–94).

Many commentators regard such avowals with cynicism, as well as questioning the depth of free-marketeers’ commitments. For example, John McCormick finds Thatcher’s conversion to environmentalism ‘surprising’ and asks how well ‘pro-environmental statements sit against a background of ardently anti-regulation Thatcherism’ (McCormick, 1991, p. 2). However, when the specific parallels between green and conservative beliefs are considered, it can be seen that it is far from solely with traditionalist varieties of conservatism that these may be drawn. It is therefore necessary to evaluate these in some detail. To do so, ten potential bases for harmony between conservatism and environmentalism may be highlighted.

(1) A Desire to Conserve; to Respect Limits

In light of the shared etymological roots of the words ‘conservative’ and ‘conservatism’, probably the most obvious basis for a commonality of outlook between conservatives and greens is a desire to conserve. Indeed, a commitment to preserve that which exists, married to a distrust of ‘needless’ experimentation, is probably the most common way in which conservatism is generally understood. Burke’s forceful railings against a ‘spirit of innovation’ (Burke, 1968, p. 119) embody a sentiment which appears regularly within conservative writings.

Even so, defining conservatism simply in terms of the desire to conserve is notoriously problematic; as Roger Scruton colourfully writes, in itself it is a decidedly ‘thin’ definition (Scruton, 2001b, p. 10). Whilst a straightforward preservationism may be manifest in relation to specific causes – whether this be the conserving of a particular tradition or historic building – at a more general level, few conservatives typically defend the arresting of change altogether. Rather, what they tend to invoke is some notion of limits as to what change is acceptable, that which does not exceed ‘sensible’ boundaries; indeed, it is possible to argue that this concept should be defined in terms of a respect for limits (O’Sullivan, 1976, pp. 9–31).

In conservative writings on the environment, this is revealed most clearly in the occurrence of terms such as ‘caution’ and ‘prudence’. For example, John Blose asks us to remember when thinking about the natural world that ‘the most important virtue in politics is prudence’ (Blose, 1996, p. 152). This prudence, he argues, should impress upon us the crucial need to halt uncontrolled meddling with the world’s climate and to protect biodiversity.

Greens offer similar, though more theorized, formulations of the idea of limits in terms of such notions as risk aversion and the ‘precautionary principle’ (O’Riordan and Cameron, 1994). Since the world’s ecosystem is highly complex and ever-changing, when considering new technological or social developments it is better to err on the side of caution because the full consequences of their impact are unforeseeable and, if unforeseeable, dangerous. Yet long before any sociological embodiment of this perspective, the belief that the natural world is beyond full human comprehension was a commonplace within the conservative tradition. For example, over half a century ago, Richard Weaver warned that nature reflects some kind of order which was here before our time and which ... defies our effort at total comprehension ... to meddle with small
parts of a machine of whose total design and purpose we are ignorant produces evil consequences (Weaver, 1948, p. 172).

It is more, then, than simply a bare notion of limits that greens and traditionalist conservatives share, but the view that what defines these limits is deficiencies in human understanding. Yet this being the case, it is also possible for a free-market perspective to be in tune with an environmental one. Thus Anderson and Leal employ an essentially Hayekian epistemology, predicated upon a belief in the limits of the human capacity for knowledge, in favour of their free-market environmental strategy. Since our knowledge of nature is diffused rather than concentrated, and because ecosystems depend upon a complex number of interacting elements which cannot be grasped in totality, it requires the unconscious workings of the market rather than the centralized power of the state to manage the environment (Anderson and Leal, 1991, p. 4). The existence of private property rights and the operation of market forces provide, they contend, the best hope for conserving the environment because the market spontaneously utilizes resources in the most efficient – or 'conservationist' – way possible.

(2) A Scepticism towards the Claims of Science and the Idea of Progress

A further prime aspect of much green writing is scepticism towards the developments of science and technology, for their roles in degrading the natural and human environments. For example, Jonathan Porritt is dismissive of 'unimpeded technological development' and the 'viewpoint of narrow scientific rationalism' (Porritt, 1984, p. 44). Moreover, because both capitalism and socialism are committed to the 'super-ideology' of industrialism, greens should be critical of each. It is for this reason, according to Porritt, that they should reject the politics of both left and right.

Yet many traditionalist conservatives are just as sceptical towards the viewpoint of 'scientific rationalism' and the idea of progress. According to Russell Kirk, 'innovation is a devoting conflagration more often than it is a torch of progress' (Kirk, 1953, p. 8). Equally, Scruton has much to say about the alienating and dehumanizing effects of industrialization (Scruton, 2001b, pp. 109–10, 116–17). The idea of progress is, of course, central to any free-market vision, as is the role of technological advancement. Nonetheless, even Margaret Thatcher is led by her reflections upon environmental issues to concede that progress may not be a wholly unalloyed good (Thatcher, 1990, p. 6).

At the same time, neither most traditionalist conservatives nor greens argue that the advance of science should be halted completely: rather, what is needed is to diminish its presumptive status. In this vein, Gray argues that, although a green conservatism should not be anti-technology per se, we should reject 'scientific fundamentalism' and temper our enthusiasm for modernity's technological fruits (Gray, 1993, p. 126). Similarly, the idea of progress is not completely rejected, but what is stressed is that, as much as the passage of time brings material improvements, these are always accompanied by costs in the form of lost values and traditions (Gray, 1993, p. 139).

(3) A Scepticism towards Unfettered Capitalism

Although conservatives and greens are hardly alone in repudiating the negative and alienating effects of industrialization, what they also typically share is the belief that what is problematic about science and technology is so inherently, rather than because of their place within a particular social context. As David Pepper points out, green critiques of technology are generally ahistorical, rarely relating it to a specific context of production arrangements (Pepper, 1993, pp. 143–5). This is evident from Porritt's regard for industrialism as some form of 'super-ideology'. Yet Scruton likewise rejects the idea that the evils of the industrial process are related to its capitalist context and would therefore disappear outside of it (Scruton, 2001b, pp. 116–17).

If their critiques of science are often ahistorical, greens are nonetheless also critical of capitalism specifically. For example, Robyn Eckersley believes that it is 'undoubtedly the case that the expansionary dynamics of capital accumulation have led to widespread ecological degradation' (Eckersley, 1992, p. 121).

Whilst traditionalist conservatives by no means reject capitalism, they too have always been sceptical of a purely free-market form. For example, Kirk criticizes capitalisms for their 'glorifying in ruthless competition' (Kirk, 1962, p. 36). Indeed, John Vincent readily endorses the view of environmentalists who 'despair' free-market conservatives – believing that they are not 'real' conservatives at all – for their consuming interest in 'possessions more than posterity' (Vincent, 1996, p. 30).

One of the most distinctive features of green economic concerns is a preoccupation with the idea of resource fmitude, which Dolson describes as 'an article of faith for green ideologues' (Dolson, 2000, p. 62). That is, the belief that, sooner or later, humanity will simply exhaust the earth's available resources. Often presented in contrast to liberal economic models, ones centred upon a notion of 'sustainable development' are instead advocated, founded upon the belief that the long-term view requires resource conservation to be a priority alongside development. Yet this belief is also very much in accord with a traditionalist conservative perspective, which likewise advocates moderation in economic policy. Thus Blythe embraces the idea of resource fmitude and supports an economics of sustainability (Blythe, 1996, p. 152).

Clearly, economic liberals do not view capitalism negatively. Nor do they attribute primary responsibility for economic degradation to the workings of the market. Nonetheless, even on economic issues there are points of contact between environmentalism and free-market ideology, with Thatcher also professing to believe in 'the concept of sustainable economic development' (Thatcher, 1990, p. 8). There is, of course, no question that sustainability might require some fundamental questioning of capitalism, or even any significant lateral of market forces. Even so, it has already been seen that economic liberals may argue that capitalism actually provides the best mechanisms for conserving resources, and whilst many greens are sceptical towards this claim in general, harmony is identifiable in relation to economic liberals' views of government spending specifically.
Regarding this, Thatcher's famous parading of the management of the nation's accounts with careful household budgeting appears to strike a chord with many greens. For example, John Young believes that it is a useful contribution to green thought 'to think of national finance in pre-Keynesian terms analogous to good housekeeping' (Young, 1990, p. 156). Porritt also emphasizes that 'managing the household budget is important' (Porritt, 1984, p. 231). Although Thatcher's administration was beset by numerous critics demanding that government spending be increased, it may have taken comfort in the fact that environmentalists represented one group willing to endorse its commitment to reining in unsustainable profligacy.

Still, what lies at the heart of many greens' concerns about economic growth is not merely the possibility of impropriety, but the idea that there is a basic immorality about 'consumer capitalism'. In other words, even were consumerism and materialism 'sustainable', they would still be unethical. For example, Porritt sees a 'materialist ethic' and suggests that we do not really need all the frivolous extravagances produced by modern capitalism (Porritt, 1984, p. 44). However, it has also always been one of the major apprehensions of traditionalist conservatives regarding capitalism that a consumer culture will have a deleterious effect upon traditional values and customs. According to Thomas Fleming, 'materialism and consumerism retard the development of the human person' (Fleming, 1996, p. 12). Indeed, we are reminded, the latter 'was the religion of Sodom'.

(4) A Belief in Non-material Values: that Nature Possesses Moral Claims

With greens and traditionalist conservatives alike disparaging the morality of consumer capitalism, what both frequently avow instead is a preference for non-material, spiritual values (Porritt, 1984, p. 231). For conservatives, these are likely to be those of the Judeo-Christian tradition, whereas for greens a much wider range of beliefs may be endorsed, including New Age doctrines. Even so, a bridge between conservative and green spirituality is provided by the perspective of conservative-minded environmentalist Edward Goldsmith, who emphasizes the value of strong religious commitments in the maintenance of stable and well-ordered green communities (Goldsmith, 1988).

Particularly distinctive in green writings is the belief that the natural world possesses moral claims, possibly even rights. The highly moral dimension of green thought is often obvious in the very tone adopted, as when Porritt writes indignantly that nature does not exist simply to be conquered by man (Porritt, 1984, p. 44). However, conservatives express similar sentiments. For example, Gingrich believes that 'human beings have a moral obligation to take care of the ecosystem' (Gingrich, 1995, p. 196).

Even more strongly, greens may argue that nature should not only be accorded moral respect, but that it possesses inherent moral virtue. Robert Goodin implies this in his development of a 'green theory of value': the more 'natural' a thing's properties, the more valuable it should be deemed (Goodin, 1992, pp. 19-83). Yet a similar belief is evident amongst conservatives, as indicated by Weaver's claim that 'creation or nature is fundamentally good' (Weaver, 1948, p. 172). In other words, greens and conservatives may share not only a benign moral attitude towards the natural world, but a belief that virtue actually inheres within it.

(5) A Belief in Fundamental Holism and Harmony

A further presumption often shared by greens and conservatives is the belief that the natural condition of the world is one of stability. Where this is perhaps clearest in green thought is in the Gaia hypothesis, which promotes the notion that the whole planet is in some form of holistic harmony. As James Lovelock contends:

... the entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses, and from oak to algae, could be regarded as constituting a single living entity, capable of manipulating the Earth's atmosphere to suit its overall needs and endowed with facilities and powers far beyond those of its constituent parts (Lovelock, 1979, p. 9).

Two major points are here asserted: first, that the constituent elements of the earth's ecosystem exist in a condition of mutual balance; and second, that the whole constitutes an entity in its own right. Whilst by no means all greens support the Gaia hypothesis, a belief that nature possesses some balanced or equilibrium state is common. In other words, a Darwinian understanding of the natural world as a domain of perpetual struggle and conflict – "red in tooth and claw" – is typically rejected.

Yet such conceptions are paralleled in conservative understandings of society, which similarly downplay the roles of change and conflict. Burke's understanding of society bears striking similarities to Lovelock's conception of the world's ecosystem:

Our political system is ... a permanent body composed of transitory parts; wherein, by the disposition of a stupendous wisdom, moulding together the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, the whole, at one time, is never old, or middle-aged, or young, but in a condition of unchangeable constancy ... (Burke, 1968, p. 120).

It is not surprising, therefore, that Gray should urge both greens and conservatives to embrace the Gaia hypothesis (Gray, 1993, p. 138). At the very least, Thatcher accepts that the world's environmental systems possess a 'fundamental equilibrium' (Thatcher, 1990, p. 6).

In fact, it is again possible to perceive a free-market perspective as also mirroring that of an environmentalist one, despite the central role played by competition. Thus Robert Nisbet classifies Adam Smith as an 'ecological thinker' (by which he means a believer in cohesive interdependence) because of Smith's belief in a 'natural', spontaneous economic order in which the overall product of individuals pursuing their own self-interests is harmonious equilibrium (Nisbet, 1974, pp. 352-4). Although free-market writers frequently disdain consciously created order, they do not typically believe in 'disorder'. Rather, diversity and conflict at one level become integrated into a whole at another. Indeed, upon this basis, free-
markets' conceptions of spontaneous order may parallel more closely an environmentalist's model of nature than do those of authority-centred conservatives.

(6) A Belief that the Natural World Should Serve as a Model for the Social

A conservative view of society may not only correspond to that of a green view of nature, but may treat the natural world as a model. For example, Burke believes that we should regard our constitution as 'working after the pattern of nature' (Burke, 1968, p. 120). One of the most notable ways in which this is apparent is the frequent recurrence of organic metaphors. Indeed, Anthony Quinton argues that organicism is one of the key principles of conservatism, contending that we should view society as 'a unitary, natural growth, an organized, living whole, not a mechanical aggregate' (Quinton, 1978, p. 16).

In fact, traditionalist conservatives are as likely to attribute some type of emergent existence to society as a whole as proponents of the Gaia hypothesis do to the planet. For example, Scruton believes that 'a society is more than a speechless organism; it has personality, and will. Its history, institutions and culture are the repositories of human values – in short, it has the character of end as well as means' (Scruton, 2001b, p. 13). By imbuing society with a personality and interests of its own, in the same way that greens wars against treating the natural world in a purely instrumental fashion, conservatives repudiate so treating society. If society is indeed akin to a living organism, then change must be slow and organic, evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

Economic liberals also often employ natural metaphors to serve their purposes. For example, Anderson and Leal seek to legitimize their belief that entrepreneurship is 'natural' in precisely this way (Anderson and Leal, 1991, pp. 4-6). The operations of the market are deemed natural because they mirror the way in which, when a 'niche' in an ecosystem appears, a new species takes advantage of the profit opportunity opened up, with the activity of 'self-interested' plants and animals benefitting the system as a whole. In other words, looking to nature as a model may be as useful for free-market writers as traditionalist conservatives in validating their views of social organization.

(7) A Preference for Community-based Modes of Life

Also common within green writings is a rejection of the belief 'that big is self-evidently beautiful' (Porritt, 1984, p. 44) and an expressed preference for the life of the small-scale community. Yet an attachment to what Burke termed society's 'little platoons' – the multiplicity of local and small-scale social units – is equally widespread amongst conservatives (Burke, 1968, p. 13; Scruton, 1996; see also Pilbeam, 2001). Nisbet, a key conservative promoter of community, highlights as an important strand of environmental thought conceptions centered upon the idea of the 'ecological community', which take as their regulative ideal the natural world's supposed harmony and simplicity (Nisbet, 1974, pp. 319-82). Similarly, Vinson argues for the 'revival of rural community' to act as a counterweight to the sterility of city life (Vinson, 1996, p. 31).

(8) A Belief in the Need for Authority and Regulation

In terms of green thought, Eckersley suggests the term 'ecocommunalism' to describe those strands of anarchist and utopian argument that believe small-scale cooperative communities to be the ideal mode of human existence, living in a harmonious relationship with nature (Eckersley, 1992, pp. 160-70). As Eckersley notes, a common theme is the desire for a disengagement or withdrawal from corrupted political and social life, which is echoed by the contempt for politics and ideology articulated by many conservative communitarians (Scruton, 1996, pp. 13-17).

In noting the importance of communitarian themes for both traditions, Gray again emphasizes their common aversion to liberal tenets, in their rejecting the 'shibboleth of liberal individualism', the idea that only the individual has value (Gray, 1993, p. 136). That is, both question the failure of the liberal tradition to understand individual identity as embedded within a fabric of social relationships. Yet both may also therefore share many of the illiberal aspects of such communitarianism. For example, Gray considers under the rubric of an environmentalist opposition to laissez-faire the necessity of restricting immigration, since uncontrolled it may lead to 'undertaking settled communities' and 'mixing inassimilable cultures' (p. 126). In other words, the problematisation of immigration may be justified by the need to preserve the environmental integrity of communities as much as any conservative desire to preserve a traditional notion of national identity.

One of the most explicit exemplars of the illiberal approach to ecological communitarian thinking is Goldsmith, who admires the stability and cohesion of primitive tribal communities, as well as the Indian caste system. Yet this requires accepting that 'a community must be relatively closed', with the admission of outsiders to take place only in a climate of wariness (Goldsmith, 1988, p. 203). A similar belief is held by Scruton (Scruton, 1999, p. 12).

Many – indeed, probably most – green writers appear uneasy at such explicit illiberalism, yet the necessity of a closed conception of community might seem to flow logically from a commitment to an ideology of limits. In fact, many greens do draw similar conclusions to Goldsmith, even if supplementing them with more liberal qualifications. For example, Porritt, although counselling sensitivity and opposing discrimination, affirms that 'the strictly logical position, as far as ecology is concerned, is to keep immigration at the lowest possible level' (Porritt, 1984, p. 191).
(9) A Concern for Absent Generations

One of the most lauded aspects of conservative thought by greens is the fact that conservatism takes a "multi-generational" perspective (Gray, 1993, p. 136; Eckersley, 1992, p. 21). As Burke contends in his oft-cited description, society is a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born (Burke, 1968, pp. 194-5). A multi-generational outlook obliges us not to despoil the world inherited from our ancestors, since this would imply abusing the partnership between generations. For example, Thatcher believes that "no generation has a freehold on this Earth. All we have is a tenancy – with a full repairing lease" (Thatcher, 1990, p. 10).

The deeper implications of this perspective are usefully brought out by Gray, who argues that, unlike liberals, conservatives and greens appreciate that "individuals can never achieve their full humanity as islands in time" (Gray, 1993, p. 136). Identity is embedded not only in the wider social context but also in how the bond between generations is seen. Scruton, incidentally, argues that one of the "most obvious mistakes of the 'Leninist revolutionaries' who destroyed civilisation in Russia" was their failure to appreciate the bond between generations (Scruton, 1992, p. 19).

In other words, invoking the imputed interests of absent generations is a powerful means of limiting change in the present. Interestingly, Scruton acknowledges that whereas society's "natural" concern for absent generations is "once more commonly found within a traditional religious perspective, today it is within the environmental movement that this is so" (p. 22). Again, a clear affinity may be suggested between environmentalism and the conservative tradition of anti-rationalism.

(10) A Rejection of Enlightenment Humanism

Finally, consistent to the elevated status of the natural world within green and conservative thought is a widespread belief in the necessity of downgrading that of human beings, to disabuse humanity of its "arrogant" presumptions regarding its capacities and importance. In fact, the rejection of humanism suggests the most fundamental way in which green and conservative philosophies are in kind.

For conservatives, it is the humanist rationalism born from the Enlightenment quest for total understanding and control which is most often the target, with conservatism by contrast stressing man's inherent imperfection (O'Sullivan, 1976, pp. 9-31). For greens, this rejection is usually manifested as an attack upon anthropocentrism: for example, Porritt argues for the displacement of an "anthropocen-
Affairs Unit (Le Fattu, 1994; O’Hear, 1997). One of the strongest concerns of many is the support environmental pessimism provides for demands to strengthen the power of the state. For example, Mark Neal and Christie Davies explore the variety of ways in which perceived health and environmental risks (from anxieties concerning food additives to fears about nuclear energy) underpin contemporary calls for increased regulation of business activity (Neal and Davies, 1998). Yet the fact that, in most parts of the world, people live longer and healthier lives than ever before – demonstrating that ‘modern society is by any standard of comparison far less risky than any in the past’ (p. 43) – indicates that health and environmental alarmism is not only misguided, but does not justify expanding the state’s regulatory role.

However, critics are motivated by more than simply the desire to defend free markets. In fact, as much as it is possible for both free-marketeers and traditionalists to espouse a green philosophy, so may both be critics. Simon’s questioning of eco-pessimism is to be found throughout conservative writings: for example, Will – noting how many predicted environmental catastrophes have failed to materialize – mockingly observes that although ‘various reasons for gloominess come and go, the supply of gloominess is remarkably constant’ (Will, 1994, p. 192).

Anthony O’Hear attacks in particular the sentimentalism of environmentalism, strongly defending the value of modern civilization. Although many in the West may bemoan the loss of more simple modes of life, he argues, ‘people in the under-developed world can think of no more desirable than to enjoy the fruits of scientific, technological and economic development’ (O’Hear, 1997, p. 9). O’Hear also attacks many of the beliefs about nature deployed by green thinkers. It is, he claims, arbitrary to presume that the present set of balances in nature is either ideal or permanent. In fact, in important ways nature must be understood as a state of imbalance: without continual change – for example, the extinction of non-abundant species – evolution could not occur (p. 8). Equally, the notion that what is natural equates to pure and moral, and the artificial to impure and corrupted, is also flawed, illustrated by such counter-examples as the fact that many of the most toxic poisons are produced by nature rather than man (pp. 17–18). O’Hear also offers a far less pessimistic account of human activity, one which recognizes that this as often improves as depletes the natural environment.

The Credibility of Free-Market Environmentalism

Yet what of those who profess sympathy for green perspectives? It is first necessary to examine free-marketeers’ attempts to address environmental issues. To the free market’s green critics, unlettered economic activity is inexplicably linked to environmental exploitation. Typical among such writers, Eckersley rejects the perspective of free-market liberalism on the basis that it is culpable for unleashing the very forces responsible for environmental degradation (Eckersley, 1992, pp. 22–3). For similar reasons, the perceived hegemony of free-market doctrines within modern conservatism is a key reason why Gray no longer sees conservatism as the appropriate vehicle for environmental concerns (Gray, 1995, pp. 87–119).

Conservatism and Environmentalism

There certainly is a question of credibility to be addressed by proponents of free-market environmentalism, since it is difficult to deny that the operation of market forces is responsible for significantly altering the natural environment, regardless of whether this is seen in destructive or creative terms. Even if market discipline does encourage firms individually to be conservative of raw materials, which may, rightly, be doubted in terms of capitalism as a whole, it is impossible to ignore the fact that capitalism’s expansionary imperatives impel it towards the ever-greater mastery and exploitation of the natural world.

However, the obstacle to economic liberalism results not only from the market’s responsibility for environmental exploitation. In fact, the most serious problem for free-marketeers is their inability to recognize the extent to which the contemporary resonance of green ideas is bound up with a more general antagonism towards the tenets of Enlightenment humanism. For example, Eckersley is disturbed by the fact that the classical liberalism of Locke and Smith treats the non-human world in instrumental terms and implies that natural resources are worthless until human labourvalorizes them (Eckersley, 1992, p. 24). There is equally a ‘shallowness’ in free-marketeers’ beliefs that the answers to environmental problems lay primarily in scientific and technological solutions (Thirlwall, 1998, pp. 16–20; Gingrich, 1995, pp. 198–200). In other words, although green critics often fail to note the many parallels that do exist within their philosophy, they are right to observe the fundamentally humanistic foundations of free-market doctrines.

The Depth of Traditionalist Conservative Environmentalism

Of course, the tensions between free-market and green doctrines are the easiest to identify. Yet it is also possible to argue that even traditionalist forms of conservatism are not truly compatible with a green outlook. Three specific differences are usefully suggested by Dobson (Dobson, 2000, pp. 175–8). The first of these relates to what greens and conservatives respectively value in terms of the forms of ‘common life’ in which individuals are believed to flourish. For greens, Dobson argues, ‘it is natural history that counts’, whilst for conservatives it is ‘human history in the form of tradition and culture’ (p. 175). That is, ecologists place a value on nature itself, whereas for conservatives nature is understood as part of the cultural landscape, with their visions of community being primarily historical. By the same token, conservatism is ‘irredeemably anthropocentric’ in its outlook (p. 176).

Second, there is a crucial difference between conservative and green invocations of a multi-generational perspective, which is that whereas conservatives are largely interested in the conserving and preserving of the past, greens are principally concerned with doing so ‘for the future’ (p. 177). And third, whilst both may share a scepticism towards Utopianism, in the sense of a common belief in limits and the fixed nature of the human condition, greens nonetheless retain a ‘Utopian sense of what is possible within those limits’ (p. 178). That is, a belief that substantial change – the fundamental transformation of our acquisitive and instrumental relationship with nature – remains possible.

However, there are problems with these suggestions. Considering Dobson’s first point, it is not so obvious that conservatives do not see nature as possessing
intrinsic value. As has been seen, conservatives may view the natural world as fundamentally good and also regard it as a model for understanding human society. Nor are conservative ideas of community purely rooted in culture and tradition. According to Scruton, "when war or other crises forced the English into consciousness of their historic ties, it was the country that was the object of their intense feelings of community" (Scruton, 2001a, p. 234). Most important, there are believed to be intimate connections between the land itself and identity (pp. 72–7). Furthermore, as Vinson observes, throughout the ages 'a prominent strand of conservative thought has been love of the land and attachment to the soil' (Vinson, 1996, p. 29).

The issue of anthropocentrism will be returned to below. Yet considering Dobson's second contention, this too must be questioned. Certainly, conservatives display a particular concern for history and tradition. However, it is with some justification that Scruton rejects the accusation that this is because conservatives 'dwell on the past' (Scruton, 1996, p. 19). Rather, he argues, their concern arises from seeing the present as part of a continuum. The point, therefore, is that our responsibility to absent generations is – as Burke's notion of a partnership between the living, the dead and the unborn suggests – a responsibility not only to those of the past, but to all on this continuum. In other words, to future generations as well. Similarly, Vinson claims that it is 'for the sake of lifetimes to come' that we should be concerned about damaging the environment today (Vinson, 1996, p. 29). Moreover, invoking the supposed interests of either past or future generations may equally be used to place limits on what is possible in the present (Scruton, 2001b, p. 39).

The third of Dobson's arguments touches upon probably the most common type of criticism raised by green writers – that is, conservatism's lack of radicalism. Eckersley also contends that the green tradition differs from conservatism in that it is able to recognize the need for profound transformations in society's patterns of production and consumption (Eckersley, 1992, pp. 22, 30). By contrast, conservatism is resistant to both cultural innovation and social and political experimentation. In fact, greens commonly accuse conservatives of being interested only in the conservation of a traditional landscape, without addressing fundamental political and economic issues. In this vein, Young argues that conservative environmental concern remains 'for the most part parochial. Conservatives campaign in favour of favourite causes, rare species, special bits of countryside, hedgerows or old buildings' (Young, 1990, p. 137).

In other words, there is a superficiality to conservatives' beliefs. Clearly, traditionalist conservatives do not argue for any comprehensive undoing of capitalism (though nor do many greens). Moreover, Scruton's preoccupation with the disappearance of the English hedgerow and country house (Scruton, 2001a, pp. 237–42) may appear to offer ready ammunition to critics such as Young. However, it has already been shown that a conservative environmentalism can extend to more than a simple preservationism: conservatives may also be committed to a more fundamental philosophy of limits, may be critical of industrialization in general and consumer capitalism in particular, and may support favoured green notions such as sustainable development. Indeed, Scruton himself dedicates efforts aimed simply

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"[preserving the landscape's traditional appearance - 'through such exercises in protest as the National Trust' (p. 242) - that do not take account of the countryside's more fundamental role (which, for him, is to serve as 'the backbone of the English religion' - p. 234)."

It must of course be recognized that conservatives would never subscribe to Dobson's 'Utopianism' or Eckersley's desire for social or political experimentation, nor that conservatives are always sceptical towards experimental change - reuniting the world to some previous (if only imaginary) natural or social order - is often far more acceptable (Scruton, 2001b, p. 11). To the extent, then, that green radicalism envisions a restoration of pre-modern modes of life, there may not be such a degree of incomparability. The point, therefore, is that whilst unlikely to support the 'radical' means possibly required to achieve this, traditionalist conservatives may be far from unsympathetic to greens' more fundamental questioning of modern industrial societies.

However, two very clear points of difference between conservatives and greens are raised by Young's charge of parochialism. The first is the fact that, alongside a stated preference for the small-scale, greens are also generally committed to a global perspective (Eckersley, 1992, pp. 176–7). Yet this suggests a tension with the particularism, and specifically nationalism, of traditionalist forms of conservatism. For example, Fleming disdains the fact that a global environmental ethic is 'more concerned with the interrelationship between an Illinois landfill site and the green ease of his concerns is the legitimacy a global ethic provides to international regulatory bodies in overriding the sovereignty of nation states. Furthermore, Scruton displays a firmness in his attachment to the significance of national identity rarely found within green writings.

Second, what may also be distinguished is the fact that whilst traditionalist conservation is rooted in a 'parochial' rural perspective, modern environmentalism is typically an urban ideology. Although conservatives such as Vinson may believe that society 'deeply needs the perspective of a self-reliant rural class' (Vinson, 1996, p. 31), this is usually the last social group greens seek to represent their perspective. Thus, although within the green literature there is much argument over who should be the bearers of an environmental ethic – suggestions ranging from scientists to the members of new social movements (Dobson, 2000, pp. 45–62) – it is rarely imagined that it might be the countryside inhabitants of conservative visions. Indeed, members of this group, those who actually live closest to nature, are more commonly cast as part of the problem than of any solution. Farmers and hunters are therefore frequently prime targets of greens' wrath for opposing modern agricultural methods and failing to share their sentimental views of animals – rather than seen as potential allies (McCormick, 1991, pp. 45–87).

It undoubtedly the most serious obstacle to any convergence with deep ecological thought is that there remains a basic difference concerning how man's place within the natural world is conceived. In this regard, Dobson's accusation of irreconcilable anthropocentrism hits the mark.
In particular, the specifically Judaeo-Christian perspective of conservatives has a number of important implications. Most significant of these is that they therefore understand man's position vis-à-vis the natural world in terms of a custodial or guardianship model. For example, Bliese believing that creation is part of God's entail to man - argues that 'we are always to act as trustees, as faithful stewards of all that we have inherited' (Bliese, 1996, p. 151). Yet this suggests a very different view to that held by radical greens. As Goodin points out, the theological notion of custodianship implicitly presupposes man to possess a higher status than the rest of nature, in having been given a unique role in its protection (Goodin, 1992, p. 6). In other words, a traditional religious perspective is, if hardly 'humanistic', nonetheless more 'human-centred' than that of radical green thought.

In fact, a belief that concern for the environment should be understood largely in terms of human interests is the norm amongst conservatives. For example, Dunn and Kinney declare that 'our effort is primarily anthropocentric; we regard the world first in terms of human needs' (Dunn and Kinney, 1996, p. xii), where this human-centredness is especially apparent in relation to the idea of animal rights. Thus, according to Scruton, animal rights activists fail to 'understand the deep differences between animals and humans', in that human beings possess 'freewill and a rational soul' (Scruton, 2000, pp. 92–93). Although, in the past, people were sure of their status as the highest order of creation, made in God's image, the ideology of animal rights proponents has detrimentally eroded this understanding (p. 3).

What is revealed by such passages is that the character of conservative 'anti-humanism' is of a qualitatively different nature to that of radical greens. That is, the anti-humanism historically so central to conservatism is fundamentally concerned with rejecting the hubris of other ideologies' social visions. This need not imply that man does not possess a privileged position in the natural world. In other words, whilst conservatives would certainly balk at being given the human label, their ideology remains human-centred in a way that is inimical to deep green perspectives.

Conclusion

Deliberately avoided in this discussion has been the general charge often levied against both greens and conservatives, that of romanticism, which greens at least are usually keen to reject (Dobson, 2000, pp. 11–12). Instead, by focusing upon particular points of principle, it has been demonstrated in very specific ways that the common ground between environmentalism and conservatism encompasses much greater territory than is usually appreciated. For this reason, it is not possible for greens simply to dismiss 'conservative environmentalism' as purely shallow in its commitments. Nor can green thought be seen as the wholly distinct post-Enlightenment ideology some adherents may presume it to be: much of the critique of modernity articulated by greens (and others) today has been forwarded many times before by conservatives.

Moreover, although green thought is most clearly in tune with traditionalist conservatism, it is not entirely without legitimacy for free-marketeers to incorporate environmental concerns within their agendas. Although there is much that may be deemed shallow, there are more basic ways in which economic liberalism underpins a principle between green and conservative philosophies. Principally, and despite of their own anti-humanist commitments, conservative doctrines are essentially those of a human-oriented ideology. Indeed, it is largely for this reason that many adopt the stance of critic. The historical irony, therefore, is that — in contrast to the even less human-centred than themselves.

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Human Rights and Modern Liberalism: A Critique

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The idea of human rights has become one of the central moral notions of both the theory and practice of international politics. While its foundation and base are in the practice of politics, looks why do we have them? To what should we attribute the authority of their moral claim? The theorist Michael Freeman has suggested one theory that by addressing such questions may serve to answer this.

The idea of human rights has over the past 50 years made a significant move from the hallowed halls of Western academia to the consciousness of the 'everyday citizen' in many parts of the world. This has happened through the application of a term that only half a century ago was coined and updated, having been pensioned off as an interesting piece of intellectual history dependent upon intellectual assumptions we had all dispensed with in the name of modernity and progress.

The Rights of Man, an idea unfashionable for some time, became Human Rights. As if through a flash of divine and redemptive revelation, the utter and stark tragedy of the Second World War - a war that engulfed the world in its existential intensity - gave birth (it seemed) to an idea which might prevent the whole damnable mess from ever happening again. That, at any rate, is how one may have felt while listening to Eleanor Roosevelt in 1948 as she first declared the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was her hope, she told, with fervour and anguished conviction, that the declaration may become the Magna Carta for 'all men everywhere'. This hope, it can be argued, has come substantially to fruition.

Theoretical Troubles

It would seem that the human rights project is alive and well. What is not so healthy is our understanding of what it is we say we promote, when we declare our allegiance to human rights. It is the sad truth of the intellectual history of human rights that, after 50 years of political advocacy, we still do not know what human rights really are: what it means for us to have them, how we would do best to justify them to aliens from Mars (to employ a technique from modern analytic philosophy: Rorty, 1979), let alone to those who are stranger still - human persons who do not seem able to grasp the rationale of our moral self-understandings.