

Conservatism, Ideology, Rationale, and a Red Light

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Among reviews of my *Conservatism*, Kevin Magill's in *Radical Philosophy* 59 several times struck me as the most challenging. It is not Tory bumble, of course, and it has all his characterful intelligence. But in my re-readings of it, it fails to fulfil its promise. It ends up as conventional, obscure, and wrong. Perhaps he is onto something when he says the book went about its business in a way bound to fail. But, to remark on a main obscurity, he has not succeeded in indicating positively the way in which he thinks it should have proceeded. I have the suspicion that he thinks I could have got some help from Hegel, Marx *et al.*, which indeed I did not, but my suspicion is not in itself enlightening.

It seems likely that our differences have much to do with the differences between analytic philosophers, as they are still called, and those with more distinctive ways of doing things, sometimes freer, sometimes more theory-laden, and sometimes, as Hume would say, fit for fairy land. I do not share the general disdain of some analytical philosophers for their competitors. Such a disdain must be wrecked on the rock of the proposition that the competitors can't all be idiots. Still, Magill's review has not in the end increased my tolerance.

My book first indicates or gestures at a subject-matter – a political tradition taken as beginning with Edmund Burke and including the Conservative Party in Britain and part of the Republican Party in the United States. It then proceeds to define or characterise this tradition by finding a large bundle of distinctions or features of it, including a certain commitment to private property, an opposition to kinds of equality, and so on. The upshot is a full definition or characterisation of the subject-matter, the political tradition in question. Conservatism is the tradition which has had these twenty or so features. The inquiry also involves trying to find the rationale of the tradition – its best summation or underlying principle or governing end. What is it that unites and explains the various distinctions and features? They are not a *haphazard* collection. They didn't come from a randomizing mechanism, or from one element nominating another. The book concludes that the rationale of Conservatism is not a principle of desert, as some have thought, but no more than selfishness. The Right does not differ from the Left in being selfish, but in being nothing else.

To my mind Magill has somehow misunderstood this enterprise. He notices what he takes to be the embarrassing fact that some of the distinctions or features might be had by other political traditions. If so, so what? Conservatism, according to me, is the unique tradition that has all of them and no others. Also, he asks what he takes to be an embarrassing question. On the assumption that there was opposition to equality in the Ancient world, was there an Ancient World conservatism? Well,

that can sensibly only be the question of whether there was in the Ancient World a counterpart-tradition to the defined tradition beginning with Burke – a counterpart-tradition having more or less the same distinctions or features. There wasn't.

There may also be misunderstanding in his coming too close to reminding us, as if there were point in it, that some Conservatives as persons are other than selfish. Who could doubt it? But that is not at issue. My concern was a *political tradition*, or, if you like, persons in so far as they are Conservatives. Is there some mistake in setting out to judge or appraise a tradition in this sense? Is this being seduced by abstraction? That would be bad news for the entire human race, which has been engaged in just this sort of inquiry since it began. We do and must do this sort of thing all the time, and nothing has the slightest chance of showing our habit to be a bad one.

One of Magill's main objections is that my book fails because it doesn't zero in on Conservatism *as an ideology*. For that reason it lacks direction, doesn't hit its target, is not a definitive Socialist philosophical examination of Conservatism, and so on. What is an ideology? There are not a lot of questions better at making me want to reach for a water pistol. But it has to be asked in order to consider the objection. Or rather, we need to attend to Magill's answer.

Conservatism as an ideology, he says, should be seen as a collection of positions and attitudes not governed by a rationale but deriving some cohesiveness from key elements in the collection. Conservatism as an ideology, at any rate for a practising Conservative politician, is what informs her practice, and what changes in response to historical developments. It is something that has emerged with the modern nation state. It is or has to do with the shape or definition put on particular contained elements by the inclusion of other elements. It is such that what you must do is not seek a rationale of it, but see how it works, articulates interests, guides and expresses policies, and does these things differently from other ideologies. There is a bit more along these lines, but I forbear.

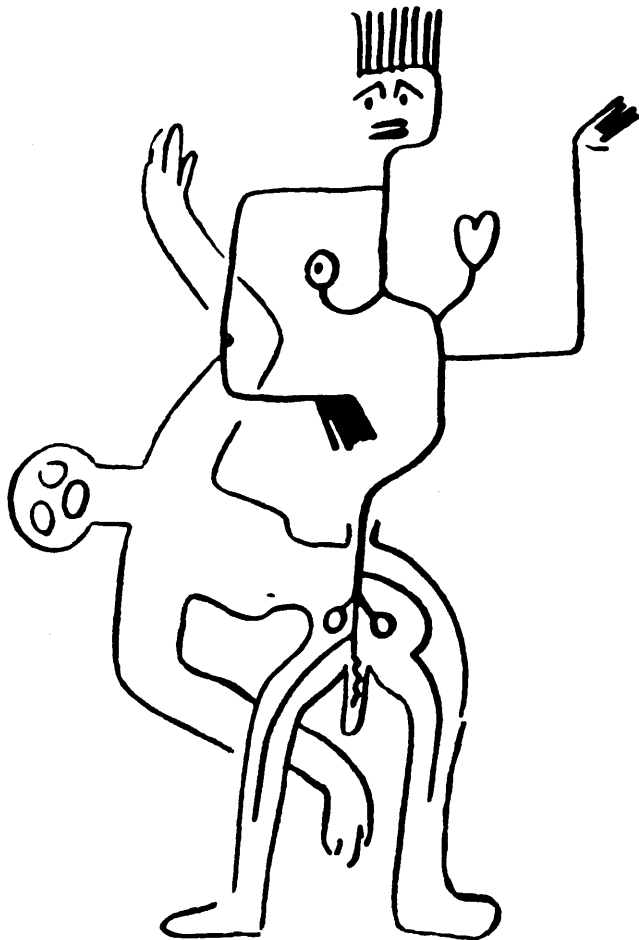
At one point Magill seems to include the 'philosophy' of Conservatism, which appears to be my bundle of distinctions or features, as *one* of the elements in the ideology of Conservatism. I take that to be a slip. It is very clear, and indeed allowed by Magill elsewhere, and indicated by my report above on his own reflections, that the ideology of Conservatism in his view *is* in a way the bundle of distinctions or features to which my book attends, at any rate that bundle with a few additions which he suggests. Or, to the extent that there is any point in the concession, the ideology of Conservatism is in a way that bundle without the assumption that the bundle has a rationale. My first main reply to Magill, then, is that by his own admission I have in

a way identified and attended to what he says or implies I omit, whether or not I have a false belief about it, pertaining to a rationale.

Putting aside for a moment the matter of the bundle's having a rationale, I do see that he thinks I have attended to this ideology only *in a way*. That is, he thinks I have missed something about its character, distinct from its not having a rationale. But what is that? I have no great disagreement with his view of an ideology, and indeed make some or indeed most of the points he makes. Private property is a key element; the ideology has changed; there is an inexplicitness in the way it guides policies; its elements give shape and size to a thing different from the shape and size given to it by elements in other ideologies; and so on.

My second reply is therefore that I have not only identified what he says I omit but, still putting aside the rationale business, also attended to its character. No doubt I do not do all the things that can be done with respect to this ideology. It may be, to recall another of his usages, that I do not try to explain *how it works*. Well, it may be that he and I share a certain amount of social theory or even conspiracy theory at this point, but this was inessential to my enterprise. Again, I felt and had no need to explain certain things that might be meant by speaking of how Conservatism functions as a credo by which to live and work. It is also true that I take myself to be fortunate in having none of the common and deeply boring academic inclination to mystify the subject of ideology. Those concessions do not bring me near to conceding I have not identified and characterised the ideology of Conservatism.

Have I made a mistake in thinking that it has a rationale? To come on to that fundamental matter, why does Magill think that



Conservatism does not have a best summation, an underlying principle of a moral or some other character? He offers two sorts of reason. The first is bound up with considerations about ideology, the second with the fact that Conservatism as I conceive it contains distinguishable parts, notably the New Right.

One reason of the first kind, if I have it straight, and as I can best express it, is that Conservatism hasn't got a rationale because ideologies don't work that way. Or, as he says, 'a unified rationale is ... the wrong means to understanding an ideology. To understand that one needs to ask how it works.' This conventional intoning about 'understanding', with its implications of deep thinking, penetration, realism, history, Hegel and what-not, does not reassure me. Still, what argument does Magill intend?

In one possible form it proceeds from the premise that the ideology has a way of working to the conclusion that it hasn't got a rationale. On the contrary, it seems to me difficult to conceive reasonably of a way of working that *would* exclude a rationale. Nor, by the way, does a rationale entail particular ways of working. Certainly the supposition of a rationale is nowhere near the mad idea that Conservatism develops or functions in some syllogistic way, starting with an explicit major premise, adding minor premises and so on.

In another possible form, the argument in question proceeds from the idea that there are ways of understanding an ideology that do not involve finding its rationale. I couldn't care less. In a third form, the argument is to the effect that the best way of understanding an ideology is not by way of its rationale. I am inclined to deny that, in so far as I can follow it, and note that no discernible reason is given for the proposition.

What is more important than any stuff about understanding is a certain clear and practical question which *was* the question answered by my book. What is the fundamental proposal that Conservatism makes to us and acts on? To answer it, to my mind, and hence to judge or appraise Conservatism, we need to show what fundamental principle informs Conservatism, and more particularly its main end. Life is short, we need to sum things up. People are in bad shape, we have to know what the Conservative and other proposals come to.

There is another way in which Magill would lead us from the matter of ideology to the denial of a rationale. What we get here, I think, is a tightening-up of the first possible form of argument mentioned above. 'To function as an ideology,' we are told, 'Conservatism must articulate the aspirations, values and beliefs of very disparate forces, and the single unified rationale which Honderich seeks would prevent it from doing so.' That seems to me just mistaken. No doubt some Conservatives are more attracted by some elements in the ideological bundle, some by others. No doubt some would leave Conservative parties if some elements were abandoned. That is not to say their politics has no fundamental unity, or that this ruling thing does not also attract them as Conservatives, or is not the main attraction.

My third main reply to Magill, then, is that he does not have an argument from a premise about ideology to the conclusion that there is no rationale of Conservatism. Consider now the other line of thought issuing in the conclusion that Conservatism has no rationale. It is that this political tradition has contained different parts. In particular, it has contained the New Right, or what Magill calls Right-Wing Liberalism, and also what can be called Traditional Conservatism. It is plainly false that I take the New Right as typical or within what is typical of the tradition of Conservatism, which Magill seems to say. My book regularly makes clear that it is Traditional Conservatism which is typical. Magill's more important proposition is that the New Right and Traditional Conservatism think differently, have different objectives, and are different ideologies.

It seems to me that these three claims can obviously be taken

in ways that make them true. What I am not nearly persuaded of is that it follows that a tradition which contains both of these tendencies cannot be regarded as having a ruling principle or that this cannot be true of a party or a person who incorporates both, as Magill allows was true of the party of Mrs Thatcher and herself. The plain fact of the matter is that *every* tradition of interest, however monolithic, has parts and tendencies within it. It is near enough to a necessary condition of something's *being* a tradition that it has a rationale, and the fact is evidently consistent with diversity in it. There are many relevant examples.

It is of course of some importance to my argument that the New Right and Traditional Conservatism were and are together in single political parties, above all the British Conservative Party. Magill nevertheless thinks it proper to ask a certain question. If the New Right and Traditional Conservatism had been separate political parties, traditionally in alliance, would it be reasonable to look for an overall rationale?

The usefulness of this question is plainly disputable, on account of its presupposition that the New Right and Traditional Conservatism are more disparate than I allow, but never mind that. It seems to me also plain that *anything* that deserves the description of being an ongoing let alone traditional alliance will indeed have a rationale. How could two entities engaged over decades in real and effective cooperation, and allied against common adversaries, lack such a thing?

My fourth and slightly premature reply to Magill is therefore that he has not got an argument which takes him from diversity within Conservatism to there being no rationale. It may be, I allow, that his denial of a rationale also rests on something else. My book, he says, 'lacks a distinct subject (or, in so far as a subject is distinguished, it corresponds to nothing in political reality)'. That sounds like something from which you could conclude that what I purport to be discussing lacks a rationale, along with anything else that might be assigned to an actual or proper subject. But forget about the issue of a rationale for a while. What does it mean to say that the book fails in the given way? This in itself sounds like a disaster.

Is the complaint that the book lacks a subject really the complaint that it lacks a uniform, homogeneous or monolithic subject – since Conservatism has had in it the New Right, Traditional Conservatism, and more? That complaint, in effect a demand for homogeneity which would rule out almost every book ever written, would be absurd. Is it then being complained that my conception of something is vague, ambiguous or otherwise conceptually inadequate and so picks out nothing? There is no breadth of argument to that conclusion in the review, and the conclusion would be mistaken. Is the complaint that what I pick out cannot be effectively treated because of its diversity? Well, I find *a great deal* in common between the several sorts of Conservatives, even before getting to the point of assigning them all the sole rationale of selfishness.

In saying that the book at best *has* a subject but one which corresponds to nothing in political reality, what can Magill possibly mean? Are we again hearing the truth that Conservatism, like every other political tradition, includes political differences within itself? I have said enough of that. Is the point that it is not politically relevant or important or the like to consider together all of what I call Conservatism? To my mind, that point would be crazy. No doubt there are positions or viewpoints from which it is most profitable to consider differences within Conservatism. But to say, in effect, that there is no position or viewpoint such that it is important to consider all of it together is indeed crazy. Consider a voter in Britain in the late twentieth century. I cannot believe Magill intends the point in question. In the end, I am left in the dark.

So my fifth reply is that my book has a subject. The sixth is a

challenge, anticipated in my opening remarks and since then. If you are trying to decide how to vote, or what is to be said for or against the Conservative Party and the Labour Party, or whether your inherited feelings about the Right and Left are reasonable, or what to say in a political book, what are you to do?

According to both Magill and myself, I think, you see what is on offer from Conservatism and what is on offer from the Left. You arrive at the Conservative ideology, which is to say you run through that tradition's distinctions or features. You arrive at the Left's ideology, which is to say you run through *that* tradition's distinctions or features. What do you do then? Wait to see if a red light saying 'Vote Labour' comes on? Notice whether you're feeling warmer about the concept of a General Strike? Find out by introspection whether you're empathising with Mr Major? Discover you're a Tory by observing your behaviour, maybe where your pencil puts its X on the ballot paper? Consult Hegel?

Well, you might, and for all Magill says, you might as well. On the other hand, you might engage in what a lot of us do, and, incidentally, is far from being *rationalistic*, which is to arrive at a rational summary of Conservatism and a rational summary of the Left. See what they come to. Arrive at the rationale of Conservatism and the rationale of the Left. I cannot see a rational alternative if the aim is to come to a judgement.

Some smaller matters remain. There is not much difference between Magill and me on Conservatism's tedious insistence that only narrow freedom, or freedom without power, is exactly freedom. Still, he has stressed what needs stressing. As for the family and nationalism as features of Conservatism, I did not so much overlook them as the review implies. With respect to pragmatism, or what I called empiricism, I remain unimpressed by arguments for social or economic institutions from their having passed the test of time – and unimpressed by the proposition that there is much recommendation in the fact by itself that an institution maintains social cohesion. An army can do that.

