

Conservatism, idealism and cardinality

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The object of this paper is to draw attention to a distinction not often discussed in substantive ethical theory. It is though, we think, a distinction of some importance. The distinction is that between an ethical idealist and her opposite. The latter might go by a number of names (pragmatist, realist, expedient) but we shall use the term ‘conservative’, for reasons to be explained.

The aims of this discussion are, first, to indicate what the distinction is; second, to illustrate it with simple diagrams; and third, to indicate why it may be significant. One aspect of this significance derives from a link between conservatism and idealism on the one hand, and cardinality on the other, that our distinction reveals.

1. The distinction described

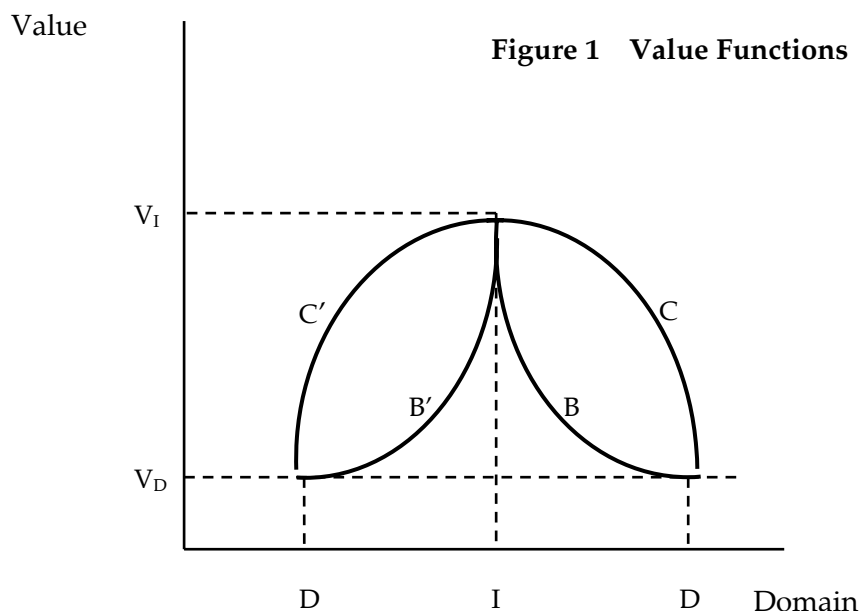
Consider a value function; that is, a function embodying a normative assessment of alternative, normatively relevant, objects of evaluation. The very idea of a value function requires the acceptance of some assumptions; for example, that there exists an appropriate metric of value. Our value function may be either an ‘all-things-considered’ value function or it may articulate just one value among many: our discussion applies, with minor modification, under either reading. We acknowledge the debates surrounding the multiplicity and commensurability of values (see, for example, Chang (1998)), but do not contribute to them here.

We assume that the objects of evaluation can be presented in a single dimension, and that both this dimension and its value may be measured on cardinal scales (we will return to these assumptions below). Our value function can then be illustrated in a diagram such as Figure 1 depicting, horizontally, the domain of evaluation and, vertically, the value associated with that domain. In the interests of generality, we shall not specify the domain of value. Economists would typically define this domain over social states, or normatively relevant attributes of social states. We shall sketch an example in terms of equality. However, we believe that the points we make are essentially independent of the particular domain that the ethical system picks out as normatively relevant.

The distinction we wish to make salient is that between value functions of the kinds illustrated by B'B and C'C in Figure 1. These value functions are deliberately constructed to have a great deal in common, so as to focus attention on the contrast we have in mind.

Specifically, the two value functions:

- are defined over the same domain and in relation to the same value - they identify the same feature of the world as normatively relevant, and accept the same metric of value;
- rank the available options identically. For any pair of options in the domain, their rankings under value functions B'B and C'C are identical;
- apply the same metric of distance between options in the domain; if the distance between options X and Y is d under B'B it is also d under C'C;
- identify the same point in the domain as ideal (I), and assign the same value (V_I) to that ideal;
- identify the same points in the domain as the worst available option (D, for disaster), and place the same value (V_D) on this option.



To illustrate, suppose that the value in question is some form of equality. Then B'B and C'C exhibit the same answer to the 'equality of what?' question in specifying the particular domain – whether it be distributions of income, welfare, or whatever. They endorse

the same normative metric of value whether the Gini co-efficient, the variance of the distribution or some other among the contenders. They agree on the distributions that are best and worst; and on the values placed on the ideal and the worst outcomes. Furthermore, they agree on the ordinal ranking of all distributions, so that there is agreement on all questions of the form ‘which of distribution X and Y is better?’

However, despite all these similarities, B’B and C’C differ in their shape – the way in which they ascribe relative value to distributions other than D and I. The value function C’C is a smooth concave curve that becomes flatter as one approaches the ideal point. By contrast, B’B is a convex curve that is relatively flat at low levels but climbs more steeply as it approaches the peak – where the ideal represents a kind of value cusp. Figure 1 is drawn to emphasise this distinction, but it applies to more moderate cases.

We want to say that B’B characterises the ethical idealist, whereas C’C characterises the ethical conservative. For the idealist, as characterised here, the important thing is to secure the ideal, because the value of the ideal vis-à-vis all non-ideal points is in general very large. Small departures from the ideal reduce value significantly. In the extreme, one might imagine that all value is concentrated at the ideal point, with all other points valued at V_D . For the idealist, the further you are from the ideal, the less there is to lose.

For the conservative, by contrast, the important thing is to avoid disaster. Getting close to the ideal is almost as good as the ideal. But each step away from the ideal gets progressively more costly. In the extreme, one might imagine that value is equal at all points in the domain other than D, where disaster beckons. For the conservative, the further you are from the ideal, the more there is to lose.

We refer to the difference between B’B and C’C as a matter of *posture* towards the ideal in the specific domain. Even though the idealist and the conservative in our example value the worst outcome identically, both absolutely and relative to the ideal, the conservative takes the threat of major departures from the ideal very seriously, while the idealist focuses attention on achieving the ideal. The conservative attends more to the potential down-side risk, while the idealist attends more to the potential upside gain whenever the status quo lies between D and I.

We should emphasize that, if there are several dimensions to the ethical domain, being conservative (or idealistic) with respect to one dimension does not imply conservatism (idealism) with respect to other dimensions – one’s overall evaluation may be concave in respect of some ethically relevant inputs, and convex in respect of others. Postures are relative to specific substantive issues, and one might be conservative with respect to some

issues and idealistic with respect to others. Equally, we recognize that value functions may take more complex shapes than those illustrated in Figure 1. Specifically, a value function may be concave over some subset of the domain and convex elsewhere. In such cases, the conservative or idealist posture is ‘local’ rather than ‘global’ in nature, but still reflects concavity or convexity over a relevant range.

We also emphasize that it is not the case that the idealist and the conservative, as we characterise them, differ in terms of their evaluative intensity. Idealists are not, in any simple sense, more passionate about their chosen ideal. Of course, one would imagine that evaluative intensity will vary from person to person. But such variations will cut across our distinction between idealist and conservative: our distinction depends on the *shape* of the respective value functions, rather than the intensity of moral views.

In illustrating the similarities between the conservative and the idealist, we stipulated that they value identically both the ideal and the worst options. This formulation implies that the conservative values any intermediate outcome more highly than does the idealist. In particular, if the status quo is neither I nor D, the conservative is more content with the status quo than the idealist is. However, we emphasize that this particular ‘normalization’ between idealist and conservative is *not* a crucial feature of the distinction we have in mind. We might have stipulated that the two value functions agree on the value of the status quo point. This would change the diagram somewhat, and remove the suggestion that the conservative value function never lies below the idealist value function. However, such a re-normalization would not disturb what we intend to be the critical feature of the conservative and idealist postures¹: namely, the conservative value function is concave; while the idealist value function is convex. It is this difference that is crucial to our distinction.

More generally, we do not claim that the distinction we offer here is the only difference between an ethical idealist and an ethical conservative – our claim is rather that this distinction picks out one significant aspect of this difference, and one that can be highlighted by holding other aspects of ethical valuation constant.

2. Why does it matter?

Ethical analysis operates in the face of at least two significant facts. One is that the status quo is typically non-ideal. Some ‘improvement’ is at least conceptually possible, and ethical

¹ Any normalisation is allowable while retaining our central distinction – as is the case where no direct interpersonal comparisons can be made so that the scales for each value function are distinct and incomparable.

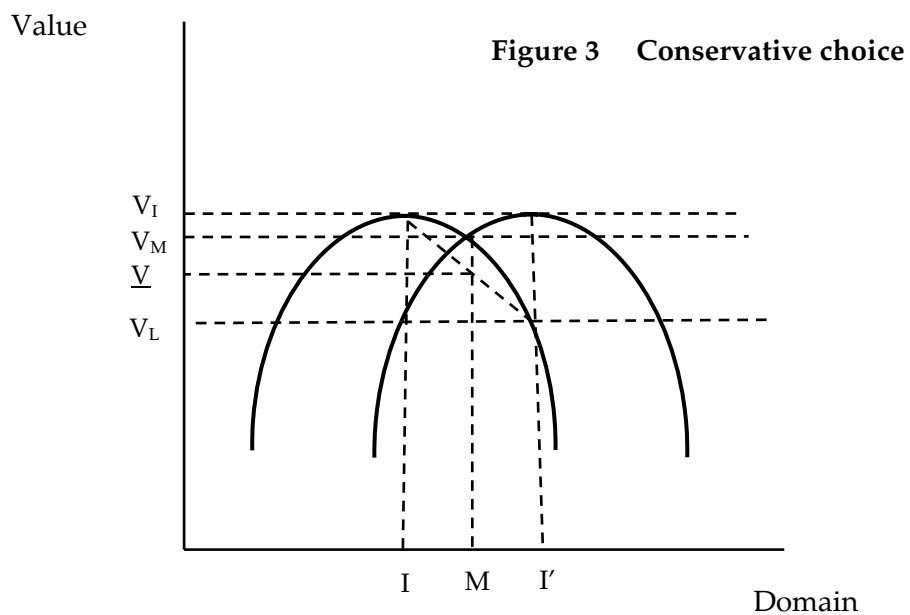
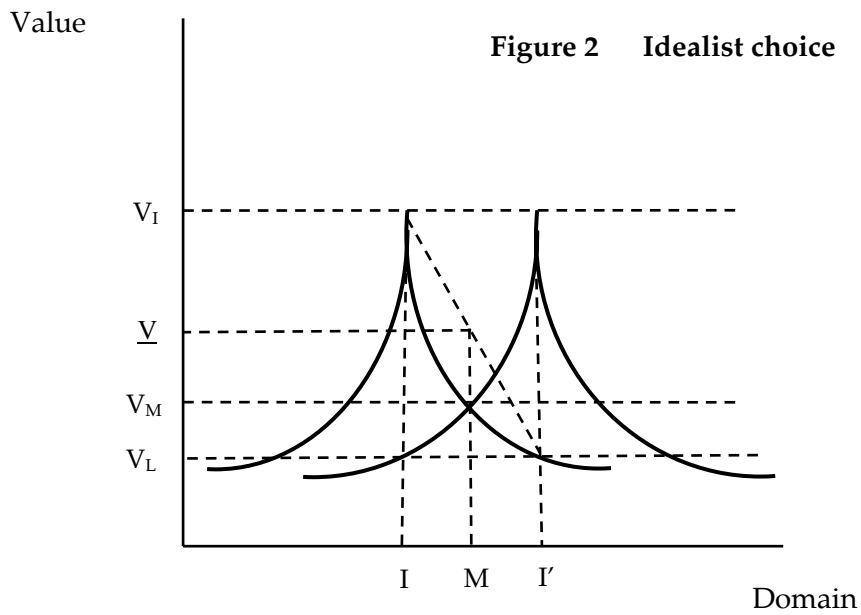
analysis is intended to guide such improvement. But this fact carries the implication that there are barriers to achieving the ideal – barriers that have so far proved resistant to ethical reasoning or action. When the set of feasibility constraints is fully specified, the conceptually ideal position may turn out to be infeasible. In such cases, one will have to settle for the ‘second best’ or ‘best feasible’ option. And to derive that best feasible outcome requires a specification not just of the conceptual ideal, but also of how to measure and evaluate divergences from that ideal. It is largely for this reason, we suspect, that Broome (1991) insists on ‘betterness’ rather than ‘goodness’ as the primary concept in a proper account of value.

The second significant fact is that among the relevant constraints are the prevailing limits on the knowledge of the actor/evaluator. Such limits are of two broad kinds. First, it is often the case that the consequences of action are difficult to predict. Perhaps the action under consideration will improve the social state, but perhaps it will not. Call this action-uncertainty. The second possibility is ethical uncertainty. Perhaps the detailed specification of the ideal requires information that the observer cannot be totally sure about. Or perhaps there are reasonable uncertainties as to whether one’s own ethical positions are perfectly correct, however deeply these have been considered.

Suppose that you are an egalitarian. You have read the relevant literature. You know that there is some dispute – even in high places – about what exactly should be equalised. Perhaps ‘capabilities’, perhaps ‘access to opportunities’, perhaps outcomes in terms of some measure of ‘flourishing’ – and these measured over lifetimes or over shorter time slices. The plausible options are multiple, and it is hard to be sure that you have settled on the right one.

Idealist egalitarians and conservative egalitarians will have different strategies to deal with this predicament. We can exploit our simple diagram to show this. Consider Figures 2 and 3; the actor/evaluator knows that the ideal is either I or at I’, but doesn’t know which. In Figure 2 the actor/evaluator is an idealist. The two possible ideals correspond to two possible locations of the cusp of the value function. Aside from a horizontal shift reflecting the ethical uncertainty, the two value functions are identical to B’B in Figure 1. Here it is ethically appropriate to choose the action that results in whichever of I or I’ has the best chance of being the ideal. If they are equally likely to be the ideal, then the actor should choose randomly. To see this, suppose, without loss of generality, that the relevant probabilities are 50/50 and that the idealist chooses I. If correct, the actual value achieved is V_I . If incorrect, the value achieved is V_L . So, the ex ante expected value is \underline{V} ($0.5V_I + 0.5V_L$). And \underline{V} is *greater* than V_M , the value that would be obtained at point M which is the 50/50 compromise

between I and I'. So, the idealist will rationally gamble on I (or I') rather than compromise. And this is so because of the convexity of the idealist's value function².



The opposite is true of the conservative. Faced with identical uncertainty, the conservative will prefer the compromise position M rather than either I or I'. Of course, M is

² It is more complicated if there are many positions where the ideal might lie. We consider the simpler case to stress our central contrast.

guaranteed not to be ideal, but it is also guaranteed to secure more value than would be secured if one chose the ‘wrong’ possible ideal. In Figure 3, the value achieved at M will again be V_M , but this is now *greater* than \underline{V} , the expected value that would be achieved by gambling on I or I’, and this because of the characteristically concave shape of the conservative’s value function. The conservative will opt for compromise while the idealist will tend to go for one or other of the possible ideals.

We said that the difference between the conservative and the idealist was a matter of *posture*. Strictly, of course, the issue is one of ‘value-function-shape’; but we can say a little more about what we mean by posture. At one level, we have in mind the familiar idea of a posture or attitude to risk. Our conservative posture is a direct analogue of risk aversion (see the classic discussion in Arrow, 1965). Just as, in the prudential domain, some individuals will be risk averse while others are risk preferring so, in any particular moral domain, some individuals will be conservative (reform averse) while others are idealist (reform preferring). In both cases the formalisation is concerned with the shape (concavity/convexity) of the relevant value function, but the underlying ideas are more concerned with the individual’s attitude or posture in relation to evaluation and decision making.

At another level, however, we have in mind the posture of moral theorists. Suppose you are a moral theorist concerned to use your scarce time and intellectual energy to best effect. And suppose you are an idealist, in our sense of the term. Then you will rationally devote your energy to the specification and exploration of the ideal. All (or at least most) of your analytic and intellectual fire-power will be devoted to fine-tuning the characterisation of the ideal. Over a relatively wide range, uncertainty will not bother you much. And you will not be much concerned with downside risks – with the prospect of disaster – because attention to downside risks would only distract you from what is, for you, the main game.

The conservative is quite different. The ideal is, of course, still of some importance. But the upside gain when you are right in your specification of the ideal is always less than the downside loss when you are wrong. So you will be more attentive to the threat of disaster and less concerned with ideal achievement. Furthermore, for the conservative, the details of probabilities and contingencies will be crucial. In a sense, the whole issue of the detailed shape of the value function is of more concern to the conservative than to the idealist. The idealist can forget the detailed shape because the general shape supports the view that the ideal is all that matters. In this sense, perhaps, the whole thrust of our argument here is conservative: it picks up features that only a conservative would care much about.

We have referred to the non-idealist type as conservative, because it involves a reform-averse posture, with a bias towards the status quo in cases of uncertainty. Consider a case where there is action-uncertainty about some contemplated reform. Specifically, suppose that the reform is as likely to move the world away from the ideal as towards it, and by an equal distance. So, one is faced with a choice between the status quo, S , and a 50/50 chance of $(S - c)$ and $(S + c)$. Suppose also that the idealist and the conservative are agreed on the terms of this choice. That is, they agree on which outcomes may result, and on the probabilities. But they will not agree on what to do. For the conservative, this bet will always be a bad one. For the idealist, it will always be a good one. More generally, facing this kind of action-uncertainty, the idealist will always choose reforms that the conservative will reject in favour of the status quo.

However, these conservative features may well be *consequences* of the structure of value rather than reasons for adopting that value system. That is, certain normative systems might lead naturally to a conservative value function for reasons that have little directly to do with attitudes to risk. One example is Lerner's (1944) utilitarian justification of income equalisation in the face of uncertainty about differences among persons in terms of their efficiency as utility-generating machines. As Lerner showed, the assumption of generalised diminishing marginal utility of income implies that income equalisation offers an optimal compromise between the relevant possible ideal distributions. In that sense, the assumption of diminishing marginal utility makes utilitarians conservative in our sense in at least one relevant dimension.

The central point here is that the conservative value function will tend to generate a status quo orientation or bias – regardless of the specifics of what is valued. For this reason, we believe that there is a natural connection between a conservative value function and at least one aspect of conservatism as a political philosophy. However, to establish that connection is not our purpose here³. Here our aim is to draw attention to a distinction that we think has not been adequately recognised in moral philosophy.

3. Cardinality

In laying out our distinction we have made important assumptions about two things – the cardinal measurability both of value and of 'distance' in the domain of ethical concern. We need to say more on each of these.

³ For a start on this project see Brennan and Hamlin, 2004.

On the cardinal measure of value; if value were only ordinally measurable there could be no distinction between the value functions identified in Figure 1 since, by construction, both yield identical ordinal rankings over all relevant alternatives. Let us be clear here; we do not require the ability to make precise and interpersonally comparable measurements of the degree of reform aversion, but (given the cardinal measurability of the domain of ethical concern) we do require the ability to identify the conservative as reform averse in the face of uncertain choices, thereby exhibiting the characteristic status quo bias. Symmetrically, we require the ability to identify the otherwise similar idealist as reform preferring in the face of such choices, thereby exhibiting the characteristic bias in favour of reform. This requires a modest cardinality of value⁴.

This requirement should not be surprising. It is another point of similarity with risk aversion, where again cardinality of value is a necessary input to the analysis of attitudes toward risk. Nevertheless, because our distinction between the conservative and idealist attitudes to reform has gone largely unnoticed, so has the implied requirement for cardinality of value. We stress that it is not the case that cardinality of value implies either conservative or idealist values – but rather that, without cardinality of value, our distinction between conservative and idealist postures cannot be sustained.

If the measure of distance in the domain of ethical concern were only ordinal in nature (even allowing for cardinality of value), a permissible transformation of the horizontal axis could transform any concave value function into a convex one (or vice versa), so that it would not be possible to use the criterion of convexity/concavity to categorise a value function as idealistic/conservative. Furthermore, some specifications of ethically relevant domains may seem more easily associated with a cardinal scale than others. Our example of equality requires the domain to be defined over distributions, and we might be relatively easily convinced that cardinal measurement is appropriate; whereas if the domain of ethical concern were, say, liberty, it is not so easy to see a cardinal measure of the distance between social states. If the chosen domain of ethical concern is cardinally measurable, we need say no more. But if there is at least considerable doubt over the cardinal measurability of some domain, we face two possibilities: either our conservative/idealist distinction is not valid for that issue – so that the force of our distinction is restricted to cardinal cases; or we must modify our account.

⁴ Sometimes referred to as ‘quasi’ cardinality. Broome 1991 includes a discussion of the ordinal/cardinal distinction.

Fortunately, a modification is available. Although permissible transformations of the horizontal axis renders the absolute distinction between convexity and concavity of a value function untenable, any such transformation will always preserve the relative properties of any pair of value functions. In relation to Figure 1, a transformation of the horizontal axis might render C'C convex (rather than concave), but that same transformation would necessarily render B'B still more convex, so that B'B would always be more convex than C'C. Thus, while in the absence of a cardinal measure of distance in the ethically relevant domain, we would lose the ability to label any value function 'conservative' or 'idealistic', we would retain the ability to make comparative statements of the form: value function C'C is more conservative (less idealistic) than value function B'B.

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