**What is the Conservative Point of View**

**about Distributive Justice?**

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This paper examines the conservative point of view about distributive justice. The first section explains the methodology used to develop this point of view. The second section describes one conservative point of view and briefly provides empirical evidence that it reflects the viewpoint of many ordinary conservatives. The third section explains how this conservative view can ground objections to social safety net programs, using as examples the recent health reform legislation and more extensive proposals for a true national health system. The fourth section sketches ways that non-conservative philosophers might try to refute those objections.

Examining a conservative point of view will lead us to several important conclusions. One is that the conservative point of view is not properly represented in contemporary philosophical discussions. Another is that the conservative point of view cannot be refuted by appealing to existing egalitarian writings. A third is that to address the conservative point of view, we must expand the range of issues that we discuss in contemporary political philosophy. Doing so is a vital task, because otherwise we ignore the political views held by as much as half the American population.

1. **Developing a Conservative Point of View about Distributive Justice**

My goal is to describe a set of principles about distributive justice that would be accepted by many conservatives if they reflected philosophically about their values and political commitments. Before proceeding, let me make three methodological notes.

First, surely there is no single set of principles that all conservatives would agree to, even after thorough reflection. To avoid awkward writing, though, I will sometimes refer to “the” conservative point of view, meaning only the particular version of a conservative viewpoint that I develop in this paper. As the next section will make clear, I suspect that this point of view would be amenable to large numbers of conservatives, even if not to all of them.

Second, my goal is develop a point of view that would be amenable to ordinary American citizens who call themselves conservatives and generally vote for the Republican Party, people who are more skeptical of redistributive programs than their left-leaning or Democratic counterparts. I suspect that the views of ordinary conservatives differ in important ways from the views of some of the more important conservative theorists and some of the more prominent conservative politicians. I don’t have the space to argue that point here,[[1]](#footnote-1) so for simplicity’s sake I will merely focus on ordinary conservatives, leaving aside any examination of prominent theorists and politicians. If the theorists and politicians would also embrace the view I develop, then so much the better, but since I want to ensure that I describe a view amenable to ordinary conservatives, I use their views as my fulcrum.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Third, though I will later discuss the actual views of ordinary conservatives about social programs, my goal is not to *merely* codify those views into general principles and then examine them. Instead, my goal is to develop a more sophisticated conservative point of view, one that would be accepted by ordinary conservatives *upon reflection*. Roughly speaking, one can think of the project this way. Imagine that ordinary conservatives engaged in philosophical reasoning. Such reasoning would surely lead them to revise or abandon some of their existing beliefs, just as philosophical reflection leads all of us to revise or abandon certain beliefs. However, at the end of this process the conservatives would arrive at certain principles of distributive justice that are likely to continue to reflect the conservatives’ main concerns and values, and it is in that sense that it is still *their* view, and a *conservative* view, about distributive justice.

Here is an example of how my project differs from mere codification of actual conservative beliefs. As I will argue later, many conservatives believe that able-bodied adults should make a productive contribution to society, and that if they don’t, there is some reason to cut them off from the social safety net. However, some empirical research suggests that conservatives—and, indeed, centrists and liberals too—apply this standard implausibly or inconsistently. For instance, people object strongly when the poor don’t make productive contributions, but they seem unconcerned with the non-contribution of the idle rich. Or to give another example, many people seem to count paid labor as a suitable “contribution”, but they do not count care work of children, infirm relatives, and so on, especially when the care work is performed by the poor or by members of racial minorities. If we were merely codifying what ordinary conservatives believe, we would make these implausible or inconsistent principles part of our “conservative view”. But I assume that such principles could not survive rational reflection,[[3]](#footnote-3) and that upon reflection, conservatives could only endorse a principle requiring productive contributions of various sorts from all able citizens. Thus it is the latter principle that figures into my description of the conservative point of view. More generally, I will always focus on conservative principles that I believe could survive philosophical scrutiny.

It is worth noting that my method is not the only “right” way to examine conservative beliefs. It is equally interesting and valuable to look at the political principles that actual conservatives (or centrists or liberals) employ in life, *before* reflection, and then subject them to examination and criticism—a task that other writers have undertaken with much success.[[4]](#footnote-4) The two projects are simply different. A useful comparison might be made with Rawls. Rawls does not merely codify what actual egalitarian-leaning individuals believe. Instead his goal is to begin from certain considered judgments and then build a theory that individuals would endorse upon reflection. My project is akin to that.

In what follows, I rely on readers to make these sorts of “corrections” to the conservative point of view on their own, because the corrections are rather obvious. For instance, although conservatives (and non-conservatives) often rail about fiscal risk when talking about programs they don’t like, they often conveniently ignore fiscal risk when discussing programs they do like. Readers don’t need me to point out the hypocrisy in that, though, so I will often move past these inconsistencies without further comment and focus on the most plausible versions of conservative principles.

1. **The Conservative Point of View About Distributive Justice**

What, then, is the conservative point of view about distributive justice? Media stereotypes suggest that America divides into Democrats who support social safety net programs and Republicans who think social safety net programs are unjust. This is incorrect. Ordinary conservatives overwhelmingly support many social safety net programs, including Medicare, Social Security, Medicaid, and federal unemployment programs. However, ordinary conservatives are more skeptical than Democrats and liberals about some such programs, including Food Stamps and “Welfare”. (There is no federal program called “Welfare”, but when people report opposition to it, they probably have in mind something like the old AFDC program or its modern incarnation, TANF.) Ordinary conservatives are also more skeptical about expansions of the social safety net, such as the recent health reform legislation (technically called the “Affordable Care Act” or ACA), and in some cases they oppose the expansions altogether.

What set of political principles could justify these positions? My view is that the conservative position is best reconstructed, not as a succinct political theory of the sort proposed by Rawls and other egalitarians, but instead as a combination of three sets of beliefs, all of which work together to justify conservative positions.

The first set of beliefs is a set of political principles which I will call *Decent Minimum Theory*, or *DMT*. These principles say:

1. Hard-working Americans and other deserving individuals such as children, the disabled, and the elderly—but also including hard-working able-bodied adults—have a pro tanto entitlement to reasonable access to the things needed for a minimally decent life, such as food, housing, security, and medical care. If private markets don’t provide access, the government has reason to enact social safety net programs that guarantee access.
2. If safety net programs allow or encourage able-bodied individuals to live off government benefits when they could be contributing to society, then that is one reason, and sometimes a sufficient reason, not to enact them.
3. If safety net program are ineffective, counter-productive, or unnecessary, that is one reason, and sometimes a sufficient reason, not to enact them.
4. If safety net programs create fiscal risks that might in turn threaten important social goals, that is one reason, and sometimes a sufficient reason, not to enact them.

Two notes on DMT. First, notice that DMT is a collection of pro tanto principles which must be weighed against each other, and in that way its principles differ from the principles that make up many standard theories of justice. Relatedly, note that while one could think that DMT’s principles are the ultimate principles of distributive justice—much as Ross thought the ultimate principles of ethics were pro tanto principles—one might also think of DMT as a set of intermediate-level principles that are grounded in further, foundational principles. This in turn opens up the possibility that the widespread consensus on DMT (to be discussed below) is the result of an overlapping consensus—perhaps an overlapping consensus among people with otherwise very different views about the foundational principles of justice.

Second, for convenience sake I’ll refer to the first of these four principles as the “ideal” principle and the last three as “non-ideal” principles. The terms “ideal” and “non-ideal” are used most notably in Rawls, and though my usage is not totally divorced from Rawls’s, I’m using the terms in a slightly different way.[[5]](#footnote-5) Readers should take my uses as stipulative. Specifically, I’ll refer to problems of inefficiency, abuse, and fiscal risk as “non-ideal problems”. Thus I label the last three principles “non-ideal” because they define pro tanto reasons that exist when non-ideal problems occur. The first principle is “ideal” because it describes a pro tanto reason that would be definitive in the absence of non-ideal problems, though it may still be definitive even when the problems exist as well.

Turning now to substance, we should note that DMT itself is not a conservative theory nor can it alone motivate the conservative point of view about distributive justice. In fact, the next section will provide evidence that large numbers of liberals and Democrats agree with the principles of DMT. Thus the conservative point of view must be distinguished from other points of view by additional components. The next component is the empirical assumption that safety net programs often face severe non-ideal problems. For instance, conservatives typically believe that at least some safety net programs, such as Food Stamps and “Welfare”, are often abused by undeserving individuals who could support themselves. With respect to the ACA, many conservatives believed that the reforms would not significantly improve America’s health care system and that it would lead to untenable increases in federal debt. The data of the next section will lay out these empirical assumptions in further detail.

And yet DMT, even together with the empirical assumptions, does not yet imply a conservative stance on safety net programs. For instance, even if we granted that Food Stamps was widely abused, and thus (according to DMT) that there is pro tanto reason to oppose it, this would not imply that we should oppose or alter the program all-things-considered. To reach that conclusion we must add our third component of the conservative point of view: the assumption that, with respect to at least some safety net programs (perhaps Food Stamps or the ACA), the pro tanto reasons against them outweigh the reasons we have to keep such programs in place.

So that, in sum, is my definition of the conservative point of view about distributive justice. It is made up of three sets of beliefs, each of which is itself somewhat complex. If correct, together they would justify a typical conservative attitude toward social safety net programs.

1. **Empirical Data about Conservatives’ Beliefs**

The previous section provided a stipulative definition of the “conservative point of view”. As noted earlier, for it to deserve the label “conservative,” it does not need to embody every stance that actual conservatives presently take up, including any stances that are inconsistent or implausible. Still, it would not deserve the label “conservative” if it were totally divorced from ordinary conservative thinking, so this section provides evidence that conservatives seem to embrace ideas that are at least akin to those presented earlier, and that upon reflection they would probably be highly amenable to the conservative theory itself.

Ideally, there would be empirical surveys that ask conservatives about philosophical principles. Such surveys don’t exist, though, so instead I work from other empirical data on conservative political attitudes. There is a vast amount of research on this subject, and I can’t possibly review the research adequately in this short space. Instead I’ll give examples representative of the larger body of data,[[6]](#footnote-6) with fuller sources cited in footnotes.

One striking source of evidence that many Americans, if asked, would affirm the ideal principle of DMT is polling about our existing safety net: social security, Medicare, Medicaid, unemployment, and so on.[[7]](#footnote-7) Support for these programs is nearly constant across ideological lines. Consider this 2005 Harris Poll (see Fig. 1). The question was: “For each of the following government services, please indicate how strongly you support the policy or service.” The percentages indicate the number who answered either “a great deal” or “a fair amount”.[[8]](#footnote-8) The table includes many government services; safety net programs are boldfaced for easy identification: **<insert Figure 1 about here>**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Party ID** | | |
|  | Total | Republican | Democrat | Independent |
|  | % | % | % | % |
| National Park Service | 85 | 83 | 88 | 84 |
| Crime-fighting and prevention | 77 | 80 | 81 | 73 |
| **Medicare, the health insurance program for the elderly and disabled** | **76** | **80** | **78** | **72** |
| **Social Security** | **76** | **75** | **78** | **74** |
| **Unemployment benefits** | **74** | **69** | **81** | **71** |
| Defense | 71 | 93 | 61 | 64 |
| **Medicaid, the health insurance program for people with very low incomes** | **71** | **66** | **77** | **70** |
| Federal aid to public schools | 69 | 67 | 78 | 64 |
| **Federal government emergency services** | **65** | **72** | **65** | **58** |
| Homeland security | 62 | 82 | 60 | 49 |
| Intelligence services | 61 | 75 | 56 | 55 |
| **Food stamps** | **59** | **45** | **71** | **58** |
| Immigration and Naturalization services | 47 | 48 | 51 | 43 |
| Foreign aid | 40 | 39 | 42 | 38 |

With the exception of food stamps (which I’ll discuss later), all the major safety net programs are supported by robust majorities across party lines.[[9]](#footnote-9) We see similar results if we look at surveys based on expressed ideology rather than political party.[[10]](#footnote-10) And though polls like these merely indicate support or opposition to specific programs, we see similar results in research that asks abstract questions about safety net policies generally.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Note three things about data of this sort. First, though the poll results suggest that conservatives support something like the ideal principle of DMT, the results also suggest that conservatives support additional ideal principles as well. For instance, Social Security in its present form does not merely ensure that people have a decent minimum; instead it often redistributes money to middle-class individuals who would be above the decent minimum without the redistribution. Just why conservatives support this form of redistribution is a separate matter that I can’t go into here.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Second, note that if one were to remove the social insurance programs (Social Security, Medicare, Unemployment) from consideration on the ground that conservatives may not think of them as aimed at ensuring a decent minimum, but rather as social insurance schemes, then in the poll above, conservative support for redistributive programs like Medicaid would be at most 66%. Other polls reveal higher numbers,[[13]](#footnote-13) but there is always a noteworthy minority that opposes funding redistributive programs. This might indicate that some important number of conservatives reject the ideal principle of decent minimum theory. (That should be unsurprising; as noted earlier, the view described in this paper is not the only conservative point of view.)

But third, and to the contrary, note that these polls might also *underestimate* the agreement about the ideal principle of Decent Minimum Theory, because even when they do register opposition to particular programs, that opposition may arise not from opposition to the idea of a safety net in principle, but merely because the respondents are worried about what I earlier called non-ideal problems. Take the poll cited above. 34% of Republicans didn’t favor Medicaid, and 24% of Americans didn’t support social security. Perhaps such people are ethically opposed to a safety net in principle (thus denying the ideal principle of Decent Minimum Theory), but instead, many might believe that the current programs merely have non-ideal problems. For instance, Americans who think they should be allowed to privately invest some of their Social Security could show up as “opposed” to the program even though they support the principle behind it.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In fact, further empirical data confirms that Americans’ principal worries about social safety net programs are akin to the ones identified in principles (2)-(4) of Decent Minimum Theory. Consider the divided opinions on Food Stamps evidenced in the poll above. Research shows that people who oppose such programs often explain (or would explain) their opposition by pointing out that the programs are abused by the undeserving.[[15]](#footnote-15) Though Americans surely disagree about who exactly is “undeserving”, the term can be generally applied to people who are able but not making a proper contribution to the larger society from which we all benefit, either by working a reasonable amount (given their abilities and opportunities) in conventional work settings, or by contributing in others ways—e.g., through child care or care for a dependent relative. A 1995 NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll found that 61% of Americans thought poor people could get along without welfare if they tried, with 59% saying that “most able-bodied people on welfare prefer to sit at home and collect benefits even if they can work”.[[16]](#footnote-16) Americans also worry that welfare programs *create* need. In a 1985 *Los Angeles Times* poll, most Americans said that welfare makes poor people dependent, and only a minority said it helps poor people get back on their feet.[[17]](#footnote-17) A CBS/*New York Times* survey from 1995 found that 79% of Americans thought that most recipients were so dependent that they would never get off welfare.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Moreover, worries about the undeserving correlate with opposition to safety net programs, and this suggests that, if asked, those who oppose the programs would cite problems with the undeserving as a reason for opposition. For instance, polling reveals that people who are more opposed to welfare programs, such as typical Republicans, are also more likely to believe that the programs benefit the undeserving. For instance, in a 1995 poll, 85% of Republicans, as opposed to 62% of Democrats, said that “there are jobs available for most welfare recipients who really want to work”.[[19]](#footnote-19) Other research confirms this result.[[20]](#footnote-20)

So much for worries about the undeserving. Research also shows that those who oppose safety net programs cite (or would cite, if asked) the worry that they are ineffective, counter-productive, or unnecessary. It is obviously sensible to oppose safety net programs *if* they have these problems, so it is no surprise that Americans accept the conditional. More importantly, though, they often think safety net programs do have these problems, and they use that (alleged) fact to explain their opposition. Take the Health Security Act proposed by President Clinton. Early in the debate, late 1993, President Clinton was selling his ideas to the public fairly well, but later on the public turned against his proposals. As opposition increased, people reported an increased belief that the plan would not work or be good for the country.[[21]](#footnote-21) We see similar trends in the debate over the ACA. Many polls suggest that people who opposed the ACA expressed the worry that it would be inefficient, wasteful, or unnecessary.[[22]](#footnote-22) These trends are not surprising given that many Americans express a general worry that government programs are wasteful and inefficient.[[23]](#footnote-23) In fact, Americans are so pessimistic about government efficiency that many believe—wrongly—that America spends more on the poor than other developed countries[[24]](#footnote-24). In their minds, the problem of poverty persists at least partly because government programs are ineffectual. Relatedly, a poll question asked regularly for twenty years is ‘How much of every dollar the federal government spends is wasted?’, and the average answer is almost always between 40 and 50%.[[25]](#footnote-25) Americans’ average estimate of administrative overhead in welfare programs is 53%, though it actually ranges from 6-20%.[[26]](#footnote-26) Worries of this general sort are more common among Republicans and conservatives. In a poll on welfare, 56% of Americans, including 50% of Democrats but 72% of Republicans, said that welfare programs do more harm than good.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The last non-ideal principle of Decent Minimum Theory states that one reason to oppose safety net programs is that the programs would create excessive fiscal risks. Research clearly shows that Americans worry about the costs of safety net programs, their effects on the deficit and debt, and the effects of deficits and debts on the U.S. economy. The health care debates over the past two decades again provide an illustrative example. During the Clinton reform debate, many people opposed the plan because of its overall cost.[[28]](#footnote-28) Likewise, even though CBO analyses claimed (perhaps rightly) that the ACA would save money over time, many Americas didn’t believe it. Two months before the bill passed, 60% of Americans thought it would increase the deficit, including 83% of Republicans.[[29]](#footnote-29) About 30-40% of respondents also affirmed that in light of the U.S.’s financial situation at that time, “we cannot afford to take on health care reform right now”.[[30]](#footnote-30)

In sum, this data provides evidence that, if asked, conservatives would explain their position on social safety net programs by appealing to principles like those contained in my description of the conservative point of view. Having made that case, though, several questions arise:

(1) One is whether conservatives would explain their attitudes toward the social safety net by appealing to additional principles that I have not discussed. For instance, it might seem as though appeals to individual liberty are common in conservative discourse, and that conservatives might explain their opposition to some social safety net programs by claiming that the taxation required to fund those programs intrudes too greatly on individual liberty.

There is certainly a grain of truth here. My description of the conservative point of view is not intended as an exhaustive description of *all* the principles conservatives would adhere to upon reflection, and I would certainly acknowledge that conservatives believe in a pro tanto right to individual liberty, as well as other pro tanto rights and obligations. It’s also true that in *some* social safety net debates, conservatives would surely appeal to these additional rights and obligations to explain their position. For instance, the debate over the ACA brought up (bogus) issues about “death panels”, and if someone opposed the ACA because they opposed its (non-existent) death panels, this opposition is not a worry about inefficiency, abuse, or fiscal risk, but rather a worry about individual liberty, freedom, and rights.

However, my goal here is to describe the principles that guide conservative thinking about the majority of social safety net programs, and I think that pro tanto claims to individual liberty are less important than they might appear. The empirical data, reviewed earlier, suggests that conservatives do not in fact explain their opposition to most social safety net programs by appealing to individual liberty.

The one notable exception might taxation. There is some (admittedly unclear) evidence that opposition to some social safety net programs is driven by the feeling that the taxes required to fund the programs are unacceptably high.[[31]](#footnote-31) Apart from a brief discussion below, I leave this aside on the ground that our ultimate concern should not be just what conservatives actually say, but rather what they would or should say after reflection. And upon reflection, I do not think conservatives would or should explain their opposition to safety net programs by claiming that the taxation involved intrudes excessively into individual freedom. That position would be inconsistent with their embrace of other social safety net programs which also require extensive taxation.

(2) A second question that might be asked is why we should care about a rational reconstruction of the conservative view at all. After all, as philosophers, our business is not to address any old position that people hold, or even a position they would hold after reflection, but rather to engage with positions of philosophical merit. I am largely in agreement with this sentiment, and later we will see that the conservative point of view, as I’ve defined it, is not just the position that many actual conservatives hold, but also a highly defensible position.

(3) A third question would concern additional research on political attitudes that I have not cited here. For instance, earlier I pointed out that many people (including many conservatives) seem to object more strongly to non-contribution among the poor than among the wealthy, and that they don’t count care work as a proper social contribution, especially when done by the poor or by minorities. In addition, when I have spoken publicly about the conservative view about distributive justice, interlocutors have often asked about other psychological phenomena—e.g., the possibility that status quo bias leads conservatives to support existing social safety net programs but to oppose new ones, or the hypothesis that people’s attitudes toward safety net programs are strongly influenced by racial bias. Regarding the latter, some researchers claim that many Americans believe that minorities, especially African-Americans, are the main recipients of certain social safety net programs and that members of certain minority groups are disproportionately lacking in work ethic;[[32]](#footnote-32) and these researchers allege that such views are disproportionately held by self-described conservatives and can help explain conservative opposition to certain safety net programs.

Personally, I think that to properly understand this research, especially on racial bias, we would need a more thorough examination than I can undertake in this space, and that the research may not have the implications it seems to at first glance. I also worry that, unanalyzed, this research feeds an unfortunate feature of contemporary American politics: the writing off of other viewpoints—e.g., on the ground that conservatives are all mean-spirited racists, or that liberals are all America-hating cowards. But let me (reluctantly) leave aside those factual disputes and say instead why I think these hypotheses about bias are irrelevant to the project I am developing here. I cited the empirical research in order to show that the principles of the conservative point of view, as I outlined them earlier, are reflected in ordinary conservative thinking. And for that project, it doesn’t matter what (perhaps unconscious) forces motivate some people’s conservative thinking. For instance, ordinary conservatives either believe that some significant number of poor people are undeserving or they don’t, and they either believe that the pro tanto reasons against certain safety net programs outweigh the reasons in favor or they don’t. For my purposes, it doesn’t matter *why* they believe this. A comparison might help. If one’s project were to describe the views most professors hold on affirmative action, one might discover that most professors are in favor. But whether that belief is influenced by non-rational factors—e.g., a desire to fit into the liberal academic setting—is simply irrelevant to the project of correctly describing what the average professor believes.

Or so it seems, but there are two complications. One is that, when we come to our evaluation of the truth of the conservative view, exploring psychological biases might matter. Take the factual issue of whether many people collecting safety net benefits are undeserving. If someone said the “evidence” for this is that (allegedly) most poor people were non-white, and (allegedly) that non-white people had a significantly lower work ethic, then we can respond to this contention by showing that these claims are unsupported.

A second complication is that some people might be so convinced that conservatism is substantially driven by bias that they feel that my “conservative point of view” is not conservative at all.[[33]](#footnote-33) Recall that earlier I stated that, even though a “conservative” theory need not perfectly reflect every actual belief conservatives have, it must nonetheless bear some strong relationship to actual conservative beliefs. But suppose one believes that conservatives’ real concerns are, as one anonymous reviewer of this paper put it, “white ethnocentrism” and an “investment in traditional class and gender hierarchies.” In that case, it may seem that even though conservatives espousesomething like DMT’s principles about undeservingness, fiscal risk, and inefficiency, they do not really embrace those principles, and would not even upon reflection. Instead they would embrace other principles—perhaps principles more explicitly related to class, gender, and so on.

Here we enter speculative territory, because we are asking what views conservatives would adopt upon reflection. I have no definitive proof that many reflective conservatives would embrace the viewpoint I have described in this paper rather than some viewpoint more explicitly linked to race, gender, or social status. In fact, I don’t know how such proof could ever be obtained. Nonetheless I can make several quick notes about why I speculate that many reflective conservatives would embrace the view described in this paper. One is that, as noted in the empirical research above, many conservatives actually *say* they endorse principles like those in DMT. Second, and relatedly, I have presented my description of the ‘conservative view’ before many self-described conservative philosophers and policy experts, and many say that it codifies their point of view. Finally, it is worth remembering that this paper’s goal is to describe a conservative point of view that conservatives could endorse on reflection, and I assume—admittedly without argument—that any political views based in race-, gender-, or class-based prejudice could not survive reflection. Consequently, if there were any reflective conservatives whose views *were* substantially driven by prejudice, I speculate that they would be naturally led toward the more sensible and unprejudiced theory I have described here.

None of this is meant to deny that conservatives suffer from certain biases. Like all people, conservatives do not always apply their principles consistently, and they are subject to irrationality and prejudice. However, to me, the evidence still seems to show that a significant number of conservatives are genuinely if imperfectly guided by core concerns about abuse, fiscal risk, and inefficiency, and would remain so even after reflection.

1. **The Conservative Point of View and Contemporary Philosophy**

Assuming I have correctly identified the political beliefs that drive conservative opposition to some safety net programs, we can ask whether these beliefs are addressed in contemporary philosophical research and teaching. I believe that generally they are not. This constitutes a major oversight, since it means that contemporary political philosophy is failing to address the political position of perhaps half the country.

Beginning with teaching, I should admit from the outset that I do not know of any solid empirical data on what is typically taught in philosophy classes. One good proxy comes from textbooks. These are designed to reflect the important philosophical positions on any subject, and they are regularly used by philosophy teachers around the country. If we look the sections on distributive justice included in these textbooks, we typically find two things. First, we find excerpts from egalitarian philosophies such as Rawls’s, philosophies that are (rightly or wrongly) taken to reflect the “liberal” point of view which favors a robust social safety net. Second, we find that the major opposed point of view is almost always represented with excerpts from libertarian philosophers such as Nozick. Obviously neither position reflects the point of view of most ordinary conservatives, which, as we saw above, is not at all libertarian, but rather favors many social safety net programs, while finding some others to be problematic. Although it is a much less secure source of information, it is worth noting that the evidence of textbooks probably fits with the experience of readers who are professional philosophers. We know that courses on distributive justice are often framed around the debate between Rawls and Nozick, thus omitting the conservative point of view entirely.

Similar things might be said about contemporary philosophical research. Philosophers who defend social safety net policies often assume that their opponents are those who oppose such policies entirely. Thus they spend their time arguing that such policies are not wrong in principle. However, if I am right, then conservatives typically agree with that already. What drives conservative opposition to some safety net policies are the non-ideal worries that certain programs are ineffective, subject to problematic abuse, or put the country at fiscal risk. It is almost impossible to find any philosopher who addresses such worries.

Why has the conservative point of view been ignored? Any answer is speculation, but several possibilities suggest themselves.

Some might allege that academics are predominantly liberal and thus ignore conservatism because of alleged “liberal bias”. I don’t think so. In fact, over the past forty years, professional philosophers have shown a near-obsession with right-wing libertarianism—a philosophy that, in my view, was never very well defended to begin with.

Another possibility is simply that philosophers have misperceived conservative attitudes. As noted above, when one hears that liberals support certain social safety net programs such as the ACA which conservatives oppose, one can jump too easily to the conclusion that conservatives oppose social safety net programs *in principle*. This makes conservatives look akin to libertarians, and so perhaps philosophers believed that by discussing libertarian writings, they were discussing something quite close to the conservative point of view.

I suspect that there is truth in this explanation: philosophers have often simply misunderstood the motivations of ordinary conservatives and thus have failed to address them. But I suspect at least two other factors are at play as well. One is that, as philosophers, we may not feel equipped to address debates that require extensive empirical work. And given the nature of conservative objections to some safety net programs—objections grounded partly in factual claims about actual programs—philosophers may not feel that they are in a position to take a stand on those objections. A second and related factor is that some philosophers may feel that the empirical claims behind conservative objections are obviously false, and thus are not worth taking seriously. For instance, I write about health policy debates, and I am surprised at the number of philosophers who will say—in my view, too blithely—that *of course* a national health system can be made to function in an efficient and fiscally sound way. If one makes those assumptions, then the conservative position may not seem worth addressing at all.

Irrespective of why philosophy has ignored the conservative point of view, we can ask how philosophers who support social safety net programs might address conservative objections more fully than we’ve done in the past.

1. **Addressing the Conservative Point of View: Decent Minimum Theory**

How could philosophers who support safety net programs address conservative objections? Since the conservative view is a collection of three different sets of beliefs, there are obviously three general lines of response. The first would challenge the principles of DMT upon which the conservative objections to safety net policies are based.

However, I do not think this is a promising line of response. Recall that the first principle of DMT said this:

1. Hard-working Americans and other deserving individuals such as children, the disabled, and the elderly—but also including hard-working able-bodied adults—have a pro tanto entitlement to reasonable access to the things needed for a minimally decent life, such as food, housing, security, and medical care. If private markets don’t provide access, the government has reason to enact social safety net programs that guarantee access.

Philosophers could try to rebut this principle, arguing that our “ideal” principle should be something different or stronger, such as Rawls’s difference principle. Though such arguments might succeed, I will not pursue them here. The reason is that even if the ideal principle required revision, that would not matter very much so long as the non-ideal principles of DMT were untouched.[[34]](#footnote-34) It is these principles which (when combined with other assumptions) generate pro tanto reasons against safety net policies.

So let us consider the non-ideal principles. Recall that they said this:

1. If safety net programs allow or encourage able-bodied individuals to live off government benefits when they could be contributing to society, then that is one reason, and sometimes a sufficient reason, not to enact them.
2. If safety net program are ineffective, counter-productive, or unnecessary, that is one reason, and sometimes a sufficient reason, not to enact them.
3. If safety net programs create fiscal risks that might in turn threaten important social goals, that is one reason, and sometimes a sufficient reason, not to enact them.

Can philosophers mount a plausible challenge to these principles? To answer, we must know what counts as a plausible challenge, and thus we must digress slightly into methodological issues.

Like many political philosophers, I believe our primary tool for political enquiry is reflective equilibrium. Roughly, when a person uses reflective equilibrium, they pull together their considered judgments on specific moral and political issues, their abstract thoughts about justice, and any other information relevant to political theorizing. The person seeks the political theory which best reconciles and explains all of those considered judgments. The theory may then mandate specific policies, such as public schooling, non-discrimination laws, or national health insurance.

We can engage in reflective equilibrium in order to clarify our own political beliefs. However, the goal of applied political philosophy—or at least the kind I favor and want to discuss here—is justification to others. Applied political philosophers are not merely saying why they find a point of view plausible, but are trying to offer arguments which should be accepted by their audience, were the audience to react reasonably to the evidence. Justification to others can proceed using reflective equilibrium as well. Beginning with the considered judgments of our audience, we argue that they should or should not arrive at certain principles in reflective equilibrium.

If this is our method, then our question at the moment is whether our target audience (conservatives) would arrive at principles 2-4 of DMT in reflective equilibrium. I think many would. The polling data above has already indicated that the non-ideal principles comport with many people’s considered judgments.[[35]](#footnote-35) In addition, the principles have plausible rationales that should make them (and in fact *do* make them) appealing to many people, not just conservatives.

Consider the second principle, which posits that if a program will be abused by the undeserving, that is one reason against it Stuart White gives the best philosophical analysis of this issue, suggesting that the deserving are those who make reasonable efforts to engage in labor that provides a “significant service for, or on behalf of, the wider community”.[[36]](#footnote-36) Almost everyone agrees that paid labor fulfills this criterion, most would probably count care work (of children, infirm relatives, and so on), and other forms of work may count too. It’s important to restrict the principle to “reasonable efforts”, since it would not be reasonable to expect all people to make such a contribution. Children, for instance, must be excluded.

Naturally people will initially disagree on the exact nature of a proper social contribution, and one would need to undertake philosophical enquiry to settle the issue. But that debate does not matter for our purposes here, because even if people disagree about the nature of a proper social contribution, they can still agree on the broader idea that the deserving are those who make one, and with that definition in hand we can offer a supporting rationale for principle (2). Stated briefly, it would go as follows: People come together in societies because, among other things, society provides us with better lives than we would have in a state of nature. Once societies are established, anyone inside them receives the society’s benefits, and anyone receiving benefits owes a proper contribution in return. In political philosophy, this is often referred to as the “principle of fair play”, and though it’s not uncontroversial, it is a plausible moral norm. It appears, for instance, in the work of H.L.A. Hart and in Rawls’s work before *Political Liberalism*. White offers a similar rationale by appealing to common-sense notions of reciprocity and exploitation:

…any member of the community who is a willing beneficiary of cooperative industry…must make a reasonable effort, given his or her endowment of productive capacities, to ensure that other members of the community are not burdened by his or her membership in the scheme. As a matter of their dignity, other citizens have the *right* to expect you to make this effort. Failure to do so treats them in an offensively instrumental way; or, as we more usually say, it *exploits* them.[[37]](#footnote-37)

These ideas about reciprocity and exclusion of the undeserving are, I suspect, part of the reason why people so naturally embrace the idea of a “social contract”. Philosophers use the notion of a “social contract” in two main ways. Some use it to explain why government has authority; the government may rule over us because we have, in some way or other, agreed to government rule. Other philosophers, such as Rawls, use the social contract to explain the extent of our obligations to each other; we are obliged to do the things we would have agreed to under certain conditions. However, the common-sense notion of a social contract is slightly different from both of these, I think. One important feature of most contracts is mutual dependence. For instance, A agrees to pay money to B, and B agrees to deliver steel to A. Because the duties are mutual, either party’s failure nullifies the contract. If A doesn’t pay, B doesn’t owe the steel, and if B doesn’t deliver the steel, then A doesn’t have to pay. Principle (2) reflects the idea that society is a compact with mutual duties. We guarantee each other minimally decent lives, and in exchange, each must do their part to maintain our society.

Moreover, note that this particular use of the principle of fair play is not subject to many of the standard objections that are made when that principle is used in discussions of political obligation generally. In those discussions, philosophers appeal to the principle to explain why citizens have a duty to obey the law and (depending on the philosopher) why we have a duty to support the state with our efforts and resources. When the principle is used that way, as it was by Rawls in his early work, it can seem dubious. One famous objection is Nozick’s, who argued that one acquired a duty of fair play only if the benefits are voluntarily received. To back this up, he gave an example in which a group of townspeople build a PA system which will broadcast public entertainment to the whole town. Each person in the town is supposed to take their turn playing music, reading news, and such. Now Nozick asks:

…your day arrives. Are you obligated to take your turn? You *have* benefitted from it, occasionally opening your window to listen, enjoying some music or chuckling at someone’s funny story. The other people *have* put themselves out. But must you answer the call when it is your turn to do so? As it stands, surely not. Though you benefit from the arrangement, you may know all along that…[the] entertainment supplied by others will not be worth your giving up *one* day. You would rather not have any of it and not give up a day than have it all and spend one of your days on it.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Many philosophers believe this criticism dooms a general principle of fair play, and that the principle is plausible only when a person voluntarily opts to receive the benefits. Thus, they think, it cannot ground a general political obligation, since most benefits provided by the state, such as police protection and national defense, cannot be avoided by anyone living within the state’s boundaries. But whether that is right or not, economic transfers via the social safety net are voluntarily received, for in real-world cases individuals must request them. Thus the objection does not apply in this case, and we can plausibly appeal to a more narrow principle of fair play—one that ranges only over benefits that are voluntarily received—in order to explain why the undeserving are not entitled (as a matter of justice) to help from the safety net.

Supposing that the undeserving are not entitled to benefit from the safety net as a matter of justice, we can then see why principle (2) is plausible. If a safety net program taxes some to provide a safety net to the undeserving, then it taxes and transfers their money (to which they have a presumptive right) for no justice-related reason. It thus moves us in one respect farther from our ideal of justice, and so there is always some reason against the policy.

Having made the case for principle (2), I should admit that it needs further qualifications which, unfortunately, I will not be able to discuss in detail. One is that my reasoning above concentrated on the virtue of justice alone. Justice is not the whole of morality, though, and one might think that as a matter of mercy, generosity, or benevolence, we should provide a safety net to the undeserving nonetheless. A second qualification concerns the principle itself, which probably cannot be made plausible without having its scope narrowed at least somewhat. The reason is that pro tanto reasons to exclude the undeserving seem to exist only if certain other conditions obtain.[[39]](#footnote-39) For instance, if we exclude the undeserving from the safety net on the ground that they have failed to make a proper social contribution, then there must be jobs or other contributory avenues open to them. In the real world this is an important qualification, especially when unemployment exceeds job availability. Additionally, it’s arguable (although more controversial) that if the undeserving are expected to work, often in low-paying and unpleasant jobs, then they must have had a reasonably fair chance to compete in the marketplace—i.e., a reasonably level of fair equality of opportunity must obtain. This too would matter a great deal in the actual world, where, in America at least, the educational system often does not provide fair equality of opportunity.

Consider now the third principle of DMT, which says that one strike against safety net programs is that they are ineffective, counter-productive, or unnecessary. Surely these ideas require no real defense. Programs always have costs, and there is obviously at least some reason (and plausibly decisive reason) not to impose those costs to no good effect, and there are obvious reasons not to enact policies that take us farther from ideal justice or toward it in a less efficient way than some alternative policy would.

It is worth making two notes on the scope and meaning of this principle. Conservatism has traditionally been associated with the viewpoint that we should be more favorably disposed to something the longer it exists. One form of this doctrine would have us value tradition for tradition’s sake. Another form would have us treat a program’s long-standing, traditional nature as evidence that it functions well and/or that its removal might produce unforeseen and destabilizing effects. Though I think the former is difficult to defend, and probably not what ordinary conservatives believe, I suspect conservatives could mount plausible defenses for the latter position. (Indeed, it seems rather obvious that the fact that a program has been around for a long time and has known effects must surely count as evidence in favor of its functionality. For instance, there is surely more reason to think that Medicare will not destabilize the health care marketplace than that the ACA reforms will.) When the presumption in favor of traditional programs is seen in the latter way, the presumption is a form of the concern about efficiency, and I would treat it as a defensible part of the third principle of DMT.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Another thing worth noting is that some significant number of conservatives believe that social policy can only mitigate poverty and its effects to some extent, and that the only real solution would come from the poor themselves—through hard work, changes in attitudes toward work, and so on.[[41]](#footnote-41) In fact, as noted in the discussion of polling above, some significant number of conservatives seem to believe that most poverty-relief programs make the problems of poverty worse. I count these worries as concerns about inefficiency and counter-productivity that fall under the scope of the third principle.

Finally, consider the fourth principle’s claim that one reason to oppose safety net programs is that they create such fiscal risks that they imperil other important social goals. Surely this too is plausible on its face. Though we may have a pro tanto obligation to provide a safety net, that is not the whole of justice. If we some adopt some specific policy in pursuit of the former goal, but that takes us farther from other aspects of justice, then we have at least a pro tanto reason not to pursue the particular policy.

In fact, the clearest cases where the fourth principle holds are those in which a safety net program threatens the very goal it is supposed to achieve.[[42]](#footnote-42) Consider the most commonly-discussed source of fiscal risk, government debt. Although economists don’t agree about how existing and future debt will affect our country, many economists think high deficits and debt create several serious risks. The main problem is that our creditors may eventually decide that investing in our country’s debt is risky. Therefore, they won’t lend us more unless we pay higher interest rates. High government rates lead to higher commercial rates, and those affect the rest of the economy. As Bittle and Johnson put it:

Businesses can’t get loans. Their costs go up. When they get in a pinch, they start cutting jobs. When the economy goes into a tailspin, there are more layoffs, fewer raises, more cuts in benefits, more businesses failing, bigger consumer debt, people’s investments getting savaged, and more. Think ‘very, very bad recession.’[[43]](#footnote-43)

At the same time, the government couldn’t get the loans it needs to cover existing expenses. It could raise taxes and slash government spending. But higher taxes and slashed spending would cut into Americans’ lifestyle, leaving them with less money to obtain housing, medical care, education, and so on.[[44]](#footnote-44) Worse yet, sudden tax hikes and high interest rates could push us farther into recession. The stock market might plummet. Investors might stop investing in America.[[45]](#footnote-45) All of these effects obviously would take us farther from our ideal situation in which deserving citizens have reasonable access to a decent minimum, both because the effects would make people (including the least advantaged) worse off than they presently are and could be in a fiscally responsible regime, and because the problems would so impair the government that it could not as easily maintain the social safety net itself. And since fiscally risky policies carry the risk of moving us further from our ideal of justice, that is one pro tanto reason against them.

In sum, then, my conclusion is that it is not promising to try to rebut the conservative position on distributive justice by trying to undermine our target audience’s commitment to the non-ideal principles of DMT. Those principles accord with the audience’s considered judgments and can be given a highly plausible supporting rationale.

One wrinkle here is that some might object that I have ignored the extensive arguments for egalitarian positions. Take as an example Rawls’s arguments for justice as fairness. Some might think that Rawls’s difference principle requires a social minimum no matter what, not a social minimum *if* certain non-ideal requirements can be adequately satisfied. Thus if we believe the arguments for Rawls’s theory should be compelling to ordinary conservatives, can’t we conclude that there is a plausible case against the non-ideal principles of DMT?

I reject this line of thought, because I do not think the non-ideal principles are incompatible with Rawls’s theory or with any other major egalitarian theories of justice. Instead the major egalitarian theories of justice are best interpreted as theories of (what I have called) ideal justice alone. Such theories are compatible with the non-ideal principles of DMT, so even if our target audience could be persuaded to adopt one of the (ideal) egalitarian theories of justice, they would still embrace the non-ideal principles of DMT for the reasons given above.

This point becomes clearer with an example. Take again Rawls’s theory. When Rawls discusses justice as fairness, he sets aside non-ideal issues. For instance, in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Rawls says this about the problem of abuse by the undeserving:

In elaborating justice as fairness we assume that all citizens are normal and fully cooperating members of society over a complete life. We do this because for us the question of fair terms of cooperation between citizens so regarded is fundamental and to be examined first. Now this assumption implies that all are willing to work and to do their part in sharing the burdens of social life, provided of course the terms of cooperation are seen as fair.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Essentially, Rawls admits that his theory abstracts away any problems about the undeserving. And though he isn’t equally explicit about issues like effectiveness and fiscal risk, his discussions always ignore those issues. For instance, he never asks which policies we should adopt if it’s unclear whether they would effectively hit their targets, or if the country is so far in debt that additional expenditures may put it at fiscal risk. He is doing ideal theory alone.

Given that Rawls is focused only on ideal theory, this means that even if we suppose that our target audience would accept justice as fairness in reflective equilibrium, we would still have to ask which non-ideal principles they should adopt to go with it. I believe they would arrive at principles two through four of Decent Minimum Theory for the reasons already given. The reasoning for those principles given above was independent of any conclusions in ideal theory.

Though Rawls did not write very much about (what I’m calling, rather than what he called) non-ideal issues,[[47]](#footnote-47) there is some textual evidence that he would have agreed with my conclusions about the relationship between his theory and the non-ideal principles of DMT. In the continuation of the passage above, he writes:

In elaborating justice as fairness we assume that all citizens are normal and fully cooperating members of society over a complete life…. Now this assumption implies that all are willing to work and to do their part in sharing the burdens of social life, provided of course the terms of cooperation are seen as fair.  
 But how is this assumption to be expressed in the difference principle? The index of primary goods, as discussed so far, makes no mention of work, and the least advantaged are those with the lowest index. Are the least advantaged, then, those who live on welfare and surf all day off Malibu?[[48]](#footnote-48)

This question can be handled in two ways: one is to assume that everyone works a standard working day; the other is to include in the index of primary goods a certain amount of leisure time, say sixteen hours per day if the standard working day is eight hours. Those who do no work have eight extra hours of leisure and we count those extra eight hours as equivalent to the index of the least advantaged who do work a standard day. Surfers must somehow support themselves.[[49]](#footnote-49)

This isn’t clear, and Samuel Freeman interprets this passage so that Rawls is actually endorsing social support of surfers, just at a lower level than for non-surfers.[[50]](#footnote-50) The passage can also be read so that Rawls is proposing the more radical idea that surfers should receive nothing at all. (Let us define the index of the least advantaged as $X, which includes the value of all benefits they receive through government action. Rawls says that the surfers’ extra eight hours of leisure are all by themselves equivalent to this $X.) Either way, it is clear that Rawls sympathizes with the notion that the undeserving lack the same claim to social benefits as others do. In fact he seems to think this is so obvious that he relies on the notion without argument. Though Rawls does not have equally explicit remarks about fiscal responsibility and efficiency, the reasoning for those principles, given above, also comports with a Rawlsian outlook. Surely any plausible non-ideal theory must count a program’s being ineffective, unnecessary, or counter-productive as at least *a* reason against it, just as we also have some reason to oppose programs with fiscal risks that imperil other important social goals.

In sum, then, we have seen that if we want to rebut conservative objections to certain social safety net programs, it will not be easy to do so by undermining the non-ideal principles of DMT. Admittedly, further philosophical reflection might undercut the defenses of those principles which I have given here—that cannot be ruled out—but the previous discussion does suggest that a more promising rebuttal might focus on the second and third components of the conservative point of view.

**6. Addressing the Conservative Point of View: Empirical Assumptions**

**and Competing Moral Considerations**

Those who want to refute conservative objections to safety net programs have two remaining options. They can attack the empirical assumptions on which those objections are based. Alternatively, they can admit that some conservative factual assumptions are plausible, and thus that some non-ideal problems give rise to pro tanto reasons against safety net programs, but argue that those pro tanto reasons do not outweigh the reasons in favor of safety net programs.

Some philosophers might believe that conservative objections to social safety net programs can all be disproven by showing that they rest on false empirical assumptions. Consider again the debate over health reform. Often I have heard philosophers say that when conservatives object that health reforms might be ineffectual or too costly, these are simply factual misunderstandings. Other countries have national health systems that function well and cost less (as a percentage of GDP) than the American system, so surely, people say, these conservative objections are just based on misinformation.

I completely agree that some such objections rest on false factual assumptions, and those objections can be rebutted without recourse to any philosophical debate. For instance, if someone alleged that an American national health system would be a complete disaster, or would probably worsen average health in America, then in my view, purely factual information would largely rebut the charge. Likewise, if someone claimed that a national health system would cost significantly more than the present U.S. health care system, then that too could be largely rebutted with purely factual work.

(Interestingly, though, note that factual information alone will not completely do the trick, because there is an interesting philosophical question about how one measures the ‘health’ of a population, and factual information alone will not tell one how to do that. There are also interesting questions about how we value health across time and generations. Similar issues are even more pressing if we take examples other than health care. If one wants to know whether a social safety net program effectively promotes equality of opportunity, for instance, then one needs philosophy to define that notion. More generally, we should note that philosophical work will always be required to define what constitutes a ‘decent minimum’ of any good, whether health care or anything else.)

But even if factual information largely rebuts many objections related to efficacy, it is far from sufficient when dealing with other all objections which appeal to other non-ideal problems of efficacy or fiscal soundness. I’ll offer two quick examples.

Consider first the common charge that a national health system would reduce innovation and thus impede the development of our health care system over time. I would not accept the claim that we know that a national health system *would* do this. However, there is also no proof to the contrary, and so it is a live possibility we must take into account during philosophical debates about health care in America.

Why is that a live possibility? Consider these facts. According to a 2006 study, the U.S. accounts for 51% of all global spending on medical research. 32% is from the private sector, 60% is public funding, and 8% is from nonprofits. Much private-sector research is me-too research—one company just trying to replicate another’s drug or technology in order to get a share of the profits—and though such research can reduce prices by increasing competition, it doesn’t produce new treatments.[[51]](#footnote-51) That said, though, the numbers still indicate that the American private sector accounts for 16% of worldwide spending on research, and critics are right to ask whether a national health system would impact innovation.

When making their case, critics seem to assume that America’s high profits lead to private-sector innovation. For instance, President Bush’s Council of Economic Advisors wrote that:

Unfettered by government price controls or access restrictions, innovative products, talented health care practitioners, and skilled health care professionals are rewarded in the marketplace. This leads to technological advances by encouraging investment in new products and research.[[52]](#footnote-52)

The Council offers a case study of price regulation in drug markets, arguing that “pharmaceutical companies tend to avoid or delay introducing new drugs in countries with price controls.”[[53]](#footnote-53) And this reasoning makes sense. Imagine a medical entrepreneur is considering putting $X into a research project. To know whether this is a good gamble, the entrepreneur must know the odds of developing something new as well as the return on investment if the product gets to market. If a national health system lowered profit margins, it would reduce the expected return on investment and disincentivize some entrepreneurship.

Now this is clearly just an “if”. Advocates of national health insurance often propose to fund their systems at high levels – in fact, the same levels (about 17% of GDP) as our current system.[[54]](#footnote-54) Equal spending levels don’t automatically translate into equal profits, though, because national health plans *could* partly pay for expanded coverage by reducing profits. Economic analysis might tell us whether that will happen, but to my knowledge no one has tried to perform the calculations. In the end, then, we simply don’t know whether national health systems would reduce innovation. And since there is some real chance that a national health system would reduce innovation, the only way to rebut an objection which appeals to effects on innovation is by philosophical arguments about its moral presuppositions—e.g., the presupposition that maintaining innovation in the future is more important than increasing coverage now.

That is one example of a conservative objection that, even if flawed, cannot be rebutted through purely factual examination. Another example concerns fiscal soundness. Though an American national health system could almost surely be funded without increasing total health care spending as a percentage of GDP, it is nonetheless true that such a system would increase the percentage of that spending which is routed through the federal government. Rather than pay for that spending, the government might just increase the national debt, as it often does. Increasing the debt puts the economy at risk. This risk is so great, some critics say, that we shouldn’t adopt a national health program.

The factual assumptions behind this objection are all correct. National health plans (of the sort usually advocated, anyway) will increase the percentage of health spending routed through the government. When new programs are implemented, government officials have often simply charged the costs to the national debt rather than paying for them with increased revenue. Large debt also puts the economy and thus people’s livelihoods at risk, though economists disagree about the degree or risk and cannot precisely quantify it.

This conservative objection, then, can only be refuted (if at all) through philosophical argument. Such arguments would require investigating at least two difficult philosophical issues. One is how we should make public policy decisions when faced with radical uncertainty that would not even allow for expected value calculation, if we chose to use it. For instance, we cannot assign even rough probabilities to the likelihood that a given health proposal will or will not, via increased debt, lead to negative economic repercussions. So how do we make decisions in the face of this uncertainty?[[55]](#footnote-55) A second and related issue is that of placing comparative values on the possible outcomes. Such values will undoubtedly play a role in any rational decision-making, and yet it is not obvious how to value increased health coverage (and reduced suffering and death as a result) versus the misery and suffering that might accompany a serious financial meltdown.

I conclude, then, that not all conservative objections can be rebutted through the use of purely factual information. A complementary point, though, is that some conservative objections can *only* be effectively rebutted by drawing on complex empirical data. Take as an example the charge that, while a national health system might not be guaranteed to be a disaster, there is some chance it will be. If the chance were high enough and the outcome bad enough, then that would seem to be a definitive point against a national health system. We can only rebut this objection via argumentation that draws on some detailed factual information. Or consider the (much more plausible) claim that a national health system could not control the rapid growth of health care costs, and thus would eventually crowd out other important social priorities. If true, this would also seem like a definitive point against a national health system, and so this objection can only be rebutted with at least some complex empirical information as well.

**7. Implications of Understanding the Conservative Point of View**

I have defined the conservative view and, using health care debates as an example, illustrated how one might try to rebut conservative objections to certain safety net programs. With this information before us, we can draw several important conclusions.

First, the conservative point of view is not well-represented in contemporary philosophical discussions. Those discussions tacitly suggest—incorrectly—that the conservative view is opposed to all safety net programs. It is not; instead it supports some programs but finds others problematic. This view is best understood as being motivated by a combination of non-ideal principles, empirical assumptions, and further ideas about how the reasons against safety net programs should weigh against the reasons in favor. To my knowledge, almost no philosophers have ever even attempted to address a view with these motivations or implications.

Second, while some philosophers may think that the conservative point of view is rebutted by certain contemporary arguments in political philosophy, such as Rawls’s arguments for justice as fairness, this is not the case. Instead contemporary egalitarian accounts are most plausibly understood as arguments for what I have called “ideal principles”—principles which tell us only what we should do on the assumption that non-ideal problems do not arise or can be adequately dealt with. Conservatives do not oppose safety net programs in principle, and so they need not be fazed by these egalitarian arguments. Indeed, if the egalitarian arguments are intended to be part of the real-world debate over the social minimum had by American liberals and conservatives, then those arguments largely miss the point.

Assuming that some philosophers want to try to rebut the conservative objections to safety net programs, the obvious target are the non-ideal principles of DMT, because these are the most philosophically interesting and robust component of the conservative point of view. However, a third upshot of this paper is that this is not an easy line of attack. Though not everyone will conclude in reflective equilibrium that the non-ideal principles are correct, I have argued that many people could. And since applied political philosophy should be other-oriented, this means that the conservative view survives our standard methods of scrutiny. Of course it is possible that further work on the conservative point of view will rebut the considerations I offered above, showing that conservatives should not arrive at the non-ideal principles in reflective equilibrium. But that has not yet been done, for as we have seen, contemporary egalitarian arguments are most plausibly construed as compatible with the non-ideal principles.

This fact leads to a fourth upshot, which is that one of the most promising responses to the conservative view would be to question the way conservatives weigh and compare the pro tanto reasons for and against a safety net. For instance, above I considered the conservative objection that a national health program might reduce future medical innovation. The most promising line of response is to argue that increased access in the present is morally preferable even if it carries a risk of reduced innovation in the future. Though I have not had the space to argue for such conclusions here, I suspect that many conservative objections to safety net programs fail because they require untenable weightings of the competing reasons. This is work that philosophers should begin to pursue. [[56]](#footnote-56)

Fifth, we have discovered that philosophers who want to rebut conservative objections will not be able to do so without at least some complex empirical information. In light of this, political philosophers must ask themselves whether they would prefer to seek out the complex factual information or, alternatively, eschew it and simply leave some actual political debates unaddressed, including important debates about the social safety net. My view is that this is a personal preference, and philosophers might opt for either course. One problem with writing about complex factual issues is that it is simply “unphilosophical” and far from the core definition of what philosophers do. Another problem is that when non-experts try to draw on complicated work from other disciplines, they often misunderstand the information. However, there are also important reasons for philosophers to make use of more complex empirical information and to attempt to integrate it into their philosophical writings. The most important is that, unless we do, we will not be able to fully engage in the sort of applied political philosophy that many of us already aspire to do. Progressive-minded political philosophers such as myself do not just aim to show that America should have a robust safety net *if* we can solve certain (as yet uninvestigated) non-ideal problems. Instead we aim to show that we should have a robust safety net *period*. This article has shown that unless we are willing to combine complex empirical research with our philosophical analysis, and unless we make a greater effort to address the conservative point of view more generally, then we have no hope of establishing that very important conclusion.

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1. There is reason to think that party activists hold more extreme views than average voters within their parties. See, e.g., Fiorina et al, *Culture War?*, 16ff. There is some evidence that party leaders may be even more extreme than their fellow party members—see, e.g., Grofman et al., “Congressional Leadership 1965-96: A new look at the extremism versus centrality debate.” This debate is complicated, though, and other evidence points in a contrary direction. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Useful theoretical works include: (1) Mead, *Beyond Entitlement* and *The New Politics of Poverty*, (2) Murray, *Losing Ground*, (3) Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty*, (4) Kekes, *A Case for Conservatism*. Useful historical works, particularly about the important of private virtue to conservative thought, are: Jones, *An End to Poverty?* (2) Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, (3) Allitt, *The Conservatives*, and (4) Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For critiques of some of these positions, see Young, “Mothers, Citizenship, and Independence: A Critique of Pure Family Values”; Kittay, “What (welfare) justice owes care”; and Anderson, “Welfare, Work Requirements, and Dependant-Care”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, e.g., Kittay, “What (welfare) justice owes care”; Smiley, “’Welfare Dependence’: The Power of a Concept”; Fraser and Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State”; Young, “Mothers, Citizenship, and Independence: A Critique of Pure Family Values”; and Anderson, “Welfare, Work Requirements, and Dependant-Care”. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Problems of abuse arise when individuals fail to comply with their duty to support social institutions, and the question of what to do in such situations falls into Rawls’s category of non-ideal theory. (Cf. Simmons, “Ideal and Nonideal Theory,” which is the best reconstruction of Rawls’s position.) As we’ll see later, the main fiscal objection to national health care is that politicians would irresponsibly charge its costs to the national debt. This too can be seen as an issue of non-compliance, since the problem only arises when legislators fail to fulfill their obligation to properly uphold just institutions. Another fiscal objection is that national health care is too expensive, and though the objection is entirely specious (since we could afford a national health system), the objection itself *contends* that society is simply too poor to establish a national health system, and Rawls categories problems like that as part of non-ideal theory. Finally, the principal objections from efficacy are that a national health system either would not be, or might not be, effective at improving achieving their goal or providing a decent minimum of health care to all citizens. Admittedly, it is a stretch to include such issues in Rawls’s conception of non-ideal theory. However, such problems are not totally divorced from cases where “social conditions do not allow the effective establishment of [the] rights” required by ideal theory. (Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed, 475.) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Naturally poll results vary over time, but I do not list any that are outside the normal trends or variations. For some surveys of changing opinions over time, see Shapiro, “From Depression to Depression? Seventy-five Years of Public Opinion Toward Welfare,” unpublished; and Panagopoulos and Shapiro, “Big Government and American Opinion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Opinion and the Media*, chapter 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In addition to the sources cited below, see Page and Shapiro, *The Rational Public*, chapter four. Howard, *The Welfare State Nobody Knows*, has evidence that when properly calculated, the American social safety net is actually quite large and does not lag as far behind other developed countries’ as some people say. This might be taken as some evidence that Americans agree that there should be a social safety net, even if its implementation is atypical for developed countries. See also chapter six of Howard for polling information on social safety net programs, as well as chapter 19 and following of Ladd’s *The American Polity.*

   The idea that Americans agree on certain principles of economic justice fits with the larger thesis that there is not an extensive “culture war” or cultural divide in America on most issues. On this, see *Culture War?* by Fiorina et al, Wolfe’s *One Nation, After All*, Page and Jacobs’s *Class War?*, and Hunter and Wolfe’s *Is There a Culture War?* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. With the following data and all similar data, one might worry that individuals endorse social safety net programs because of a desire to appear morally good. However, this does not appear to be a major factor. See Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*: *Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, 196ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Page and Jacobs*, Class War?*, 72 for some contrary data showing that Republicans are more supportive of Food Stamps than is indicated here. Rather than relying on that data, though, I have used the data which indicates a greater partisan divide, since this only helps my critics and makes my job harder. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See, e.g., data form the National Election Study in 2000, cited in Shaw, “Changes in Public Opinions and the American Welfare State”. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, e.g., Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare,* especially 38-39. Compare also Jacobs, Shapiro, Shulman, “Poll Trends: Medical Care in the United States—an Update,” 408. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Interestingly, many people seem to think that they only receive back from Social Security and Medicare what they paid in, or at least that they paid an actuarial fair value for these forms of social insurance, and so perhaps no redistributive principle is (in their minds) needed to justify their benefits from these programs. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See, e.g., Shaw, “Changes in Public Opinion and the American Welfare State.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It is almost impossible to find research that separates these issues. The best I know of is a 1972-1973 survey from the Research Institute in Social Welfare. (It is cited in Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*: *Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy,* 39.) Respondents were given a list of positions about welfare. One was that “Welfare, including aid to the aged, the blind, and the disabled, should be supported by voluntary private contributions, not by government funds or taxes,” while the other available responses all affirmed that “welfare should be a tax-supported relief program”, with respondents allowed to specify which people should receive benefits. Ninety-four percent said that welfare should be a tax-supported program, and only 5% said that welfare should be eliminated. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Cf. Shaw, “Changes in Public Opinion and the Welfare State”. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*: *Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, 62. Note that the phrasing of the response is taken from Gilens and not from the original poll. Cf. Page and Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*, 124ff., for further polls of this sort. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*: *Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, 56. See also *Los Angeles Times*, “Poverty Seen as Increasing, Poll Reports.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*: *Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Kaiser Family Foundation, “National Survey of Public Knowledge of Welfare Reform and the Federal Budget, Press Release”. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Compare Page and Jacobs, *Class War?: What Americans Really Think about Economic Inequality*, 70ff. In Gilens’s work, he identifies two beliefs that play a pivotal role in the welfare debate: the belief that welfare recipients don’t really need the benefits, and the belief that welfare recipients are primarily African-American and that African-Americans lack a good work ethic. He summarizes: “…both of these beliefs are strongly related to opposition to welfare: Americans who hold these popular views are strong opponents of welfare spending, while those who reject these beliefs think spending for welfare should be increased.” (*Why Americans Hate Welfare*: *Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, 60.) Gilens provides extensive, illuminating, and important research on the relationship between race and welfare, finding that attitudes toward African-Americans are one of the primary drivers of the welfare debate. Because race will not play an important role in the subsequent chapters on health care, I largely leave these results aside in the text. But Gilens’s important result should not be overlooked. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See, e.g., Jacobs and Shapiro*, Politicians Don’t Pander*, 229; Blendon *et al*, “What Happened to Americans’ Support for the Clinton Health Plan?”, 8-14; Best and Radcliff, *Polling America*, 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Newport, “Costs, Gov’t Involvement Top Healthcare Reform Concerns.” Cf. Blendon, “Public Opinion at the Time of the Vote on Health Care Reform,” e55(5). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. On this see: (1) Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*: *Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, 60; (2) Blendon *et al*, “What Happened to Americans’ Support for the Clinton Health Plan?”, 13; (3) Blendon et al, *American* *Public Opinion and Health Care*, 93; (4) Best and Radcliff, *Polling America*, 293; (5) Jacobs *et al*, “Poll Trends,” 423. See also Blumenthal and Morone, *The Heart of Power*, for information on how worries about efficacy and trust in government have shaped national health debates.

    On the idea that government safety net programs may be unnecessary or counter-productive, consider Jacobs *et al’s* result that that a substantial minority of Americans are always willing to say that “poor people are able to get needed medical care”, with numbers ranging from a high of 48% in 1982 to a low of 25% in 1991. In a poll on welfare rather than health, 56% of Americans, including 50% of Democrats and 72% of Republicans, said that welfare programs do more harm than good. (See Kaiser Family Foundation, “National Survey of Public Knowledge of Welfare Reform and the Federal Budget.”) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Lewis, *Constructing Public Opinion*, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Gallup Politics, “Americans: Uncle Sam Wastes 50 Cents on the Dollar.” Importantly, though, Americans may think that “wasteful” spending includes efficient but inappropriate spending. For instance, the American population is notably opposed to foreign aid, and the average American also believes the federal government spends a great deal on foreign aid, with the average answer often coming in around 20%. (See the Program on International Policy Attitudes, “Americans on Foreign Aid and World Hunger: A Study of U.S. Public Attitudes (Feb. 2nd, 2001),” 7.) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*: *Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*, 60-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Kaiser Family Foundation, “National Survey of Public Knowledge of Welfare Reform and the Federal Budget.” [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Blendon, Brodie, and Benson, “What Happened to Americans’ Support for the Clinton Health Plan?”, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Kaiser Health Tracking Poll, January 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See, e.g., Penn, Schoen, and Berland Associates, “Divided We Remain,” August 2009; also Kaiser Health Tracking Poll, January 2010. Though Americans report worries about costs, it’s less clear whether these are the sourceof opposition or just fuel for an existing fire. I know of very little data on this. One poll suggests that people’s worries about “costs” are actually worries about their personal costs rather than overall costs. (On this, see the Gallup 2009 polling results at Gallup Politics, “Costs, Gov’t Involvement Top Healthcare Reform Concerns.”) [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For instance, focusing on health programs and the ACA, people sometimes oppose health programs because they worry about increased taxes, losing their own health insurance, or being locked into a government program that offers fewer choices. (See, e.g., the Penn, Schoen, and Berland Associates poll from August 2009, “Divided We Remain: August 2009 Poll of American’s Attitudes Toward Health Care Reform.” See also Blendon *et al.*, *American Public Opinion and Health Care*, 101-102. ) Some worries about “fiscal responsibility” could really be coded talk for worries about personal sacrifice. (On this, see the Gallup 2009 polling results at Newport, “Costs, Gov’t Involvement Top Healthcare Reform Concerns.” For examples of polling about fiscal impacts, see, e.g., Blendon, Brodie, and Benson, “What Happened to Americans’ Support for the Clinton Health Plan?”, 11; and Kaiser Family Foundation, “Kaiser Health Tracking Poll.”) [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. E.g., see Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, chapter 3; and Kinder and Kam, *Us Against Them*, chapter 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this interesting possibility to my attention. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Although there is some evidence that some Americans fix the level of the safety net by asking whether the benefits to the recipients outweigh the costs to donors, when judged on a weighted scale that gives disproportionate weight to the latter. This may be why some people object to safety net programs on the ground that they require excessive tax payments. If these notions are part of the content of principle (1), then revising it might eliminate some objections to social safety net programs. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Some might object that polling data does not reveal *considered* judgments but rather snap judgments that, as polling itself shows, can change substantially based on the vagaries of political campaigns. There is clearly something right in this, but note that the variation tends to be not about the general principles of DMT but rather the question of whether and to what extent they are satisfied. For instance, an advertising campaign must turn people against a safety net program by convincing people (even wrongly) that it would be widely abused, but the core judgment that abuse is a moral concern seems stable over time in the polling. The same is true for the other core moral judgments that form DMT. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. White, *The Civic Minimum: On the Rights and Obligations of Economic Citizenship*, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. White, *The Civic Minimum: On the Rights and Obligations of Economic Citizenship*, 62, italics in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. The best discussion of this is again in White, from whom I borrow in the following text. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. On this, see Brennan and Hamlin, “Analytic Conservatism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. For defenses or explorations of this point of view, see, e.g., Mead, “The Logic of Workfare: The Underclass and Work Policy”; Mead, “Social programs and social obligations”; Mead, *Beyond Entitlement*; Mead, *The New Politics of Poverty*; Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty*; Murray, *Losing Ground*; Jones, *An End to Poverty?: A Historical Debate*; Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*; Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin*. For critiques of the ethical and factual issues in this debate, see Smiley, “’Welfare Dependence’: The Power of a Concept”; Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare,* especially chapter 3; Fraser and Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State”; Kittay, “What (welfare) justice owes care”; Young, “Mothers, Citizenship, and Independence: A Critique of Pure Family Values”; and Anderson, “Welfare, Work Requirements, and Dependant-Care”. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. This paragraph and the next are almost identical to remarks in my paper “Fiscal Objections to Expanded Health Coverage: A Case Study of the Affordable Care Act,” 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Bittle and Johnson, *Where Does the Money Go?: Your Guided Tour to the Federal Budget Crisis,* rev ed., 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. The previous sentences are paraphrased from Walker, *Comeback America: Turning the Country Around and Restoring Fiscal Responsibility*, 19-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. The previous sentences are paraphrased from Bittle and Johnson, *Where Does the Money Go?: Your Guided Tour to the Federal Budget Crisis,* rev. ed., 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, 179. Note as well that his discussion of a negative income tax in *A Theory of Justice* hints at awareness of this issue, since one of its merits is that it always provides incentives to work. Interestingly, in the continuation of this passage, Rawls provides one of his few discussions of non-ideal issues, indicating that the undeserving may be at least partly excluded from the benefits afforded by the difference principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Rawls’s remarks on non-theory, as defined by him, are opaque. The best reconstruction is Simmons, “Ideal and Nonideal Theory.” [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Freeman, *Rawls*, 229-230. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. De Francisco and Matlin, “Monitoring Financial Flows for Health Research 2006: The Changing Landscape of Health Research for Development.” See also Baker and Chatani, “Promoting Good Ideas on Drugs: Are Patents the Best Way?”, for interesting remarks on the possibility of replacing some private-sector research with publicly-funded research. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *Economic Report of the President, 2004*, 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. *Economic Report of the President, 2004*, 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Rasell, “An Equitable Way to Fund Universal Coverage”; Emanuel, *Healthcare, Guaranteed.* [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. One possible way forward is to demand better projects from the empirical scientists, a task that would have nothing to do with philosophers. But my assumption here is that the empirical scientists cannot at present resolve the uncertainty, even with additional work, and thus policy can only be set by reasoning about uncertain outcomes. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. At this point, someone might object that if we want to determine how to weigh competing pro tanto considerations, we must be led back to the kind of high-level theory that I said we should abandon. Here’s why. Suppose that DMT’s principles are regarded as intermediate-level principles which instantiate some foundational theoretical requirements that are more basic. If so, then it might seem that clarifying how to weigh the principles requires looking to the foundational theory. Moreover, I admitted earlier that DMT may be acceptable to many only because of an overlapping consensus: people agree on DMT, but on the basis of very different fundamental theories. If so, then we must determine which fundamental theory is correct before we can determine how to weigh the competing principles of DMT.

    I reject this recourse to theory because, for reasons given earlier, I think that almost all foundational theories do not incorporate non-ideal concerns at all, and thus appealing to them would not tell us how to balance ideal and non-ideal concerns. The exceptions may be utilitarian theories, which are usually intended to offer instruction in real-world situations that might involve non-ideal problems. Of course, I cannot exclude the possibility that further work into say, a Rawlsian framework would provide insight into the questions about weighing. Certainly that hasn’t been the focus of most prior philosophical enquiry, though, so it’s still true that there is unfinished work here to pursue. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)