REVIEW

PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PRESERVATION

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WHAT TO SAVE AND WHY: IDENTITY, AUTHENTICITY, AND THE ETHICS OF CONSERVATION

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Issues, benefits, challenges and practices of saving, conserving, restoring—or, if these are not possible, then slowly learning how to let things go—are central concerns today. In one way or another, we are all engaged with various aspects of these questions, both on a personal level and on a larger scale: things to be saved that matter to the society or country we live in—or, even more broadly, to humanity as a whole. Let's just look at a few illustrative examples. My parents have an old pendulum clock on their wall. Occasionally, it stops working, but since they really enjoy the traditional sound of its swinging weights, they always take it to the horologist—despite the inconvenience of removing and transporting the heavy timepiece. A few streets aways, in my own garden, another—and rather "biological"—clock was ticking: that of an old tree which, that despite our efforts and several rounds of consultations with various specialists, had to be cut down, as its weak, old and ill trunk posed a threat to our house and those of our neighbours. Since we were emotionally attached to the tree, we kept a few metres of it standing and converted it into a bird feeder—so that at least some part of it could stay with us.

In a completely other part of the world, on the Matsu Islands, old military tunnels were saved by assigning them a new–and more peaceful–function: they were converted into a distillery and depository of a local wine and spirits producer, owing to the tunnels' ideal microclimate. A fourth example–certainly less straightforward than the three above–was offered a few years ago at the Historical Museum in Oslo, where visitors encountered a thought-provoking case involving carved wooden masks of the Makonde people of East Africa. These objects, used as helmets in ceremonies, are traditionally supposed to be burned after the rituals to rid them of evil spirits. This procedure is, of course, not followed when such items are saved and presented in museums–raising a dilemma: should these masks be kept for educational purposes and museological purposes for future generations, or should the intentions of the original owners and creators be respected? These four, randomly chosen examples clearly demonstrate how far-reaching implications of preservation can be.

At the beginning of this review, I wrote that questions around conservation and preservation are central concerns "today." However, on further reflection, we must admit that this is not (only) a modern phenomenon. Evidence shows that every culture and civilisation has made efforts–often serious, complicated and costly–to save personal items, important objects, relics connected to religious practices, monuments and buildings that were essential to the cultural identity of the community, or, even at a larger physical scale, to save entire areas or regions, landscapes or natural phenomena, etc. Therefore, based on this, preservation can be understood as a more general instinct than a recently developed concern.

In his new book, *What to Save and Why*, Erich Hatala Matthes investigates the theoretical aspects of these questions by elevating the discussion to a higher level. He does so by generalising the inquiry, transforming it into a philosophical issue that concern not just experts in aesthetics, ethics, or conservation–but all of us. Hence, Matthes demonstrates that these questions matter even to those who do not explicitly reflect on them, yet still make decisions about what to save, what to let go, and why.

In the book, this demonstration of how and why things matter revolve around the concept of *meaning*. Although this may seem, at first, like a rather obvious or self-evident explanation for our urge to preserve, Matthes shows how it not only helps clarify the

significance of saving, but also opens the door to further considerations. In the second chapter, for instance, we are confronted with the question: "Are we ultimately interested in conserving an object's meaning (to us? to anyone?), and might that be a different goal from conserving the thing itself? (...) we need to think about what makes things have distinctive *meanings* for us" (18 and 21, italics in the original). This same starting point helps us understand the role meaning plays in dealing with the very change that saving seeks to manage:

> When we ask *from what* conservation should aim to save things, the answer is not a list of particular changes. Rather, it is from change on terms that would prevent us from exercising our agency in confronting that change, whatever it may be. In other words, it isn't necessarily change itself that conservation needs to manage, but the terms on which change is experienced (73, italics in the original).

The keyword here is *experience*: the way we encounter the modifications of an object, a building, a natural location, etc., that we aim to preserve. Our decisions about it—our ability to intervene or our incapacity to prevent undesired alterations—can again bring us closer to understand the meaning of the object for us, and the significance of our successful or failed agency. Therefore, although the inquiry starts with an object, it ultimately tells us more about ourselves.

This self-referentiality, i.e. to put the experiencing individual at the centre of the investigation, is thus one of the central theses of the book. The emphasis of this shift in focus is what makes the volume a compelling read. Unsurprisingly, we can already learn about this approach in a summarising statement in the Introduction of the book:

> The need for conservation is impelled by the threat of loss, and the desire to prevent change stems from the hope of preserving our sense of self. But what really matters is not repelling any alteration, but confronting change on terms that we can accept—terms that grant us a role in managing the forces of change instead of being dominated by them. It is through becoming part of the process of change that conservation empowers us to mold the future of things we care about, and in so doing, shape who we will be (15).

Matthes' ambition to approach the subject through an all-encompassing philosophical investigation is also manifested in the book's structure and chapter themes. He guides us through the problems and debates around preservation with the help of six questions that also appear in the sub-titles of the chapters: (1) what should we save, (2) why, (3) from what, (4) how, (5) by whom and (6) for whom? The book thus surveys not only the philosophical criteria of how to define (or limit) the circle of things to save, but also the motivations for doing so, the sources of threat, the modes of conservation, the relevant actors, and the (future) beneficiaries of such efforts.

On a more meta-level, Matthes' comprehensive ambition influences the book's tone and style. It is both engaging and accessible—not only for readers unfamiliar with the issues and current debates on saving and conservation but also for those unaccustomed to philosophical texts in general. Of course, quotations and references are neatly indicated in the endnotes for those who wish to explore further, but the main text remains accessible even for non-specialists. This inclusivity is further strengthened by Matthes' global range of examples. He is right in highlighting that issues of saving and conservation intersect with many other areas and disciplines—including politics, sociology, education, personal and cultural identity and especially ethics. Consequently, the discussions should take into consideration the factors and details coming from these fields too. This also explains why he refers to phenomena beyond the Western tradition, and he also does not shy away from particularly complicated debates, including issues around confederate monuments and the contested past. Besides these, Matthes includes references to well-known philosophers and lesser-known Indigenous practices, world-famous archaeological sites and classical authors, popular culture and gastronomical traditions. There is, quite literally, something for everyone—which makes sense, since we all have something we care about and want to save. Matthes successfully achieves to make us reflect on why we have this drive, and how the experience of saving—successful or not—can enrich us through a deeper understanding of the meaning of the saved object and the new significance it may acquire.

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