It has been suggested that the stability of one’s belief system is a cognitive virtue, an end toward which cognitive agents should strive. While sticking dogmatically to one’s beliefs is epistemically preposterous, it would be equally unreasonable, it is said, to change them in the absence of any good reasons. This position known as epistemic conservatism seems to have had a distinguished line of advocates among the likes of Quine and Chisholm. Although, it has been claimed that epistemic conservatism has informed and resolved various positions and problems in epistemology from foundationalist theories of justification to problems such as the underdetermination of theories by data, one can primarily regard it as an anti-skeptical strategy whose most widely held form upholds that the mere holding of a belief confers justification on that belief.

The argument from epistemic conservatism, thus, has only modest aims. It does not seek to establish that our commonsense beliefs are true. It is only intended to show that some of our beliefs are justified. Our goal in this chapter is to see whether this minimalist strategy is successful. Looking at the literature on this topic though, it is difficult to single out an account as definitely representing the thesis of epistemic conservatism. Sometimes the thesis is formulated in terms of the requirement that one be justified in holding on to a theory even when faced with competing but evidentially equivalent hypotheses. And sometimes, as just noted, it is claimed that mere belief in a proposition is sufficient for its justification, and so on. In general, what one finds is that various principles are being employed under the rubric of conservatism often without sufficient attempt being made to establish their credibility beyond mentioning certain pragmatic considerations.

In this chapter, I begin by expounding the thesis of epistemic conservatism and its alleged applications. Having shown that the
applications in question are far from being genuine, I highlight the disparate and largely unconnected attempts that have been made to establish conservatism. The diversity, I shall argue, is mainly due to the fact that the theorists are actually concerned with different and non-equivalent versions of epistemic conservatism. Having distinguished between different varieties of conservatism, I set out to determine their credibility and anti-skeptical potentials by evaluating various arguments that have been offered or may be considered in their defense. While finding the arguments generally wanting, it is important, I believe, not to opt for a wholesale rejection of the conservative theses as the arguments offered in their defense vary in their structure. The burden of this paper is, therefore, to assess the merit of each argument on its own as it is geared toward establishing a distinct thesis. I close, however, by arguing that those versions of the thesis of epistemic conservatism that survive critical scrutiny fail to live up to the aspirations of the thesis as a substantive anti-skeptical canon of rationality.

8.1 Varieties of epistemic conservatism

According to the thesis of epistemic conservatism, it is unreasonable to subject our belief system to revision or change without any good reasons. Not only would this incur an unnecessary utilization of resources and energy on the part of the cognizer, it would also fail to bequeath the agent's cognitive system any epistemic benefit. Thus, epistemic conservatism views the stability of one's belief system as an epistemic virtue, something that, on certain accounts of the thesis, has survival value and is the product of the optimific process of natural selection. Epistemic conservatism comes in many forms, the most basic of which asserts that the mere possession of a belief confers justification on that belief. So an agent is justified in holding a belief simply in virtue of the fact of holding it.

Although the proponents of conservatism are quick to point out that the epistemic credibility that it bestows on a belief is only prima facie and minimal, one cannot help feeling that there must be something unsatisfactory about a thesis that takes the mere holding of a belief to endow it with epistemic worth. And, in general, would not the conservative policy of encouraging stability and retaining the status quo in one’s belief repertoire hinder the course of inquiry by undermining our motivation to break new grounds? The advocates of conservatism, however, reject these charges as being superficial. In turn, they highlight the cases where conservatism has supposedly informed and shaped a