

A couple of weeks ago, George Will told the [Fox News](#) audience that humans have nothing to do with climate change — it's just natural fluctuations. Will himself has changed his brand of conservatism in the past few years, as the [New Republic](#) has noted. At this point, he has sampled two of the three varieties of conservatism. True believers of all three varieties find climate denial congenial, but for somewhat different reasons. They also tend to differ in their general attitudes toward science.

During much of his earlier career, Will showed a bent toward a form of Establishment Conservatism harkening back to the 18th Century figure of Edmund Burke. Like Burke, who was repelled by the upheaval of the French Revolution, these Establishment conservatives reject liberal egalitarianism along with the liberal penchant for social experimentation. Burkeans tend to favor existing hierarchies and to resist large-scale policy changes. They have a strong presumption in favor of the status quo. Obviously, this doesn't necessarily imply ignoring scientific facts. But climate change itself is highly disruptive and calls for urgent societal responses. If you're suspicious of change in general, it's convenient to be able to ignore the prospect of climate change.

Will has now moved much closer to another form of conservatism, with strong affinities to the Tea Party. Since Obama's election, he seems to have found libertarianism increasingly appealing. Libertarians are skeptical of government, and climate change seems to call for major government action. And in addition, libertarians are deeply attached to a vision of the autonomous individual. In contrast to John Donne, for a libertarian each man actually *is* "an island unto himself." But climate science shows dramatically how small actions by individuals can seriously impact other individuals. Again, this evidence of deep human interdependence does not sit comfortably with the libertarian celebration of the lone autonomous individual.

Thus, the first two forms of conservatism share a disinclination to accept climate science. Note, however, that Burkeans and libertarians really have very little in common with each other, except that for different reasons they both are opposed to liberalism. Neither of them has much in common with the third form of conservatism either.

It seems unlikely that Will, who describes himself as an "amiable, low-voltage atheist," will embrace the third major form of conservatism. (Still, stranger things have happened.)

Evangelical conservatism has provided much of the popular base for conservative politicians. There seems to be nothing in the Bible that bears on climate change. But evangelicals are deeply suspicious of science in general. Obviously, if you want to take the position that humans and dinosaurs roamed the earth together, you're going to have to reject huge portions of the sciences of geology and biology. But even more fundamentally,

science is based on a willingness to question authority received wisdom, which sits uncomfortably with a religious stance based on unquestioned faith in the unerring truth of a sacred text.

There are important differences between how these approaches view science. For Burkeans, science is both part of the established order and a disruptive threat to current understandings, leaving them ambivalent about science as an enterprise. Libertarians have nothing against science in general, but climate science cuts against the grain of their conceptual framework. Evangelicals are the most likely to be at odds with the basically secular enterprise of understanding the world in scientific terms.

Despite their differences, all three converge in finding modern climate science unpalatable medicine. Some brave souls in each group may be willing to swallow the medicine and face the scientific facts, but the easier course is to look the other way.