

# Liberalism

There are three philosophical roots for liberalism. The first is John Locke, the second is Adam Smith and the third is John Mill. Historically, and arising from the above philosophical roots classical liberalism can be defined as a political philosophy that believes government exists to safeguard citizens' rights. Some draw on Locke for a definition of rights where rights have a religious basis. Simply put, if one is to serve God and be responsible to God for one's actions, then one must be free to make choices. Thus, Locke considers individual rights inherent in the creation of man by God. Others draw on Mill for a definition of rights where rights have a secular basis. Mill argues that each member of society by pursuing his or her interests promotes the interests of society. Thus, society has an obligation to guarantee and protect the rights of individuals to pursue their interests.

Classical liberals believe that government should be limited in scope and function by what the governed will consent to within the restraints imposed by the preservation of individual rights. Government is, however, viewed as having a role in the production of "public goods" such as defense and education. Drawing on Smith, classical liberals further believe that voluntary market transactions are an essential aspect of economic life and should be protected. Classical liberals believe that an environment that protects individual rights and free market transactions will lead to personal well being. Personal well being in the majority of the population will promote aid and charity for those in difficulty.

Both Locke and Mill's philosophy of individual rights contained a seed that has been seized upon and nurtured into what is today probably best characterized as neo-liberalism or welfare liberalism. Locke spoke of a right to subsistence and Mill of a right of self-development. It is easy to see how "welfare" is constructed on Locke. His "right to subsistence" leads to a rationale for government programs to ensure that all citizens are provided the necessities, e.g., food, shelter, clothing and medical care. In the case of Mill, the argument is that the "right of self-development" requires resources, which should be guaranteed as part of government's protection of individual rights. One cannot exercise the right to self-development unless adequate resources are available. A contemporary philosopher who continues to develop the philosophical rationale for welfare liberalism is John Rawls.

Protection of a subsistence or self-development right leads to a paternalistic view of government that seeks to help individuals provide for and develop themselves. One

outcome is redistribution programs that attempt to smooth out the dispersion of resources across members of society. Obviously, welfare liberalism leads to a much broader conception of the role of government in the lives of citizens than classical liberalism.

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