

What Is Conservatism, Liberalism, and Pragmatism?

In my opinion, there are three philosophies of government: *conservatism*, *liberalism*, and *pragmatism*. Conservatism was the operating philosophy until the Enlightenment when many people stopped believing in God. Then came classical liberalism, which gave the West laissez-faire capitalism and high living standards for everyone. Then came pragmatism, which gave all of mankind nationalism, imperialism, progressivism, socialism, communism, fascism, Nazism, and modern day liberalism.

The first liberal was Niccolò Machiavelli (1469 to 1527), who said it was okay to kill human beings for reasons of state. According to conservatism, you can only kill human beings for the sake of justice. Conservatives believe that morality should guide family life and justice should guide governments. Forgetting about the man who gave the devil his nickname (“Old Nick”), the philosophy of classical liberalism is that it is wrong to kill people for reasons of state because human beings have rights.

The idea that human beings have rights was introduced by the Catholic Church in response to the mistreatment of the South American natives by Spaniards. The reasoning is that God created only one kind of human being, so it is just as wrong to enslave an aboriginal as an educated Christian.

According to classical liberalism, taxing one rich person to prevent ten poor people from starving violates the property rights of the rich person. Utility theory provides another way to justify not taxing the rich person. The utility of a good is how much benefit the consumer of the good can obtain. With no tax, eleven people use the means and goods available to them to maximize their happiness. But, only ten people benefit when there is a tax. It might be objected that the utility of the means available to the ten persons increases a lot and outweighs the decrease in the utility of the means available to the rich person. This objection is questionable, however, because utility is measured on an ordinal scale, not a cardinal scale. What is relevant, in other words, is the number of people who benefit, not how much they benefit. According to pragmatism, utility theory and property rights are unimportant abstractions, so it is okay to tax on one rich person a little to help 10 poor people a lot.

One famous classical liberal was Herbert Spencer, who said that one of the benefits of laissez-faire capitalism is “survival of the fittest.” The idea is that the superior human beings can afford better health care and have more children than inferior human beings, therefore bringing about an improvement of the human race.

To understand the rise of pragmatism from conservatism and classical liberalism, this quotation attributed to G.K. Chesterton is helpful: “People who don’t believe in

God don't believe in nothing. They believe in anything." The first pragmatists were called progressives. Progressives took Spencer's ideas about improving the human race one step further by advocating and promoting the compulsory sterilization of people deemed to be undesirable. This is called eugenics. Progressives also advocated minimum wage laws. While modern day liberals are for minimum wage laws to help poor people, the laws were originally enacted to protect white workers from unfair competition from people who can live on less money. This is called racism. Nazism gave eugenics and racism a bad name, so progressives cleaned up their act and started calling themselves liberals.