

Chapter 9

Kant's Legacy

There's a story in academic circles that serious philosophical work in the liberal political tradition coming out of Enlightenment thinkers died after Kant, only to be resurrected by Harvard University philosopher John Rawls in the 1970s. While this story contains a bit of hyperbole, there's little doubt that, after Kant, no writing before 1971 had the impact of Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls's project was to take the principles that he identified as central to Kant's moral philosophy—principles like the obligation not to treat another moral being merely as a means to accomplishing some end—and apply those principles to the political question of what justice entails and how best to bring it about.

For Rawls, addressing inequality is the most significant issue to resolve when it comes to achieving a condition of justice. Here, he doesn't just mean inequality in terms of wealth, but also inequality in terms of voice in the decision-making process of the state and in the ability to maximize one's individual freedom. Rawls identifies two principles of justice that must be met in order to address these concerns: (1) everyone is entitled to a fully adequate scheme of the same basic liberties, and (2) any social or economic inequalities that exist are justified only if (a) they are attached to positions that are open to everyone and (b) these inequalities benefit the people who are least well-off. The consequence, Rawls argues, is that justice requires, among other things, a large redistribution of resources from the rich to the poor, and a central government that is strong and competent enough to make that happen.

But philosopher Robert Nozick, Rawls' colleague at Harvard, saw the practical implications of Kant's moral theory in a fundamentally different way. For Nozick, Kant's moral philosophy—and the philosophical thinking coming out of the Enlightenment generally—focused on individual freedom. The primary aim of civil society, and, by implication, the state institutions that

help to maintain it, is to maximize freedom of all individuals to the extent that it doesn't infringe on the freedom of any other individuals. Inequalities, where they result, are the natural consequence of people using their freedom to make choices about what they value and how they want to live their lives. As a result, it's not the appropriate role of the state to redistribute resources or anything else along those lines. Instead, the state should function similar to a "night watchman," possessing limited powers to protect the freedom of individuals.

Nozick's discussion in his 1974 book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* help shape contemporary discussion of the principles central to what we now recognize as the classical liberal tradition. These principles include the importance of, and limits to, individual freedom; the appropriate role of the government in helping individuals live flourishing lives; and whether or not the government should intervene in financial markets, and, if so, to what extent and to promote which goals. While not all classical liberals share Nozick's position, this book provided the first substantive, contemporary defense of classical liberal principles rooted in a widely-recognized Enlightenment moral philosophy, demonstrating how the thoughts of Spinoza, Montesquieu, and Kant are still very relevant today.