liberalism’s concern with freedom of conscience and personal choice (negative liberty) in many areas, the Democratic Party expresses modern liberalism’s argument that people are not fully free unless positive liberty exists. Thus, one sees the influence of thinkers such as Green and Addams in the Democratic Party’s positions.  

Summing up liberalism, we can see how the two forms of liberalism diverge in applying the lessons of political theory to the present. In terms of the debates over the ethical foundations of politics discussed in Chapter 4, classical liberals and modern liberals have very different views on how to leave the cave and achieve enlightenment. Although neither embraces Hobbes’s call for authoritarianism, neither accepts Plato’s concept of justice either. Classical liberals find justice and fairness in limited states, whereas modern liberals find them in interventionist states. Classical liberalism upholds natural equality but not economic equality, whereas modern liberalism advocates both kinds of equality. Neither form of liberalism is Machiavellian; however, clearly, on questions of state mobilization of power, modern liberals are more supportive of expanding state power than are classical liberals. Both classical and modern liberals advocate individual liberty, and as a result both tend to claim John Stuart Mill as an ally. Thus, we see, both types of liberalism draw on the history of political theory, but they disagree radically in terms of using that history to come up with pragmatic solutions for contemporary problems.

**Conservatism**

Conservatism is an ideology that is generally thought of as seeking to conserve or preserve some reality. Like liberalism, however, conservative ideology is complex and multidimensional. There is no single form of conservatism. Indeed, we have already discussed one type of conservatism—classical liberal conservatism. Classical liberal conservatives argue for small government and thriving capitalism. However, a second group of conservatives draw their ideas from the eighteenth-century teachings of Edmund Burke. These Burkean conservatives are called traditional conservatives, and their ideology differs dramatically from that of the classical liberal conservatives.

**Traditional Conservatism**

British philosopher Edmund Burke (1729–1797) was both a scholar and a member of the British parliament. In both capacities, he opposed what he saw as the errors of liberalism. His most famous work is *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), in which he uses the occasion of the French Revolution to comment on the importance of conserving tradition, authority, and moral values. Upholding traditional values is very important to Burkean conservatives. Indeed, as we will see, it is the driving force of their conservatism. Burke begins his discussion of political ideology with a critical analysis of human nature. He emphasizes two points. First, Burke argues that human nature is not characterized by rational supremacy. Although individuals have the ability to reason, according to Burke, the ability is severely limited. Most people do not reason clearly. On observing history, Burke believes, one sees that people are often irrational, emotional, and unpredictable. Individuals most certainly do not possess the kind of reasoning
capacity accorded to them by Locke and the classical liberals. In short, Burke explains, individuals are incapable of using their reason to run their own lives smoothly.²⁸

Second, not only are people less rational than liberals believe them to be, but they are also naturally unequal, according to Burke. Burke asserts that differences in natural talents divide people into different levels of abilities. Recall that classical liberals, although never stating that people are equal in terms of all their abilities, argued in favor of the notion that people are naturally equal in terms of possessing natural rights to life, liberty, and property. Traditional conservatives such as Burke seek to emphasize a different point, namely that people naturally differ in political capacity. Some individuals are more capable of ruling than others; some individuals are better suited for political decision making than are others. Thus, society is best arranged when individuals who are natural rulers do the ruling. To call for equality in the laws and to demand that all people be placed on the same (equal) level of decision making would be erroneous, according to Burke.²⁹

Moreover, Burke rejects classical liberalism’s emphasis on natural rights. Classical liberals are wrong when they contend that the purpose of government is the protection of natural rights. This emphasis on rights confuses citizens, Burke asserts. People hear about having natural rights, and they begin to mistake rights for promises of power. As Burke explains it, if someone is told he or she has a right to something, he or she begins to expect it, and begins to demand it. These demands place undue pressures on society, as people clamor for the power to enjoy all that they are told they have a natural right to possess. Thus, Burke concludes, although natural rights technically exist in an abstract, analytical sense, they should not be the basis of government decision making, nor should they be stressed in political speeches and platforms. If governments stress rights, they engender grandiose expectations among the populace.³⁰
Government should take care of human needs rather than protect natural rights, according to Burke. Burke believes that humans have a fundamental need for order and control. Given the less than fully rational impulses of human nature, Burke writes, people have a fundamental need for stability, for a guiding direction in their lives to render social existence meaningful and harmonious.31

Burke gives long consideration to the implications of these insights. For example, he instructs his readers to ponder the ramifications of limits of reason. If reason is fragile, it is unreliable. Therefore, he concludes, classical liberalism must be wrong on two additional points. First, because reason is weak, it is impossible to deduce ethics (laws of nature) from reason. We need something other than reason to show us right from wrong. In looking to our reason to decide what to believe on euthanasia, for example, we can probably think of rational arguments in its favor. However, we can also probably imagine rational arguments against it. Yet if reason can justify either position, what good is it for deciding moral questions? This is Burke’s point. Reason cannot be considered a trustworthy guide to ethical decision making because reason alone is insufficient to generate ethical clarity. Second, if reason is so very weak, reason is inadequate as the primary or only basis for individual decision making and self-guidance. If an individual cannot depend on reason to deduce any laws of nature, to figure out the consequences of any potential decisions, or to logically select between any possible alternatives, then this individual’s reason has left him or her completely helpless.

Something beyond reason is needed. Something solid and trustworthy is needed. Traditional values are needed. Instead of looking to reason for answers, look to the moral guidelines passed down by generations of women and men. These guidelines have comforted humanity, provided solace during periods of crisis, represented moral clarity during times of uncertainty, and offered encouragement and strength during times of ethical confusion. Which sounds more reliable, traditional conservatives ask, trying to rationally deduce your life from scratch as you go along or learning how to live well by following the ethical rules that have served humanity across the ages?

From the standpoint of political ideology, Burke has told us something very important. Traditional conservatives do not glorify traditional values just to be “old fashioned.” They challenge us to conserve traditional morality because without traditional morality, we lose our connection with ethical certainty. Traditional values teach us right from wrong in a way that reason, as we saw earlier, cannot. Reason can only confuse us by suggesting that there are no moral absolutes (because any side of any ethical dilemma can be made to look rational).

We are wise, Burkeans believe, if we come to know the difference between trends and traditional moral values. A trend is something new and different, such as a fashion or a fad. Traditional moral values, by contrast, are based on what endures after fads are long forgotten. Morality should not be like fashion. It should not go out of style just because it is old. Indeed, the older the moral teachings, Burke argues, the more trustworthy those teachings tend to be. Hence, Burkeans are conservatives in a very literal sense, seeking to preserve older, tradition-oriented moralities, not replace them with something new in the name of progress.32

Civil institutions should teach traditional morality, according to Burke. Civil institutions are nongovernment organizations within society. Examples include families and religious institutions. By passing along long-standing moral values from
one generation to the next, civil institutions prepare individuals to live peacefully and orderly. When civil institutions are operating in this manner, society functions smoothly, without the violence and disruption caused by upheavals such as the French Revolution. Governments are to support civil institutions by providing a secure setting in which they can operate. In protecting and nourishing these institutions, governments become part of a larger mission, participating in the grand process whereby each generation connects itself to those who came before, as the teachings of the past are conserved.33

Each of these points leads Burke to another conclusion. Morality is more important than unencumbered individual freedom. Individual freedom must be compromised so that individuals conform to the teachings of traditional values. Freedom should not include the freedom to act in an immoral manner. People should not insist on the freedom to act out any impulse or desire. Thus, traditional conservatives believe in freedom, but freedom with boundaries.34 It is not to someone's benefit, for example, to go out and do whatever is pleasing but destructive. It is not your true need to indulge your irrational and impulsive self. That would be comparable to living so boundlessly that you destroy yourself.

In the nineteenth century, English Cardinal John Henry Newman expressed this idea by contrasting good uses of liberty with bad ones. With regard to freedom of opinion, for example, Cardinal Newman explained that proper uses of liberty upheld morality, whereas improper exercises of liberty violated moral traditions.35 Bad or improper liberty recognized no rules. For example, contemporary traditional conservatives might argue that pornography is a form of such liberty. Someone who publishes pornography and claims that doing so is a part of freedom of the press is taking freedom too far; he or she is exercising liberty of choice when he or she should be acknowledging traditional moral proscriptions against such behavior.

Thus, traditional conservatives favor freedom limited by an acknowledgment of the duty to live in compliance with goodness. Burke describes the society he favors in a revealing passage from *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In the good society, we live according to the laws of God, as passed from one generation to the next by traditional authorities.36

### TRADITIONAL CONSERVATISM TODAY

Contemporary traditional conservatives share Burke's goal of elevating the moral lives of their societies. For example, one can look to the Conservative Party of Norway and find Burkean concerns expressed throughout the party's program. In 1992, the Conservative Party program expressed support for Christian values and committed itself to the preservation of the moral values of the country. Like Burke, the party proclaimed that individuals require the guidance provided by the teachings of traditional institutions. Very significantly, the party rejected the classical liberal conservative call for limited government. The state's role should not be minimal, because the state's purpose is to support strong civil institutions that can provide the moral certainties needed by Norway's citizens.37

In contemporary U.S. politics, traditional conservative ideology has many proponents. Burkean ideology is reflected in conservative writer William Bennett's concern over the weakening of civil institutions, because such institutions are vital, Bennett believes, to the moral well-being of any society.38 Burkean ideals are also articulated in many antiabortion arguments made in recent years by Republicans such as Robert K. Dornan of California.39