



Walter Williams: Black Libertarian

Walter Williams is associated with that paradoxical phenomenon typically known as “black conservatism.” However, while Williams is a fierce opponent of the leftist political ideology that has overcome the majority of his fellow black Americans — he is a rightist — it is not altogether technically accurate to describe him as a conservative.

Unlike such black thinkers as [George Schuyler](#) and [Thomas Sowell](#), as far as his ethical and political philosophical principles are concerned, the most appropriate label to ascribe to Williams is that of [libertarian](#). What this means is that he is a liberal in the *classical* sense of that term.



The concept of “tradition” or “habit” or “custom” has historically figured prominently, even centrally, in conservative thought. With respect to libertarianism or classical liberalism, in contrast, matters are otherwise. There need not be an adversarial relationship between libertarianism and tradition, it is true, but it is abstract *principles*, principles whose jurisdiction encompasses *all* human beings, irrespective of their culture or time, for which the libertarian tends to reserve a place of preeminence.

If Edmund Burke can be said to be “the patron saint” of conservatism, [John Locke](#) can claim this distinction vis-à-vis libertarianism. In [Do the Right Thing](#), a collection of his essays, Williams dispels any confusion as to which of these two philosophers has won over his sympathies. It is worth quoting him here at length.

At the root of my values system is the principle of natural law as expounded by philosophers like John Locke and William Blackstone and adopted by early American notables such as [Thomas Jefferson](#), [James Madison](#), [George Mason](#), [Patrick Henry](#), and [Thomas Paine](#), among others, and captured simply, elegantly, and compellingly in our [Declaration of Independence](#) in the phrase ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

As Williams correctly observes, Locke’s vision exerted no small measure of influence over many of America’s founders, and the Declaration of Independence specifically. Yet “the right” to “the Pursuit of Happiness” was a modification of Locke’s “right to property” — a fact of which Williams is well aware and which he enthusiastically embraces.

Speaking as a true Lockean, he writes: “The first principle of natural law holds that each person owns himself.” It is from this “first principle” that the individual right to property flows. Recalling Locke, Williams refers to “[the state of nature](#),” a pre-political situation that functioned as a sort of theoretical first step in the deliberations of many a thinker in the 17th and 18th centuries. In “the state of nature,” he says, “all people are free and equal,” yes, but they are “*insecure*” [Emphasis added]. They are insecure because they know “that other people may not respect” their “self-ownership rights and,



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through intimidation, threats, and coercion, wrongly confiscate” their “property and violate” their “persons.” In order to abate this precarious condition, the inhabitants of the state of nature agree to “form governments” to which they will grant “certain limited powers.”

The principle of self-ownership is the principle that *all* people own themselves. This in turn implies that “we all have the right to protect ourselves, family, and property from encroachment by others.” To the governments that we create “we grant these rights...in exchange for the guarantee that the state will perform these security functions.”

However, it is *only* these rights that we grant. “We give up only the rights necessary for government to perform its only function — protecting our security.” Most Americans, black, white, and other, have forgotten this. Williams puts the matter even more bluntly, blasting Americans with having jettisoned “those basic ideals and principles on which our prosperous nation was built” for the sake of “other ideals, such as equality of income, sex and race balance, orderly markets, consumer protection, energy conservation, and environmentalism, just to name a few [.]” The problem is that in order to realize these goals, our government that is supposed to be grounded in the consent of agents who own themselves necessarily transforms itself into something vastly more ambitious in scope, a tyrannical leviathan that has no option but to “confiscate...through intimidation, threats, and coercion” the legitimately acquired resources of its citizens.

Williams reasons that if redistributive measures of the sort that most Americans have come to expect from their government are morally impermissible when employed by individual agents, they cannot be made right just because they have been enacted into law. “Americans must ask whether an act clearly immoral and criminal when done privately becomes moral when done collectively and given legal sanction.” The answer to this question, Williams asserts, is a no-brainer. “The unambiguous answer will be that legality is a poor guide to morality.” History supplies no small number of examples to illustrate this contention. “After all, slavery and apartheid were legal, as were the Nazi persecution of Jews and the Stalinist and Maoist purges.” Still, “the fact of being legal did not make them moral acts.”

Williams echoes the sentiments of [St. Augustine](#), [St. Thomas Aquinas](#), and many other Christian thinkers who declared that an unjust law was no law at all. “Immoral laws,” he states, “aren’t worthy of obedience.”

If anything discloses the libertarian character of Williams’ thought it is his position on the criminalization of “vices.” “For the government to declare a vice a crime is to violate those natural law guarantees of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, which are enunciated in our Declaration of Independence.” Williams’ argument here is straightforward: Since no individual has the right to punish others for their vices, and since the only rights that government possesses are those that it derives from its citizens, government doesn’t have the right to punish individuals for their vices. Thus, prostitution, drug usage, and discrimination in the private sector are among those activities that the U.S. government illegitimately proscribes.

Walter Williams is to be commended for the courage that he has exhibited in his lifelong campaign to combat the leftist illusions that have seized the minds of millions of his fellow Americans, white and black. But it is important to recognize that while *the substance* of his positions on social issues is virtually identical to that of, say, Thomas Sowell, Williams arrives at many of his conclusions by means of premises reflective of his allegiance to, not conservatism, but libertarianism or classical liberalism.



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