

A CONFLICT OF VISIONS

*Ideological Origins of
Political Struggles*

Thomas Sowell

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Political Struggles*

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Table of Contents

RELATED BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Title Page

Dedication

Praise

Preface to the 2006 Edition

Preface to the 1987 Edition

PART I: - PATTERNS

Chapter 1 - The Role of Visions

Chapter 2 - Constrained and Unconstrained Visions

THE NATURE OF MAN

TRADE-OFFS VERSUS SOLUTIONS

SOCIAL MORALITY AND SOCIAL CAUSATION

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Chapter 3 - Visions of Knowledge and Reason

THE MOBILIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

ARTICULATED VERSUS SYSTEMIC RATIONALITY

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Chapter 4 - Visions of Social Processes

ORDER AND DESIGN

PROCESS COSTS

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Chapter 5 - Varieties and Dynamics of Visions

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

HYBRID VISIONS

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

PART II: - APPLICATIONS

Chapter 6 - Visions of Equality

CAUSATION

KINDS OF EQUALITIES AND INEQUALITIES

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Chapter 7 - Visions of Power

FORCE AND VIOLENCE

THE LOCUS OF DISCRETION

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Chapter 8 - Visions of Justice

LEGAL JUSTICE

INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS

SOCIAL JUSTICE

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Chapter 9 - Visions, Values, and Paradigms

PARADIGMS AND EVIDENCE

VISIONS AND VALUES

VISIONS AND INTERESTS

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

NOTES

INDEX

Copyright Page

RELATED BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Vision of the Anointed

The Quest for Cosmic Justice

Knowledge and Decisions

On Classical Economics

A CONFLICT OF VISIONS

*Ideological Origins of
Political Struggles*

Thomas Sowell

To my wife Mary, with love

Every man, wherever he goes, is encompassed by a cloud of comforting convictions, which move with him like flies on a summer day.

Bertrand Russell

Preface to the 2006 Edition

This is a revised edition of my own favorite among the books I have written—mainly because it addresses a fundamental question that seldom gets the attention it deserves: What are the underlying assumptions behind the very different ideological visions of the world being contested in modern times? The purpose here will not be to determine which of these visions is more valid but rather to reveal the inherent logic behind each of these sets of views and the ramifications of their assumptions which lead not only to different conclusions on particular issues but also to wholly different meanings to such fundamental words as “justice,” “equality,” and “power.” Although this is in one sense a book about the history of ideas, it is also very much about our own times, for this conflict of visions is as sharply contested today as it has been over the past two centuries.

Two other books of mine do seek to examine the validity of different visions—*The Vision of the Anointed* and *The Quest for Cosmic Justice*—but that is not the task in *A Conflict of Visions*. Together these three books might be considered an informal trilogy, though each was written to stand alone. However, I cannot claim to have stood alone when preparing this revised edition, for my two assistants Na Liu and Elizabeth Costa have made major contributions in ferreting out errors and inconsistencies and in preparing the computerized work for publication.

Thomas Sowell
The Hoover Institution
Stanford University

Preface to the 1987 Edition

A conflict of visions differs from a conflict between contending interests. When interests are at stake, the parties directly affected usually understand clearly what the issue is and what they individually stand to gain or lose. The general public may not understand—and indeed may be confused precisely because of the propaganda of the contending parties. But such public confusion is the direct consequence of the clarity of the interested parties themselves. However, when there is a conflict of visions, those most powerfully affected by a particular vision may be the least aware of its underlying assumptions—or the least interested in stopping to examine such theoretical questions when there are urgent “practical” issues to be confronted, crusades to be launched, or values to be defended at all costs.

Yet visions are not mere emotional drives. On the contrary, they have a remarkable logical consistency, even if those devoted to these visions have seldom investigated that logic. Nor are visions confined to zealots and ideologues. We all have visions. They are the silent shapers of our thoughts.

Visions may be moral, political, economic, religious, or social. In these or other realms, we sacrifice for our visions and sometimes, if need be, face ruin rather than betray them. Where visions conflict irreconcilably, whole societies may be torn apart. Conflicts of interests dominate the short run, but conflicts of visions dominate history.

We will do almost anything for our visions, except think about them. The purpose of this book is to think about them.

Thomas Sowell
The Hoover Institution
Stanford University

PART I:

PATTERNS

Chapter 1

The Role of Visions

One of the curious things about political opinions is how often the same people line up on opposite sides of different issues. The issues themselves may have no intrinsic connection with each other. They may range from military spending to drug laws to monetary policy to education. Yet the same familiar faces can be found glaring at each other from opposite sides of the political fence, again and again. It happens too often to be coincidence and it is too uncontrolled to be a plot. A closer look at the arguments on both sides often shows that they are reasoning from fundamentally different premises. These different premises—often implicit—are what provide the consistency behind the repeated opposition of individuals and groups on numerous, unrelated issues. They have different visions of how the world works.

It would be good to be able to say that we should dispense with visions entirely, and deal only with reality. But that may be the most utopian vision of all. Reality is far too complex to be comprehended by any given mind. Visions are like maps that guide us through a tangle of bewildering complexities. Like maps, visions have to leave out many concrete features in order to enable us to focus on a few key paths to our goals. Visions are indispensable—but dangerous, precisely to the extent that we confuse them with reality itself. What has been deliberately neglected may not in fact turn out to be negligible in its effect on the results. That has to be tested against evidence.

A vision has been described as a “pre-analytic cognitive act.”¹ It is what we sense or feel *before* we have constructed any systematic reasoning that could be called a theory, much less deduced any specific consequences as hypotheses to be tested against evidence. A vision is our sense of how the world works. For example, primitive man’s sense of why leaves move may have been that some spirit moves them, and his sense of why tides rise or volcanoes erupt may have run along similar lines. Newton had a very different vision of how the world works and Einstein still another. For social phenomena, Rousseau had a very different vision of human causation from that of Edmund Burke.

Visions are the foundations on which theories are built. The final structure depends not only on the foundation, but also on how carefully and consistently the framework of theory is constructed and how well buttressed it is with hard facts. Visions are very subjective, but well-constructed theories have clear implications, and facts can test and measure their objective validity. The world learned at Hiroshima that Einstein’s vision of physics was not *just* Einstein’s vision.

Logic is an essential ingredient in the process of turning a vision into a theory, just as empirical evidence is then essential for determining the validity of that theory. But it

is the initial vision which is crucial for our glimpse of insight into the way the world works. In Pareto's words:

Logic is useful for proof but almost never for making discoveries. A man receives certain impressions; under their influence he states—without being able to say either how or why, and if he attempts to do so he deceives himself—a proposition, which can be verified experimentally...²

Visions are all, to some extent, simplistic—though that is a term usually reserved for other people's visions, not our own. The ever-changing kaleidoscope of raw reality would defeat the human mind by its complexity, except for the mind's ability to abstract, to pick out parts and think of them as the whole. This is nowhere more necessary than in social visions and social theory, dealing with the complex and often subconscious interactions of millions of human beings.

No matter what vision we build on, it will never account for “every sparrow's fall.” Social visions especially must leave many important phenomena unexplained, or explained only in *ad hoc* fashion, or by inconsistent assumptions that derive from more than one vision. The purest vision may not be the basis of the most impressive theories, much less the most valid ones. Yet purer visions may be more revealing as to unspoken premises than are the more complex theories. For purposes of understanding the role of visions, William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) may tell us more than Marx's *Capital*. Indeed, we may understand more of Marx's *Capital* after we have seen how similar premises worked out in the less complicated model of William Godwin. Likewise, the vision of social causation underlying the theories of the Physiocrats was in its essentials very much like the vision elaborated in a more complex and sophisticated way by Adam Smith and still later (and still more so) by Milton Friedman.

A vision, as the term is used here, is not a dream, a hope, a prophecy, or a moral imperative, though any of these things may ultimately derive from some particular vision. Here a vision is a sense of *causation*. It is more like a hunch or a “gut feeling” than it is like an exercise in logic or factual verification. These things come later, and feed on the raw material provided by the vision. *If* causation proceeds as our vision conceives it to, *then* certain other consequences follow, and theory is the working out of what those consequences are. Evidence is fact that discriminates between one theory and another. Facts do not “speak for themselves.” They speak for or against competing theories. Facts divorced from theory or visions are mere isolated curiosities.

Ultimately there are as many visions as there are human beings, if not more, and more than one vision may be consistent with a given fact. Theories can be devastated by facts but they can never be proved to be correct by facts. Facts force us to discard some theories—or else to torture our minds trying to reconcile the irreconcilable—but they can never put the final imprimatur of ultimate truth on a given theory. What empirical verification can do is to reveal which of the competing theories currently being considered is more consistent with what is known factually. Some other theory may come along tomorrow that is still more consistent with the facts, or explains those facts with fewer, clearer, or more manageable assumptions—or a new theory may fit

both this and other empirical phenomena hitherto explained by a separate theory.

Social visions are important in a number of ways. The most obvious is that policies based on a certain vision of the world have consequences that spread through society and reverberate across the years, or even across generations or centuries. Visions set the agenda for both thought and action. Visions fill in the necessarily large gaps in individual knowledge. Thus, for example, an individual may act in one way in some area in which he has great knowledge, but in just the opposite way elsewhere, where he is relying on a vision he has never tested empirically. A doctor may be a conservative on medical issues and a liberal on social and political issues, or vice versa.

The political battles of the day are a potpourri of special interests, mass emotions, personality clashes, corruption, and numerous other factors. Yet the enduring historic trends have a certain consistency that reflects certain visions. Often special interests prevail to the extent that they can mobilize support from the general public's responsiveness to visions which can be invoked for or against a given policy. From the standpoint of personal motivation, ideas may be simply the chips with which special interests, demagogues, and opportunists of various sorts play the political game. But from a broader perspective of history, these individuals and organizations can be viewed as simply carriers of ideas, much as bees inadvertently carry pollen—playing a vital role in the grand scheme of nature while pursuing a much narrower individual purpose.

The role of rationally articulated ideas may be quite modest in its effect on a given election, a legislative vote, or an action of a head of state. Yet the atmosphere in which such decisions take place may be dominated by a particular vision—or by a particular conflict of visions. Where intellectuals have played a role in history, it has not been so much by whispering words of advice into the ears of political overlords as by contributing to the vast and powerful currents of conceptions and misconceptions that sweep human action along. The effects of visions do not depend upon their being articulated, or even on decision-makers' being aware of them. "Practical" decision-makers often disdain theories and visions, being too busy to examine the ultimate basis on which they are acting. However, the object here will be precisely to examine the underlying social visions whose conflicts have shaped our times and may well shape times to come.

Chapter 2

Constrained and Unconstrained Visions

At the core of every moral code there is a picture of human nature, a map of the universe, and a version of history. To human nature (of the sort conceived), in a universe (of the kind imagined), after a history (so understood), the rules of the code apply.

-Walter Lippmann¹

Social visions differ in their basic conceptions of the nature of man. A creature from another galaxy who sought information about human beings from reading William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* in 1793 would hardly recognize man, as he appears there, as the same being who was described in *The Federalist Papers* just five years earlier. The contrast would be only slightly less if he compared man as he appeared in Thomas Paine and in Edmund Burke, or today in John Kenneth Galbraith and in Friedrich A. Hayek. Even the speculative pre-history of man as a wild creature in nature differs drastically between the free, innocent being conceived by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the brutal participant in the bloody war of each against all conceived by Thomas Hobbes.

The capacities and limitations of man are implicitly seen in radically different terms by those whose explicit philosophical, political, or social theories are built on different visions. Man's moral and mental natures are seen so differently that their respective concepts of knowledge and of institutions necessarily differ as well. Social causation itself is conceived differently, both as to mechanics and results. Time and its ancillary phenomena—traditions, contracts, economic speculation, for example—are also viewed quite differently in theories based on different visions. The abstractions which are part of all theories tend to be viewed as more real by followers of some visions than by followers of opposing visions. Finally, those who believe in some visions view themselves in a very different moral role from the way that followers of other visions view themselves. The ramifications of these conflicting visions extend into economic, judicial, military, philosophical, and political decisions.

Rather than attempt the impossible task of following all these ramifications in each of the myriad of social visions, the discussion here will group these visions into two broad categories—the constrained vision and the unconstrained vision. These will be abstractions of convenience, recognizing that there are degrees in both visions, that a continuum has been dichotomized, that in the real world there are often elements of each inconsistently grafted on to the other, and innumerable combinations and

permutations. With all these caveats, it is now possible to turn to an outline of the two visions, and specifics on the nature of man, the nature of knowledge, and the nature of social processes, as seen in constrained and unconstrained visions.

THE NATURE OF MAN

The Constrained Vision

Adam Smith provided a picture of man which may help make concrete the nature of a constrained vision. Writing as a philosopher in 1759, nearly twenty years before he became famous as an economist, Smith said in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

Let us suppose that the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake, and let us consider how a man of humanity in Europe, who had no sort of connection with that part of the world, would react upon receiving intelligence of this dreadful calamity. He would, I imagine, first of all express very strongly his sorrow for the misfortune of that unhappy people, he would make many melancholy reflections upon the precariousness of human life, and the vanity of all the labours of man, which could thus be annihilated in a moment. He would, too, perhaps, if he was a man of speculation, enter into many reasonings concerning the effects which this disaster might produce upon the commerce of Europe, and the trade and business of the world in general. And when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquility as if no such accident had happened. The most frivolous disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance. If he was to lose his little finger tomorrow, he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never saw them, he would snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred million of his brethren. . . .²

The moral limitations of man in general, and his egocentricity in particular, were neither lamented by Smith nor regarded as things to be changed. They were treated as inherent facts of life, the basic constraint in his vision. The fundamental moral and social challenge was to make the best of the possibilities which existed within that constraint, rather than dissipate energies in an attempt to change human nature—an attempt that Smith treated as both vain and pointless. For example, if it were somehow possible to make the European feel poignantly the full pain of those who suffered in China, this state of mind would be “perfectly useless,” according to Smith, except to make him “miserable,”³ without being of any benefit to the Chinese. Smith said: “Nature, it seems, when she loaded us with our own sorrows, thought that they were enough, and therefore did not command us to take any further share in those of others, than what was necessary to prompt us to relieve them.”⁴

Instead of regarding man's nature as something that could or should be changed, Smith attempted to determine how the moral and social benefits desired could be produced in the most efficient way, *within* that constraint. Smith approached the production and distribution of moral behavior in much the same way he would later approach the production and distribution of material goods. Although he was a professor of moral philosophy, his thought processes were already those of an economist. However, the constrained vision is by no means limited to economists. Smith's contemporary in politics, Edmund Burke, perhaps best summarized the constrained vision from a political perspective when he spoke of "a radical infirmity in all human contrivances,"⁵ an infirmity inherent in the fundamental nature of things. Similar views were expressed by Alexander Hamilton in *The Federalist Papers*:

It is the lot of all human institutions, even those of the most perfect kind, to have defects as well as excellencies—ill as well as good propensities. This results from the imperfection of the Institutor, Man.⁶

Returning to Adam Smith's example, a society cannot function humanely, if at all, when each person acts as if his little finger is more important than the lives of a hundred million other human beings. But the crucial word here is *act*. We cannot "prefer ourselves so shamelessly and blindly to others" when we act, Adam Smith said,⁷ even if that is the spontaneous or natural inclination of our feelings. In practice, people on many occasions "sacrifice their own interests to the greater interests of others," according to Smith,⁸ but this was due to such intervening factors as devotion to moral principles, to concepts of honor and nobility, rather than to loving one's neighbor as oneself.⁹

Through such artificial devices, man could be persuaded to do for his own self-image or inner needs what he would not do for the good of his fellow man. In short, such concepts were seen by Smith as the most efficient way to get the moral job done at the lowest psychic cost. Despite the fact that this was a moral question, Smith's answer was essentially economic—a system of moral incentives, a set of *trade-offs* rather than a real *solution* by changing man. One of the hallmarks of the constrained vision is that it deals in trade-offs rather than solutions.

In his later classic work, *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith went further. Economic benefits to society were largely unintended by individuals, but emerged systemically from the interactions of the marketplace, under the pressures of competition and the incentives of individual gain.¹⁰ Moral sentiments were necessary only for shaping the general framework of laws within which this systemic process could go on.

This was yet another way in which man, with all the limitations conceived by Smith, could be induced to produce benefits for others, for reasons ultimately reducible to self-interest. It was not an atomistic theory that individual self-interests added up to the interest of society. On the contrary, the functioning of the economy and society required each individual to do things for other people; it was simply the *motivation* behind these acts—whether moral or economic—which was ultimately self-centered. In both his moral and his economic analyses, Smith relied on incentives rather than dispositions to get the job done.

The Unconstrained Vision

Perhaps no other eighteenth-century book presents such a contrast to the vision of man in Adam Smith as William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, a work as remarkable for its fate as for its contents. An immediate success upon its publication in England in 1793, within a decade it encountered the chilling effect of British hostile reactions to ideas popularly associated with the French Revolution, especially after France became an enemy in war. By the time two decades of warfare between the two countries were ended at Waterloo, Godwin and his work had been relegated to the periphery of intellectual life, and he was subsequently best known for his influence on Shelley. Yet no work from the eighteenth-century "age of reason" so clearly, so consistently, and so systematically elaborated the unconstrained vision of man as did Godwin's treatise.

Where in Adam Smith moral and socially beneficial behavior could be evoked from man only by incentives, in William Godwin man's understanding and disposition were capable of intentionally creating social benefits. Godwin regarded the *intention* to benefit others as being "of the essence of virtue,"¹¹ and virtue in turn as being the road to human happiness. Unintentional social benefits were treated by Godwin as scarcely worthy of notice.¹² His was the unconstrained vision of human nature, in which man was capable of directly feeling other people's needs as more important than his own, and therefore of consistently acting impartially, even when his own interests or those of his family were involved.¹³ This was not meant as an empirical generalization about the way most people currently behaved. It was meant as a statement of the underlying nature of human potential.

Conceding current egocentric behavior did not imply that it was a permanent feature of human nature, as human nature was conceived in the unconstrained vision. Godwin said: "Men are capable, no doubt, of preferring an inferior interest of their own to a superior interest of others; but this preference arises from a combination of circumstances and is not the necessary and invariable law of our nature."¹⁴ Godwin referred to "men as they hereafter may be made,"¹⁵ in contrast to Burke's view: "We cannot change the Nature of things and of men—but must act upon them the best we can."¹⁶

Socially contrived incentives were disdained by Godwin as unworthy and unnecessary expedients, when it was possible to achieve directly what Smith's incentives were designed to achieve indirectly: "If a thousand men are to be benefited, I ought to recollect that I am only an atom in the comparison, and to reason accordingly."¹⁷ Unlike Smith, who regarded human selfishness as a given, Godwin regarded it as being promoted by the very system of rewards used to cope with it. The real solution toward which efforts should be bent was to have people do what is right because it is right, not because of psychic or economic payments—that is, not because someone "has annexed to it a great weight of self interest."¹⁸

Having an unconstrained vision of the yet untapped moral potential of human beings, Godwin was not preoccupied like Smith with what is the most immediately

effective incentive under the current state of things. The real goal was the long-run development of a higher sense of social duty. To the extent that immediately effective incentives retarded that long-run development, their benefits were ephemeral or illusory. The “hope of reward” and “fear of punishment” were, in Godwin’s vision, “wrong in themselves” and “inimical to the improvement of the mind.”¹⁹ In this, Godwin was seconded by another contemporary exemplar of the unconstrained vision, the Marquis de Condorcet, who rejected the whole idea of “turning prejudices and vices to good account rather than trying to dispel or repress them.” Such “mistakes” Condorcet traced to his adversaries’ vision of human nature—their confusing “the natural man” and his potential with existing man, “corrupted by prejudices, artificial passions and social customs.”²⁰

TRADE-OFFS VERSUS SOLUTIONS

Prudence—the careful weighing of trade-offs—is seen in very different terms within the constrained and the unconstrained visions. In the constrained vision, where trade-offs are all that we can hope for, prudence is among the highest duties. Edmund Burke called it “the first of all virtues.”²¹ “Nothing is good,” Burke said, “but in proportion and with reference”²²—in short, as a trade-off. By contrast, in the unconstrained vision, where moral improvement has no fixed limit, prudence is of a lower order of importance. Godwin had little use for “those moralists”—quite conceivably meaning Smith—“who think only of stimulating men to good deeds by considerations of frigid prudence and mercenary self-interests,” instead of seeking to stimulate the “generous and magnanimous sentiment of our natures.”²³

Implicit in the unconstrained vision is the notion that the potential is very different from the actual, and that means exist to improve human nature toward its potential, or that such means can be evolved or discovered, so that man will do the right thing for the right reason, rather than for ulterior psychic or economic rewards. Condorcet expressed a similar vision when he declared that man can eventually “fulfill by a natural inclination the same duties which today cost him effort and sacrifice.”²⁴ Thus a solution can supersede mere trade-offs.

Man is, in short, “perfectible”—meaning continually improvable rather than capable of actually reaching absolute perfection. “We can come nearer and nearer,” according to Godwin,²⁵ though one “cannot prescribe limits” to this process.²⁶ It is sufficient for his purpose that men are “eminently capable of justice and virtue”²⁷—not only isolated individuals, but “the whole species.”²⁸ Efforts must be made to “wake the sleeping virtues of mankind.”²⁹ Rewarding existing behavior patterns was seen as antithetical to this goal.

Here, too, Condorcet reached similar conclusions. The “perfectibility of man,” he said, was “truly indefinite.”³⁰ “The progress of the human mind” was a recurring theme in Condorcet.³¹ He acknowledged that there were “limits of man’s