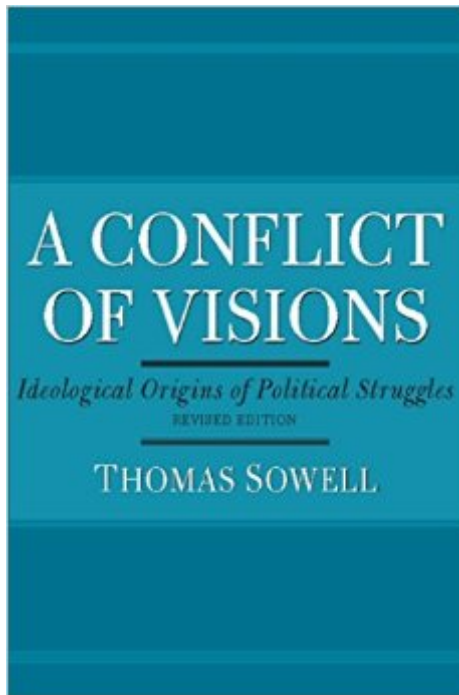


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A Conflict Of Visions: Ideological Origins Of Political Struggles



Synopsis

In this classic work, Thomas Sowell analyzes the two competing visions that shape our debates about the nature of reason, justice, equality, and power: the 'constrained' vision, which sees human nature as unchanging and selfish, and the 'unconstrained' vision, in which human nature is malleable and perfectible. He describes how these two radically opposed views have manifested themselves in the political controversies of the past two centuries, including such contemporary issues as welfare reform, social justice, and crime. Updated to include sweeping political changes since its first publication in 1987, this revised edition of *A Conflict of Visions* offers a convincing case that ethical and policy disputes circle around the disparity between both outlooks.

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Customer Reviews

On reading the entire block of 60-odd reviews, I find that more than half of them, even while admiring Sowell's evenhandedness, misstate the carefulness of the book's positions. In an attempt to pay tribute to the brilliance of this (rather dense, historical & philosophical) book, I'll try to correct this. This book presents two visions of the world. However, contrary to most of the reviewers, the difference is not about Liberals vs. Conservatives. It is about the difference between two visions

of the world, and each of the visions is found in most parties in the political spectrum. The two visions are metaphysical, pre-scientific points of view regarding how the world works. In one view (Unconstrained), people can drive change, intentions matter, and this could improve the world. In the other view (Constrained), people will always be (somewhat) bad, only results and processes matter, and improvements always involve tradeoffs. Sowell first acknowledges that no vision is purely Constrained or Unconstrained. And then he explicitly does not connect the dots to (modern, US) liberal vs. conservative visions. And he doesn't do so for the basic reason that it really isn't that simple. Instead of attempting to place "Conservative" vs. "Liberal" positions on top of Sowell's 2 visions, let us look instead at every issue, and determine whether our own individual intuitions are that (a) it is a problem, and that (b) human beings can solve or meliorate, via coordinated political action, this particular problem without creating other (potentially worse) problems. This is the issue. And the arguments for or against most actions can come from both positions. Examples from the War in Iraq.

Let me present you with a hypothetical but nonetheless realistic person. He majored in social work in college, considers himself to be a proud male supporter of feminism, supports preferential policies for blacks and generous welfare benefits for the poor, considers the United States to be an extremely racist and sexist country, and considers George W. Bush to be a war criminal. Where do you think he stands on constitutional interpretation? Do you think he is more on the activist constitution side or more on the side of determining the document's original intent? I am not asking for certainty, just what do you think his opinion on the issue is. Let us be honest. My hypothetical man almost certainly favors an activist and expansive view of constitutional interpretation. But how did we know that to be the case? Thomas Sowell addresses that issue in *A CONFLICT OF VISIONS*. Even for Sowell, one of the top intellectuals of our time, this book stands out as particularly important. As Sowell demonstrates, the answer lies not with the specifics of whatever issue is at hand. Rather, the answer lies in the ideological vision with which one perceives the world. Although Sowell acknowledges that ideological visions span a continuum, he nonetheless isolates two particular visions with very different outlooks. Most of the continuum is really a shading of one of these two. The constrained vision views man as inherently very limited, both in his knowledge and, by implication, in what he is able to accomplish in terms of creating a functioning society. The unconstrained vision, however, views humans as being, if not totally without limits, then far, far more capable of unleashing our human potential to create a better world for us all.

Some others have already commented on the basic premise of the book: the dichotomy between a constrained and unconstrained view of human nature and the logical conclusions and "visions" that arise based on that difference, so I will leave that summary aside. This book is a fantastic read for many reasons: the writing style is incredibly clear and simple, and Sowell is adept at conveying his ideas in a manner that should be easily understandable to any reader. Sowell appears to show a commendable level of detachment in that there does not seem to be much of a personal value judgement placed on either of the two schools of vision (i.e. without reading other texts, the reader may not be able to distinguish whether Sowell places himself within the "constrained" or "unconstrained" vision). Another reviewer commented that this dichotomy was rather simplistic, and I tend to agree. However, I see this as a strength rather than a weakness. Sowell gives a more general view of the derivation of certain viewpoints and the logical implications of a certain conception without getting distracted by every specific application. He does not explain every thought or viewpoint, but he provides an exceptionally clear framework through which you can view these thoughts and viewpoints on your own. I found the quotes he used to be very illuminating, but I agree that they should be viewed in the proper light. The quotes are interesting as articulations of the "constrained" or "unconstrained" views in the particular context in which they are used, and should probably not be carried beyond that.

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