

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

The day after the Vice Presidential debate, the New York Times reported that “Mike Pence repeatedly made statements that were either misleading or untrue.” Alternatively, Fox News reported that Kamala Harris’ Abe Lincoln/SCOTUS Answer Was “Historical Nonsense.” Republicans and Democrats are equally astounded that the other side cannot see the obvious flaws in the opposing ideology.

In 2005, Thomas Sowell wrote *A Conflict of Visions* in which he describes the two primary political/economic “Visions” which have framed American political and economic thinking. Sowell is a conservative - so someone with what Sowell calls the Unconstrained Vision may frame this in another way.

These visions give each of us our “cloud of comforting convictions.” The scaffolding for these convictions is not necessarily purely rational. Nonetheless, these convictions provide the foundation on which theories are built and these visions influence the way we understand history, morality, and human nature.

Thomas Sowell labeled these competing visions as Constrained and Unconstrained. Both visions make the common good paramount, but they differ completely as to how it is to be achieved. The visions disagree about assumptions regarding human nature, social cause and effect, the importance of incentives and the role that rewards and punishments should play in our economic systems.

The following is a brief summary of differences between the two ideologies:

Constrained Vision	Unconstrained Vision
The Constrained Vision seeks to analyze, prescribe, or judge processes.	The Unconstrained Vision seeks to analyze, prescribe, or judge results. Processes are inadequate when results are deemed unsatisfactory.
The founders had a very specific idea of the liberty they sought to guarantee in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.	“Being true to our founding documents, does not mean we all define liberty in exactly the same way or follow the same precise path to happiness.” - Barack Obama
John Locke: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. People are created equal before the law 2. Certain basic rights exist independent of government 3. Governments exist only to protect those rights and enforce equality before the law. 	Natural rights do not exist and there are no rights that are discoverable from human nature and reason. The role of government is to advance equality of outcome as government changes the hearts and minds of the people.

<p>The Constitution of the United States was a compromise document, designed to enshrine checks and balances and enumerated powers via a limited government system. “The powers delegated by the proposed Constitution to the federal government are few and defined.” Federalist No. 45</p>	<p>“What the Founders left us is the power, each of us, to adapt to changing times. They left us the keys to a system of self-government, the tools to do big things and important things together that we could not possibly do alone.” - Barack Obama</p> <p>The enumerated powers are insufficient to meet the needs of citizens. Checks and balances can be barriers to progress.</p>
<p>Everywhere in the world there are gross inequities in income and wealth. They offend most of us. Few can fail to be moved by the contrast between the luxury enjoyed by some and the grinding poverty suffered by others. A society that puts equality – in the sense of equality of outcome – ahead of freedom will end up with neither equality nor freedom. The use of force to achieve equality will destroy freedom, and the force, introduced for good purposes, will end up in the hands of people who use it to promote their own interests. - Milton Friedman</p>	<p>A strong sense of a moral obligation to take care of one’s fellow human beings leads to the conclusion that government is the instrument for discharging this obligation. The focus in the Unconstrained Vision is on achieving equality of outcome rather than equality of process for things like income distribution and social mobility.</p> <p>The great obstacle to achieving equality of outcome is the opposition of those benefiting from the existing social order and the inertia and blindness of others.</p>
<p>“The end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom: for in all the states of created beings capable of laws, where there is no law, there is no freedom.” - John Locke</p>	<p>“Freedom finally depends on attaining important primary goals such as dignity, respect, love, affection, solidarity, friendship. To the extent that individuals lack these, they cannot be free.” – Robert Dahl</p>
<p>Social decisions evolve systematically from the interactions of individual discretion, exercised for individual benefit. Here the common good is served only as an individually unintended consequence of the characteristics of systemic processes such as a competitive market economy.</p>	<p>The fact that particular individuals or groups have already exceeded the masses in intellect, morality, or dedication to the social good, demonstrates what is possible. The great obstacles to its achievement are the opposition of those benefiting from the existing social order and the inertia and blindness of others.</p>
<p>Exploitative situations have been seen as more effectively eliminated by the systemic characteristics of a competitive economy than by the deliberate intervention of political leaders in complex economic processes that they cannot</p>	<p>“We seek not just freedom but opportunity. We seek not just legal equity but human ability, not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result. To this end</p>

comprehend. Attempts to equalize economic results lead to greater – and more dangerous – inequality in political power. (This is the central theme of Hayek’s <i>The Road To Serfdom</i>)	equal opportunity is essential, but not enough, not enough. - Lyndon Baines Johnson
Freedom, not virtue, is the goal of government; virtue is the goal of individual people, pursuing right reason – a task itself that requires freedom.	We must aim for inequality before the law, so that we can achieve equality of everything else.
Hamilton & Madison sought a trade-off	Robespierre sought a solution
The constrained vision puts little faith in deliberately designed social processes, since it has little faith that any manageable set of decision-makers could effectively cope with the enormous complexities of designing a whole blueprint for an economic system, a legal system, or a system of morality or politics. “Men are neither angels nor devils, and we must be careful in allocating power thanks to that basic truth.” - James Madison	The Unconstrained vision believes in deliberately designed social processes and in educated decision-makers that can effectively cope with the complexities of designing a blueprint for an economic system, a legal system, or a system of morality or politics.
In the Constrained Vision, social decisions evolve systematically from the interactions of individual discretion, exercised for individual benefit.	In the Unconstrained Vision, decisions are deliberately made by surrogates on explicitly rationalistic grounds, for the common good.
The common good is served only as an individually unintended consequence of the characteristics of systemic processes such as a competitive market economy.	The common good is centrally planned through deliberate processes as a function of government.
Freedom is a process characteristic - the absence of externally imposed impediments, freedom from coercion, freedom from the arbitrary power of other individuals	Freedom assumes the absence of externally imposed impediments, freedom from coercion, freedom from the arbitrary power of other individuals but also includes circumstantial limitations which reduce the range of choice
Justice means adherence to agreed-upon rules	Justice can only be evaluated by the end results that occur.
Equality means equal protection under the law. Equality of discretion is more important than equality of condition.	Equality means equality of outcome. Disparity is discrimination. We must aim for inequality before the law, so that we can achieve equality of everything else.
Inequality of outcome is a feature inherent to humankind	Disparities result from societal injustice rather than human differences

<p>The American Revolutionaries held that the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness pre-existed government.</p>	<p>People source their rights from the government. “What the Founders left us, is the power, each of us, to adapt to changing times. They left us the keys to a system of self-government, the tools to do big things and important things together that we could not possibly do alone. Government’s the only thing we all belong to.”(Barack Obama 2012)</p>
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Phil Donahue’s 2009 interview of Milton Friedman is an illustration of two people coming from these alternate visions:

Phil Donahue:

When you see around the globe the maldistribution of wealth, the desperate plight of millions of people in underdeveloped countries, when you see so few haves and so many have-nots, when you see the greed and the concentration of power, did you ever have a moment of doubt about capitalism and whether greed is a good idea to run on?

Milton Friedman:

Well, first of all, tell me, is there some society you know that doesn’t run on greed?

You think Russia doesn’t run on greed?

You think China doesn’t run on greed?

What is greed?

Of course none of us are greedy. It’s only the other fellow who’s greedy.

The world runs on individuals pursuing their separate interests. The great achievements of civilization have not come from government bureaus.

Einstein didn’t construct his theory under order from a bureaucrat.

Henry Ford didn’t revolutionize the automobile industry that way.

In the only cases in which the masses have escaped from the kind of grinding poverty you’re talking about, the only cases in recorded history are where they have had capitalism and largely free trade. If you want to know where the masses are worst off, it’s exactly in the kinds of societies that depart from that. The record of history is absolutely crystal clear that there is no alternative way, so far discovered, of improving the lot of the ordinary people that can hold a candle to the productive activities that are unleashed by a free enterprise system.

Phil Donahue:

But it seems to reward not virtue as much as ability to manipulate the system.

Milton Friedman:

And what does reward virtue?

Do you think the communist commissar rewards virtue?

Do you think Hitler rewards virtue?

Do you think American presidents reward virtue?

Do they choose their appointees on the basis of the virtue of the people appointed or on the basis of their political clout? Is it really true that political self-interest is nobler somehow than economic self-interest? You know, I think you're taking a lot of things for granted. Just tell me where in the world you find these angels who are going to organize society for us.

Jay - I admire your effort to understand a perspective that seems foreign and illogical. I know you are not trying to arbitrate which vision is right or true or best with this forum. The polarization that exists in American culture as a consequence of the conflict of these alternative visions and the low level of political discourse today is now leading to an escalation of anger and hostility. How do we go forward?

Marilyn Robinson's essay on *Imagination and Community* points us in a direction where we can try to make sense of the differences, talk to each other with respect and get on a path back to civility in public discourse:

Robinson: "There are excitements that come with abandoning the constraints of moderation and reasonableness. Those whose work it is to sustain the endless palaver of radio and television increasingly stimulate these excitements. No great wonder if they are bored, or if they suspect their audiences might be. But the effect of this marketing of rancor has unquestionably been to turn debate or controversy increasingly into a form of tribal warfare, harming the national community and risking always greater harm. I think it is reasonable to wonder whether democracy can survive in this atmosphere. Democracy, in its essence and genius, is imaginative love for and identification with a community with which, much of the time and in many ways, one may be in profound disagreement.

It is true for everyone that the experience that society gives to us, or denies us, is profoundly formative. Because I have lived at the cusp of great social change, I am perhaps especially aware of this fact. I am aware not only of the benefits I have enjoyed, sharing the life of this community, but also of the good service we can do one another by contributing as we can to the health, generosity, and courage of our community.

I have talked about community as being a work of the imagination, and I hope I have made clear my belief that the more generous the scale at which imagination is exerted, the healthier and more humane the community will be.

There is a great deal of cynicism at present, among Americans, about the American population. Someone told me recently that a commentator of some sort had said, “The United States is in spiritual free-fall.” When people make such remarks, such appalling judgments, they never include themselves, their friends, those with whom they agree. They have drawn, as they say, a bright line between an “us” and a “them.” Those on the other side of the line are assumed to be unworthy of respect or hearing, and are in fact to be regarded as a huge problem to the “us” who presume to judge “them.” This tedious pattern has repeated itself endlessly through human history and is, as I have said, the end of community and the beginning of tribalism.

At this point in my life I have probably had a broader experience of the American population than is usual. I have been to divinity schools, and I have been to prisons. In the First Epistle of Peter we are told to honor everyone, and I have never been in a situation where I felt this instruction was inappropriate. When we accept dismissive judgments of our community, we stop having generous hopes for it. We cease to be capable of serving its best interests.

On average, in the main, we are Christian people, if the polls are to be believed. How is Christianity consistent with this generalized contempt that seems to lie behind so much so-called public discourse? Why the judgmentalism, among people who are supposed to believe we are, and we live among, souls precious to God—three hundred million of them on this plot of ground, a population large and various enough to hint broadly at the folly of generalization? It is simply not possible to act in good faith toward people one does not respect, or to entertain hopes for them that are appropriate to their gifts.

As we withdraw from one another we withdraw from the world, except as we increasingly insist that foreign groups and populations are our irreconcilable enemies. The shrinking of imaginative identification which allows such things as shared humanity to be forgotten always begins at home

When we condescend, when we act consistently with a sense of the character of people in general which demeans them, we impoverish them and ourselves, and preclude our having a part in the creation of the highest wealth, the testimony to the mysterious beauty of life we all value in psalms and tragedies and epics and meditations, in short stories and novels. In the same way we diminish the worth of the institutions of society—law, journalism, education, and religion as well, when we forget respect and love for the imagined other, the man or woman or child we will never know, who will take the good from these institutions that we invest in them, or who will be harmed or disheartened because our institutions are warped by meagerness and cynicism. It is very much in the gift of the community to enrich individual lives, and it is in the gift of any individual to enlarge and enrich community. The great truth that is too often forgotten is that it is in the nature of people to do good to one another.

Marilyn Robinson, Imagination and Community