

Constrained *versus* Unconstrained Visions

(Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* [NY: Morrow, 1987])

“Unconstrained Vision” (liberal)	“Constrained Vision” (conservative)
<p>The Nature of Man Selfishness is <i>not</i> a permanent feature of human nature. Man’s understanding and disposition are capable of intentionally creating social benefits. “Implicit...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 for the right reason rather than for ulterior psychic or economic rewards” (pp. 25-26). “The notion that ‘the human being is highly plastic material’ is still central among many contemporary thinkers who share the unconstrained vision. The concept of ‘solution’ remains central to this vision” (p. 26)</p>	<p>The Nature of Man The moral limitations of human beings, in particular their egocentricity (self-centeredness and selfishness) are accepted as inherent facts of life. The challenge is to make the best of the possibilities that exist <i>within that constraint</i>, rather than waste energy trying to change human nature.</p>
<p>Trade-Offs <i>versus</i> Solutions “The concept of ‘solution’ remains central to this vision. A solution is achieved when it is no longer necessary to make a trade-off, even if the development of that solution entailed costs now past. The goal of achieving a solution is in fact what justifies the initial sacrifices or transitional conditions which might otherwise be considered unacceptable” (pp. 26-27)</p>	<p>Trade-Offs <i>versus</i> Solutions Prudence (the careful weighing of trade-offs) is among the highest duties in the constrained vision. Deals in <i>trade-offs rather than solutions</i>. (p. 22) All human institutions are flawed because people are flawed, and therefore there are <i>no perfect solutions</i> to problems.</p>
	Relies on incentives rather than motivations to get people to do desirable/moral/ things.
	<i>Moral Incentives.</i> Although people are by nature selfish, they do on occasion “sacrifice their own interests to the greater interests of others” (Adam Smith), but it is because of such factors as devotion to moral principles, to concepts of honor and nobility, rather than to loving one’s neighbor as oneself. Through such ideas people can be persuaded to do for their own self-images or inner needs what they would not do for the good of others. (p. 22)
The unconstrained vision speaks directly in terms of desired results.	The constrained vision speaks “in terms of process characteristics considered conducive to desired results, but not directly or without many unhappy side effects, which are accepted as part of a trade-off” (p. 37).
“Running through the tradition of the unconstrained vision is the conviction that foolish or immoral choices explain the evils of the world—and that wiser or more moral and humane social policies are the solution” (p. 37)	“...sees the evils of the world as deriving from the limited and unhappy choices available, given the inherent moral and intellectual limitations of human beings. For amelioration of these evils and the promotion of progress, they rely on the systemic characteristics of certain social processes such as moral traditions, the marketplace, or families. They conceive of these processes as evolved rather than designed—and rely on these general patterns of social interaction rather than on specific policy designed to directly produce particular results for particular individuals and groups” (p. 38).
The French Revolution was an application of the unconstrained vision.	“The intellectual foundations of the American Revolution were more mixed, including men like Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, whose thinking was similar in many ways to that of France, but also including as a dominant influence on the Constitution the classic constrained vision of man expressed in <i>The Federalist Papers</i> ...Robespierre sought a solution, Hamilton a trade-off...
“the French Revolution...gave sweeping powers, including the power of life and death, to those who spoke in the name of ‘the people,’....Even when bitterly disappointed with particular leaders, who were then deposed and executed, believers in this vision did not substantially change their political systems or beliefs, viewing the evil as localized in individuals who had betrayed the revolution” (p. 32)	“The Constitution of the United States, with its elaborate checks and balances, clearly reflected the view that no one was ever to be completely trusted with power” (p. 32)