
**A
CONFLICT
OF
VISIONS**

Thomas Sowell

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CONSTRAINED AND UNCONSTRAINED VISIONS

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 the 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

A CONFLICT OF VISIONS

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

CONSTRAINED AND UNCONSTRAINED VISIONS

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, principal author of *The Federalist Papers*:

It is the lot of all human institutions, even those of the most perfect kind, to have defects as well

A CONFLICT OF VISIONS

as excellencies—ill as well as good propensities.

This results from the imperfection of the Instructor, Man.⁶

Clearly, 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, 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 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 pro-

CONSTRAINED AND UNCONSTRAINED VISIONS

duce 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 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 of 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 or 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

A CONFLICT OF VISIONS

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

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."¹⁵ 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."¹⁶

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 illusory. The "hope of reward" and "fear of

CONSTRAINED AND UNCONSTRAINED VISIONS

punishment" were, in Godwin's vision, "wrong in themselves" and "inimical to the improvement of the mind."¹⁷ 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."¹⁸

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."¹⁹ "Nothing is good," Burke said, "but in proportion, and with reference"²⁰—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."²¹

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

A CONFLICT OF VISIONS

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."²² 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,²³ though one "cannot prescribe limits" to this process.²⁴ It is sufficient for his purpose that men are "eminently capable of justice and virtue"²⁵—not only isolated individuals, but "the whole species."²⁶ Efforts must be made to "wake the sleeping virtues of mankind."²⁷ 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."²⁸ "The progress of the human mind" was a recurring theme in Condorcet.²⁹ He acknowledged that there were "limits of man's intelligence,"³⁰ that no one believed it possible for man to know "all the facts of nature" or to "attain the ultimate means of precision" in their measurement or analysis.³¹ But while there was ultimately a limit to man's mental capability, according to Condorcet, no one could specify what it was. He was indignant that Locke "dared to set a limit to human understanding."³² As a devotee of mathematics, Condorcet conceived perfectibility as a never-ending asymptotic approach to a mathematical limit.³³

While use of the word "perfectibility" has faded away over the centuries, the concept has survived, largely intact, to the present time. The notion that "the human being is highly plastic material"³⁴ is still central among many contemporary thinkers who share the unconstrained vision. 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

CONSTRAINED AND UNCONSTRAINED VISIONS

solution is in fact what justifies the initial sacrifices or transitional conditions which might otherwise be considered unacceptable. Condorcet, for example, anticipated the eventual "reconciliation, the identification, of the interests of each with the interests of all"—at which point, "the path of virtue is no longer arduous."³⁵ Man could act under the influence of a socially beneficial disposition, rather than simply in response to ulterior incentives.

SOCIAL MORALITY AND SOCIAL CAUSATION

Human actions were dichotomized by Godwin into the beneficial and the harmful, and each of these in turn was dichotomized into the intentional and the unintentional. The intentional creation of benefits was called "virtue,"³⁶ the intentional creation of harm was "vice,"³⁷ and the unintentional creation of harm was "negligence," a sub-species of vice.³⁸ These definitions can be represented schematically:

	BENEFICIAL	HARMFUL
INTENTIONAL	<i>Virtue</i>	<i>Vice</i>
UNINTENTIONAL		<i>Negligence</i>

The missing category was unintentional benefit. It was precisely this missing category in Godwin that was central to Adam Smith's whole vision, particularly as it unfolded

A CONFLICT OF VISIONS

in his classic work *The Wealth of Nations*. The economic benefits to society produced by the capitalist were, according to Smith, “no part of his intention.”³⁹ The capitalist’s intentions were characterized by Smith as “mean rapacity”⁴⁰ and capitalists as a group were referred to as people who “seldom meet together, even for merriment or diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices.”⁴¹ Yet, despite his repeatedly negative depictions of capitalists,⁴² unrivaled among economists until Karl Marx, Adam Smith nevertheless became the patron saint of *laissez-faire* capitalism. Intentions, which were crucial in the unconstrained vision of Godwin, were irrelevant in the constrained vision of Smith. What mattered to Smith were the systemic characteristics of a competitive economy, which produced social benefits from unsavory individual intentions.

While Adam Smith and William Godwin have been cited as especially clear and straightforward writers espousing opposing visions, each is part of a vast tradition that continues powerful and contending for domination today. Even among their contemporaries, Smith and Godwin each had many intellectual compatriots with similar visions, differently expressed and differing in details and degree. Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790 was perhaps the most ringing polemical application of the constrained vision. Thomas Paine’s equally polemical reply, *The Rights of Man* (1791), anticipated in many ways the more systematic unfolding of the unconstrained vision by Godwin two years later. Rousseau was perhaps the most famous of those who argued on the basis of a human nature not inherently constrained to its existing limitations, but narrowed and corrupted by social institutions—a vision also found in Condorcet and in Baron D’Holbach, among others of that era. In the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill said that the “present wretched

CONSTRAINED AND UNCONSTRAINED VISIONS

education" and "wretched social arrangements" were "the only real hindrance" to attaining general happiness among human beings.⁴³ Mill's most ringing rhetoric reflected the unconstrained vision, though his eclecticism in many areas caused him to include devastating provisos more consonant with the constrained vision.⁴⁴

Much of nineteenth-century socialism and twentieth-century liberalism builds upon these foundations, modified and varying in degree, and applied to areas as disparate as education, war, and criminal justice. Marxism, as we shall see, was a special hybrid, applying a constrained vision to much of the past and an unconstrained vision to much of the future.

When Harold Laski said that "dissatisfaction" was an "expression of serious ill in the body politic,"⁴⁵ he was expressing the essence of the unconstrained vision, in which neither man nor nature have such inherent constraints as to disappoint our hopes, so that existing institutions, traditions, or rulers must be responsible for dissatisfaction. Conversely, when Malthus attributed human misery to "laws inherent in the nature of man, and absolutely independent of all human regulations,"⁴⁶ he was expressing one of the most extreme forms of the constrained vision, encompassing inherent constraints in both nature and man. Godwin's reply to Malthus, not surprisingly, applied the *unconstrained* vision to both nature and man: "Men are born into the world, in every country where the cultivation of the earth is practised, with the natural faculty in each man of producing more food than he can consume, a faculty which cannot be controlled but by the injurious exclusions of human institution."⁴⁷ Given the unconstrained possibilities of man and nature, poverty or other sources of dissatisfaction could only be a result of evil intentions or blindness to solutions readily achievable by changing existing institutions. By contrast, Burke considered complaints about our times and rulers to be part

A CONFLICT OF VISIONS

of "the general infirmities of human nature," and that "true political sagacity" was required to separate these from real indicators of a special malaise.⁴⁸ Hobbes went even further, arguing that it was precisely when men are "at ease" that they are most troublesome politically.⁴⁹

The constraints of nature are themselves important largely through the constraints of human nature. The inherent natural constraint of the need for food, for example, becomes a practical social problem only insofar as human beings multiply to the point where subsistence becomes difficult. Thus this central constraint of nature in Malthus becomes socially important only because of Malthus' highly constrained vision of *human* nature, which he saw as inevitably behaving in such a way as to populate the earth to that point. But Godwin, who readily conceded the natural constraint, had a very different vision of human nature, which would not heedlessly overpopulate. Therefore, the possibility of a geometrical increase in people was of no concern to Godwin because "possible men do not eat, though real men do."⁵⁰ Malthus, on the other hand, saw overpopulation not as an abstract possibility in the future but as a concrete reality already manifested. According to Malthus, "the period when the number of men surpass their means of subsistence has long since arrived . . . has existed ever since we have had any histories of mankind, does exist at present, and will for ever continue to exist."⁵¹ It would be hard to conceive of a more absolute statement of a constrained vision. Where Malthus and Godwin differed was not over a natural fact—the need for food—but over behavioral theories based on very different visions of human nature. Most followers of the unconstrained vision likewise acknowledge death, for example, as an inherent constraint of nature (though Godwin and Condorcet did not rule out an eventual conquest of death), but simply do not treat this as a constraint on the social development of mankind.

CONSTRAINED AND UNCONSTRAINED VISIONS

The great evils of the world—war, poverty, and crime, for example—are seen in completely different terms by those with the constrained and the unconstrained visions. If human options are not inherently constrained, then the presence of such repugnant and disastrous phenomena virtually cries out for explanation—and for solutions. But if the limitations and passions of man himself are at the heart of these painful phenomena, then what requires explanation are the ways in which they have been avoided or minimized. While believers in the unconstrained vision seek the special causes of war, poverty, and crime, believers in the constrained vision seek the special causes of peace, wealth, or a law-abiding society. In the unconstrained vision, there are no intractable reasons for social evils and therefore no reason why they cannot be solved, with sufficient moral commitment. But in the constrained vision, whatever artifices or strategies restrain or ameliorate inherent human evils will themselves have costs, some in the form of other social ills created by these civilizing institutions, so that all that is possible is a prudent trade-off.

The two great revolutions of the eighteenth century—in France and in America—can be viewed as applications of these differing visions, though with all the reservations necessary whenever the flesh and blood of complex historical events are compared to skeletal theoretical models. The underlying premises of the French Revolution more clearly reflected the unconstrained vision of man which prevailed among its leaders. 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 in France, but also including as a dominant influence on the Constitution, the classic constrained vision of man expressed in the *The Federalist Papers*. Where Robespierre looked forward to the end of revolutionary bloodshed, “when all

A CONFLICT OF VISIONS

people will have become equally devoted to their country and its laws,"⁵² Alexander Hamilton in *The Federalist Papers* regarded the idea of individual actions "unbiased by considerations not connected with the public good" as a prospect "more ardently to be wished than seriously to be expected."⁵³ Robespierre sought a solution, Hamilton a trade-off.

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. This was in sharp contrast to the French Revolution, which gave sweeping powers, including the power of life and death, to those who spoke in the name of "the people," expressing the Rousseauian "general will." 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.

The writers of *The Federalist Papers* were quite conscious of the vision of man that underlay the Constitution of checks and balances which they espoused:

It may be a reflection on human nature that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?⁵⁴

To the Federalists, the evil was inherent in man, and institutions were simply ways of trying to cope with it. Adam Smith likewise saw government as "an imperfect remedy" for the deficiency of "wisdom and virtue" in man.⁵⁵ *The Federalist Papers* said:

Why has government been instituted at all? Because the passions of men will not conform to

CONSTRAINED AND UNCONSTRAINED VISIONS

the dictates of reason and justice without constraint.⁵⁶

To those without this constrained vision of man, the whole elaborate system of constitutional checks and balances was a needless complication and impediment. Condorcet condemned such “counterweights” for creating an “overcomplicated” political machine “to weigh upon the people.”⁵⁷ He saw no need for society to be “jostled between opposing powers”⁵⁸ or held back by the “inertia” of constitutional checks and balances.⁵⁹

The constrained vision is a tragic vision of the human condition. The unconstrained vision is a moral vision of human intentions, which are viewed as ultimately decisive. The unconstrained vision promotes pursuit of the highest ideals and the best solutions. By contrast, the constrained vision sees the best as the enemy of the good—a vain attempt to reach the unattainable being seen as not only futile but often counterproductive, while the same efforts could have produced a viable and beneficial trade-off. Adam Smith applied this reasoning not only to economics but also to morality and politics: The prudent reformer, according to Smith, will respect “the confirmed habits and prejudices of the people,” and when he cannot establish what is right, “he will not disdain to ameliorate the wrong.” His goal is not to create the ideal but to “establish the best that the people can bear.”⁶⁰

But Condorcet, expressing the unconstrained vision, rejected any notion that laws should “change with the temperature and adapt to the forms of government, to the practices that superstition has consecrated, and even to the stupidities adopted by each people . . .”⁶¹ Thus he found the French Revolution superior to the American Revolution, for “the principles from which the constitution and laws of France were derived were purer” and allowed “the people to exercise their sovereign right” without constraint.⁶² Related to this is the question whether

A CONFLICT OF VISIONS

the institutions of one society can be transferred to another, or particular blueprints for better societies be applied to very different countries. Jeremy Bentham was noted for producing both specific reforms and general principles intended to apply in very different societies. Yet to Hamilton, "What may be good at Philadelphia may be bad at Paris and ridiculous at Petersburg."⁶³ Each of these conclusions is consistent with the respective vision from which it came.

While the constrained vision sees human nature as essentially unchanged across the ages and around the world, the particular cultural expressions of human needs peculiar to specific societies are not seen as being readily and beneficially changeable by forcible intervention. By contrast, those with the unconstrained vision tend to view human nature as beneficially changeable and social customs as expendable holdovers from the past.

Ideals are weighed against the cost of achieving them, in the constrained vision. But in the unconstrained vision, every closer approximation to the ideal should be preferred. Costs are regrettable, but by no means decisive. Thomas Jefferson's reply to those who turned against the French Revolution, because of the innocent people it had killed, exemplified this point:

My own affections have been deeply wounded by some of the martyrs to this cause, but rather than it should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated.⁶⁴

Belief in the irrelevance of process costs in the pursuit of social justice could hardly have been expressed more clearly or categorically. Yet, in the end, Jefferson too turned against the French Revolution, as its human cost increased beyond what he could continue to accept. Jefferson was not completely or irrevocably committed to the unconstrained vision.

CONSTRAINED AND UNCONSTRAINED VISIONS

The relative importance of process costs has continued, over the centuries, to distinguish the constrained and the unconstrained visions. Modern defenders of legal technicalities which allow criminals to escape punishment who declare, "That is the price we pay for freedom," or defenders of revolutions who say, "You can't make omelettes without breaking eggs," are contemporary exemplars of an unconstrained vision which has historically treated process costs as secondary. At the other end of the philosophical spectrum are those who in essence repeat Adam Smith's view of process costs: "The peace and order of society is of more importance than even the relief of the miserable."⁶⁵ The continuing battle between ideals and the costs of achieving them is only one part of the ongoing conflict of visions.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Visions rest ultimately on some sense of the nature of man—not simply his existing practices but his ultimate potential and ultimate limitations. Those who see the potentialities of human nature as extending far beyond what is currently manifested have a social vision quite different from those who see human beings as tragically limited creatures whose selfish and dangerous impulses can be contained only by social contrivances which themselves produce unhappy side effects. William Godwin and Adam Smith are two of the clearest and most consistent exemplars of these respective social visions—the unconstrained and the constrained. Yet they were neither the first nor the last in these two long traditions of social thought. When Rousseau said that man "is born free" but "is everywhere in chains,"⁶⁶ he expressed the essence of the unconstrained vision, in which the fundamental problem is not nature or man but institutions. According to Rousseau,

A CONFLICT OF VISIONS

“men are not naturally enemies”.⁶⁷ The diametrically opposite vision was presented in Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, where the armed power of political institutions was all that prevented the war of each against all⁶⁸ that would otherwise exist among men in their natural state, where life would be “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.”⁶⁹ While the unconstrained vision of Condorcet led him to seek a society in which man’s “natural inclination” would coincide with the social good,⁷⁰ Hayek’s constrained vision led to the conclusion that the “indispensable rules of the free society require from us much that is unpleasant”⁷¹—that is, man’s nature inherently could not coincide with the social good but must be deliberately subordinated to it, despite the unpleasantness this entailed.

Given the wider capabilities of man in the unconstrained vision, the intentions which guide those capabilities are especially important. Words and concepts which revolve around intention—“sincerity,” “commitment,” “dedication”—have been central to the unconstrained vision for centuries, and the policies sought by this vision have often been described in terms of their intended goals: “liberty, equality, fraternity,” “ending the exploitation of man by man,” or “social justice,” for example. But in the constrained vision, where man’s ability to directly consummate his intentions is very limited, intentions mean far less. Burke referred to “the Beneficial effects of human faults” and to “the ill consequences attending the most undoubted Virtues.”⁷² Adam Smith’s entire economic doctrine of *laissez-faire* implicitly assumed the same lack of correspondence between intention and effect, for the systemic benefits of capitalism were no part of the intention of capitalists. In the constrained vision, social processes are described not in terms of intentions or ultimate goals, but in terms of the systemic characteristics deemed necessary to contribute to those goals—“property rights,” “free enterprise,” or “strict construction” of the Consti-

CONSTRAINED AND UNCONSTRAINED VISIONS

tution, for example. It is not merely that there are different goals in the two visions but, more fundamentally, that the goals relate to different things. The unconstrained vision speaks directly in terms of desired results, the constrained vision 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.

With all the complex differences among social thinkers as of a given time, and still more so over time, it is nevertheless possible to recognize certain key assumptions about human nature and about social causation which permit some to be grouped together as belonging to the constrained vision and others as belonging to the unconstrained vision. Although these groupings do not encompass all social theorists, they cover many important figures and enduring ideological conflicts of the past two centuries.

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. William Godwin's elaboration of this unconstrained vision in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* drew upon and systematized such ideas found among numerous eighteenth-century thinkers—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, Condorcet, Thomas Paine, and D'Holbach being notable examples. This general approach was carried forth in the nineteenth century, in their very different ways, by Saint-Simon, Robert Owen, and by George Bernard Shaw and other Fabians. Its twentieth-century echoes are found in political theorists such as Harold Laski, in economists like Thorstein Veblen and John Kenneth Galbraith, and in the law with a whole school of advocates of judicial activism, epitomized by Ronald Dworkin in theory and Earl Warren in practice.

A CONFLICT OF VISIONS

By contrast, the constrained vision 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. This constrained view of human capacities found in Adam Smith is also found in a long series of other social thinkers, ranging from Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century, through Edmund Burke and the authors of *The Federalist Papers* among Smith's contemporaries, through such twentieth-century figures as Oliver Wendell Holmes in law, Milton Friedman in economics, and Friedrich A. Hayek in general social theory.

Not all social thinkers fit this schematic dichotomy. John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx, for example, do not fit, for very different reasons, as will be noted in Chapter 5. Others take midway positions between the two visions, or convert from one to the other. However, the conflict of visions is no less real because everyone has not chosen sides or irrevocably committed themselves.

Despite necessary caveats, it remains an important and remarkable phenomenon that how human nature is conceived at the outset is highly correlated with the whole conception of knowledge, morality, power, time, rationality, war, freedom, and law which defines a social vision. These correlations will be explored in the chapters that follow.

Because various beliefs, theories, and systems of social thought are spread across a continuum (perhaps even a multi-dimensional continuum), it might in one sense be

CONSTRAINED AND UNCONSTRAINED VISIONS

more appropriate to refer to *less* constrained visions and *more* constrained visions instead of the dichotomy used here. However, the dichotomy is not only more convenient but also captures an important distinction. Virtually no one believes that man is 100 percent unconstrained and virtually no one believes that man is 100 percent constrained. What puts a given thinker in the tradition of one vision rather than the other is not simply whether he refers more to man's constraints or to his untapped potential but whether, or to what extent, constraints are built into the very structure and operation of a particular theory. Those whose theories incorporate these constraints as a central feature have a constrained vision; those whose theories do not make these constraints an integral or central part of the analysis have an unconstrained vision. Every vision, by definition, leaves something out—indeed, leaves *most* things out. The dichotomy between constrained and unconstrained visions is based on whether or not inherent limitations of man are among the key elements included in each vision.

The dichotomy is justified in yet another sense. These different ways of conceiving man and the world lead not merely to *different* conclusions but to sharply divergent, often diametrically opposed, conclusions on issues ranging from justice to war. There are not merely differences of visions but conflicts of visions.