

March 19, 2021
Volume 05—Number 07



A journal for restless minds

Colloquī *: to discuss*

An Embarrassment of Intellect

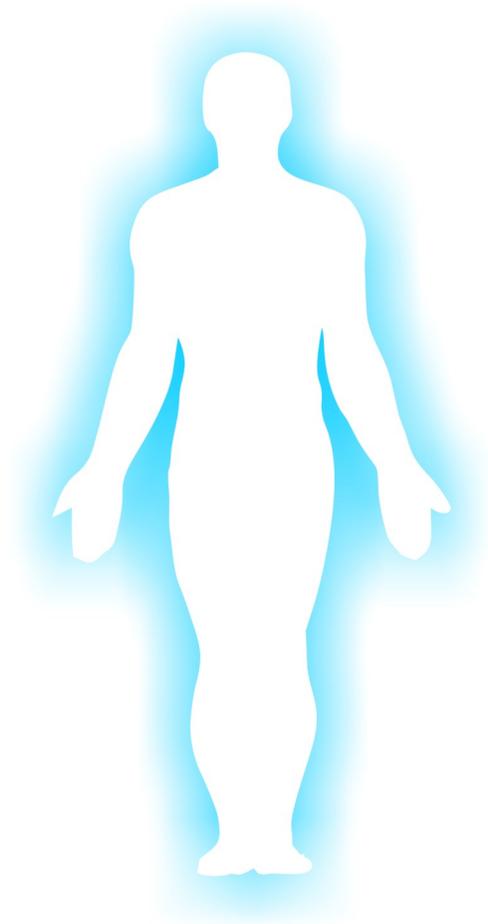
None so blind as those who will not see

An Embarrassment of Intellect

None so blind as those who will not see

The core “vital conflicts” of American public bioethics—and I would argue, any political and social ideology which prescribes self-invention—according to O. Carter Snead, “is grounded in a gravely incomplete and thus false vision of human identity and flourishing. It is a vision that defines the human being fundamentally as an atomized and solitary will.” He continues, noting, quite correctly I must add, that such a false vision equates “human flourishing solely with the capacity to formulate and pursue future plans of one’s own invention. By contrast, the law in this domain views the natural world and even the human body itself as merely inchoate matter to be harnessed and remade in service of such projects of the will.”¹

But human beings do not live as mere atomized wills and there is more to life than self-invention and the unencumbered pursuit of a destiny of our own devising. The truth is that persons are *embodied* beings, with all the natural limits and great gifts this entails. We experience our world, ourselves, and one another *as* living (and dying) bodies. Because we are bodies, vulnerability, mutual dependence, and natural limits are inextricable features of our lived human reality. And, ... our embodiment situates us in a particular relationship to one another, from which emerge obligations to come to the aid of vulnerable others, including especially the disabled, the elderly, and children. But because the law governing several of the core vital conflicts of American public bioethics rests on a vision of human identity and flourishing that does not consider embodiment as essential to its account of the person, it fails to recognize these obligations, and leaves the weakest and most vulnerable members of the human community invisible and unprotected.²



Justice Anthony Kennedy, in his opinion to the 1992 U.S. Supreme Court case *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* reaffirming *Roe v. Wade*, exemplified this false vision of human identity when he wrote, “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” In other words, Justice Kennedy and every other like-minded disembodied, “atomized and solitary will” are either gods or fools; odds are the latter, but then foolish gods, nonetheless. There are, no doubt, a host of fools who will themselves godhood, far more than necessary to convince the weakest minds that they also can “be like God” (Gen 3:5).

The problem comes from man’s hubris.³ While it is true that the divine image is present in every man⁴ that does not make every man divine. “Endowed with ‘a spiritual and immortal’ soul, the human person is ‘the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake.’”⁵ “The human person participates in the light and power of the divine Spirit. By his reason, he is capable of understanding the order of things established by the Creator. By free will, he is capable of directing himself toward his true good. He finds his perfection ‘in seeking and loving what is true and good.’”⁶ “By virtue of his soul and his spiritual powers of intellect and will, man is endowed with freedom, an ‘outstanding manifestation of the divine image.’”⁷

The dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God; it is fulfilled in his vocation to divine beatitude. It is essential to a human being freely to direct himself to this fulfillment. By his deliberate actions, the human person does, or does not, conform to the good promised by God and attested by moral conscience.⁸

Emerson once observed, “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.” Elsewhere and later, Walter

Lippmann wrote, “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.”⁹

We are in and of an age in which insanity rules with mad abandon whether in politics or religion, academy, or enterprise. There is no solid ground for those who would subscribe to objective reality, no truth in the absolute, no unalienable rights endowed by our Creator God. There is only the disembodied will to define one’s own rights, one’s own truth, one’s own reality, one’s own moral code. The weak-minded (there are far too many) are more than willing to accept the madness of the crowds as gospel for the weak-minded wanting to be free of thinking. Milton Friedman once said as much to an audience at Stanford University. “It is very tempting for individuals to say, ‘I want to be free of that.’ You know, freedom imposes costs as well as benefits. If you have to make up your own mind, that is a terrible thing. Most people would much prefer to have their mind made up for them, but if we are going to maintain a free society, we each of us have to undertake the task of making up our own mind.”

We are going through a great crowd derangement. In public and in private, both online and off, people are behaving in ways that are increasingly irrational, feverish, herd-like and simply unpleasant. The daily news cycle is filled with the consequences. Yet while we see the symptoms everywhere we do not see the causes.

One by one the narratives we had were refuted, became unpopular to defend or impossible to sustain. The explanations for our existence that used to be provided by religion went first, falling away from the nineteenth century onwards. Then over the last century the secular hopes held out by all political ideologies began to follow in religion’s wake.¹⁰

There are few in whom I admire more than Thomas Sowell—second only perhaps to G.K. Chesterton, of whom I hold the utmost respect and admiration. Indeed, and admittedly, as readers have at times openly suggested, I have on occasion overindulged in Chestertonian remarks; but then, I must protest, never have I misused or abused the privilege. So, before I mention further the admirable sage, Thomas Sowell, I must beg your indulgence with a brief Chestertonian essay written six score years ago.

In certain endless uplands, uplands like great flats gone dizzy, slopes that seem to contradict the idea that there is even such a thing as a level, and make us all realise that we live on a planet with a sloping roof, you will come from time to time upon whole valleys filled with loose rocks and boulders, so big as to be like mountains broken loose. The whole might be an experimental creation shattered and cast away. It is often difficult to believe that such cosmic refuse can have come together except by human means. The mildest and most cockney imagination conceives the place to be the scene of some war of giants. To me it is always associated with one idea, recurrent and at last instinctive. The scene was the scene of the stoning of some prehistoric prophet, a prophet as much more gigantic than after-prophets as the boulders are more gigantic than pebbles. He spoke some words—words that seemed shameful and tremendous—and the world, in terror, buried him under a wilderness of stones. The place is a monument of an ancient fear. If we followed the same mood of fancy, it would be more difficult to imagine what awful hint or wild picture of the universe called forth that primal persecution, what secret of sensational thought lies buried under the brutal stones. For in our time the blasphemies are threadbare. Pessimism is now patently, as it always was essentially, more commonplace than piety. Profanity is now more than an affectation—it is a convention. The curse against God is Exercise I in the primer of minor poetry. It was not, assuredly, for such babyish solemnities that our imaginary prophet was stoned in the morning of the world. If we weigh the matter in the faultless scales of imagination, if we see what is the real trend of humanity, we shall feel it most probable that he was stoned for saying that the grass was green and that the birds sang in the spring; for the mission of all the prophets from the beginning has not been so much the pointing out of heavens or hells as primarily the pointing out of the earth.

Religion has had to provide that longest and strangest telescope—the telescope through which we could see the star upon which we dwelt. For the mind and eyes of the average man this world is as lost as Eden and as sunken as Atlantis. There runs a strange law through the length of human history—that men are continually tending to undervalue their environment, to undervalue their happiness, to undervalue themselves. The great sin of mankind, the sin typified by the fall of Adam, is the tendency, not towards pride, but towards this weird and horrible humility.

This is the great fall, the fall by which the fish forgets the sea, the ox forgets the meadow, the clerk forgets the city, every man forgets his environment and, in the fullest and most literal sense, forgets himself. This is the real fall of Adam, and it is a spiritual fall. It is a strange

thing that many truly spiritual men, such as General Gordon, have actually spent some hours in speculating upon the precise location of the Garden of Eden. Most probably we are in Eden still. It is only our eyes that have changed.

The pessimist is commonly spoken of as the man in revolt. He is not. Firstly, because it requires some cheerfulness to continue in revolt, and secondly, because pessimism appeals to the weaker side of everybody, and the pessimist, therefore, drives as roaring a trade as the publican.¹¹ The person who is really in revolt is the optimist, who generally lives and dies in a desperate and suicidal effort to persuade all the other people how good they are. It has been proved a hundred times over that if you really wish to enrage people and make them angry, even unto death, the right way to do it is to tell them they are all the sons of God. Jesus Christ was crucified, it may be remembered, not because of anything he said about God, but on a charge of saying that a man could in three days pull down and rebuild the Temple. Every one of the great revolutionists, from Isaiah to Shelley, have been optimists. They have been indignant, not about the badness of existence, but about the slowness of men in realising its goodness. The prophet who is stoned is not a brawler or a marplot.¹² He is simply a rejected lover. He suffers from an unrequited attachment to things in general.

It becomes increasingly apparent, therefore, that the world is in a permanent danger of being misjudged. That this is no fanciful or mystical idea may be tested by simple examples. The two absolutely basic words "good" and "bad," descriptive of two primal and inexplicable sensations, are not, and never have been, used properly. Things that are bad are not called good by any people who experience them; but things that are good are called bad by the universal verdict of humanity.

Let me explain a little: Certain things are bad so far as they go, such as pain, and no one, not even a lunatic calls a toothache good in itself; but a knife which cuts clumsily and with difficulty is called a bad knife, which it certainly is not. It is only not so good as other knives to which men have grown accustomed. A knife is never bad except on such rare occasions as that in which it is neatly and scientifically planted in the middle of one's back. The coarsest and bluntest knife which ever broke a pencil into pieces instead of sharpening it is a good thing in so far as it is a knife. It would have appeared a miracle in the Stone Age. What we call a bad knife is a good knife not good enough for us; what we call a bad hat is a good hat not good enough for us; what we call bad cookery is good cookery not good enough for us; what we call a bad civilization is a good civilization not good enough for us. We choose to call the great mass of

the history of mankind bad, not because it is bad, but because we are better. This is palpably an unfair principle. Ivory may not be so white as snow, but the whole Arctic continent does not make ivory black.

Now it has appeared to me unfair that humanity should be engaged perpetually in calling all those things bad which have been good enough to make other things better, in everlastingly kicking down the ladder by which it has climbed. It has appeared to me that progress should be something else besides a continual paricide¹³; therefore, I have investigated the dustheaps of humanity, and found a treasure in all of them. I have found that humanity is not incidentally engaged, but eternally and systematically engaged, in throwing gold into the gutter and diamonds into the sea. I have found that every man is disposed to call the green leaf of the tree a little less green than it is, and the snow of Christmas a little less white than it is; therefore, I have imagined that the main business of a man, however humble, is defence. I have conceived that a defendant is chiefly required when worldlings despise the world—that a counsel for the defence would not have been out of place in that terrible day when the sun was darkened over Calvary and Man was rejected of men.¹⁴

Nowhere have I found a better and more apt description of the present insanity that threatens to overwhelm us. At least, that is, until I recently indulged my esurient mind with a magnificent tome written by Thomas Sowell entitled *Intellectuals and Society*. Sowell, now ninety years young, was born in Gastonia, North Carolina, adopted by a great-aunt upon the deaths of his parents, grew up in Harlem, New York where he attended Stuyvesant High School, a prestigious high school in New York City; he was the first in his family to study beyond the sixth grade. He did not graduate, forced to drop out at age 17 because of financial difficulties. He was drafted into the military in 1951 and served in the U.S. Marine Corps during the Korean War as a photographer. After his discharge from the military, he worked a civil service job in Washington, D.C. and attended night classes at Howard University, a historically black college. He enrolled at Harvard University, graduating magna cum laude with a B.A. degree in economics in 1958, received a master's degree from Columbia University in 1959, and a doctorate in economics from the University of Chicago in 1968, studying under such august minds as George Stigler, Friedrich Hayek, and Milton Friedman. He has taught economics at Howard University, Rutgers, Cornell, Brandeis University, Amherst

College, and the University of California, Los Angeles. Since 1980 he has worked at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, where he presently serves as the Rose and Milton Friedman Senior Fellow on Public Policy. He has written more than thirty books, all from a libertarian conservative perspective. While often described as a black conservative, he prefers not to be labeled. "I prefer not to have labels, but I suspect that 'libertarian' would suit me better than many others, although I disagree with the libertarian movement on a number of things." Sowell primarily writes on economic subjects, generally advocating a free market approach to capitalism. Sowell opposes the Federal Reserve, arguing that it has been unsuccessful in preventing economic depressions and limiting inflation. Sowell described his serious study of Karl Marx in his autobiography; he opposes Marxism, providing a critique in his book *Marxism: Philosophy and Economics* (1985).

Sowell has also written a trilogy of books on ideologies and political positions, including *A Conflict of Visions*, in which he speaks on the origins of political strife; *The Vision of the Anointed*, in which he compares the conservative/libertarian and liberal/progressive worldviews; and *The Quest for Cosmic Justice*, in which, as in many of his other writings, he outlines his thesis of the felt need—more a obsessive-compulsive disorder, in my humble opinion—by intellectuals, politicians, and leaders to fix and perfect the world in utopian, and ultimately he posits, disastrous fashions. Separate from the trilogy, but also in discussion of the subject, he wrote *Intellectuals and Society*, building on his earlier work, in which he discusses what he argues to be the blind hubris and follies of intellectuals in a variety of areas. It is from this work which I will draw upon for much of the remainder of this essay.

His book *Knowledge and Decisions*, a winner of the 1980 Law and Economics Center Prize, was heralded as a "landmark work," selected for this prize "because of its cogent contribution to our understanding of the differences between the market process and the process of government." In announcing the award, the center acclaimed Sowell, whose "contribution to our understanding of the process of regulation alone would make the book important, but in reemphasizing the diversity and efficiency that the market makes possible, his work goes deeper and becomes even more significant." Friedrich Hayek wrote:

"In a wholly original manner Sowell succeeds in translating abstract and theoretical argument into highly concrete and realistic discussion of the central problems of contemporary economic policy."

In several of his works, Sowell challenges the notion that black progress is due to progressive government programs or policies, including in *The Economics and Politics of Race* (1983), *Ethnic America* (1981), *Affirmative Action Around the World* (2004), and other books. He claims that many problems identified with blacks in modern society are not unique, neither in terms of American ethnic groups, nor in terms of a rural proletariat struggling with disruption as it became urbanized, as discussed in his *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* (2005). On systemic racism, Sowell is unequivocal, arguing it is an untested, questionable hypothesis, a piece of propaganda pushed on the American people. Sowell has said that "it really has no meaning that can be specified and tested in the way that one tests hypotheses" and "it's one of many words that I don't think even the people who use it have any clear idea what they're saying". He has argued that it is a propaganda tactic akin to those used by Joseph Goebbels because it comes with an attitude that it must be "repeated long enough and loud enough" till it is believed and people "cave in" to it. He has been and continues to be an outspoken critic of affirmative action and race-based quotas. He takes strong issue with the notion of government as a helper or savior of minorities, arguing that the historical record shows quite the opposite. In *Affirmative Action Around the World*, Sowell posits that affirmative action covers most of the American population, particularly women, and has long since ceased to favor blacks:

One of the few policies that can be said to harm virtually every group in a different way ... Obviously, whites and Asians lose out when you have preferential admission for black students or Hispanic students—but blacks and Hispanics lose out because what typically happens is the students who have all the credentials to succeed in college are admitted to colleges where the standards are so much higher that they fail.

In *Intellectuals and Race* (2013), Sowell argues that intelligence quotient (IQ) gaps are hardly startling or unusual between, or within, ethnic groups. He notes that the roughly 15-point gap in contemporary black–white IQ

scores is similar to that between the national average and the scores of certain ethnic white groups in years past, in periods when the nation was absorbing new immigrants.

In March 2019, Sowell commented on the public's response to mainstream media's allegations that Trump was a racist: "What's tragic is that there's so many people out there who simply respond to words rather than ask themselves 'Is what this person says true? How can I check it?' And so on." A month later, Sowell again defended Trump against media charges of racism, stating: "I've seen no hard evidence. And, unfortunately, we're living in a time where no one expects hard evidence. You just repeat some familiar words and people will react pretty much the way Pavlov's dog was conditioned to react to certain sounds."

In the preface to *Intellectuals and Society*, Sowell writes that "Although this book is about intellectuals, it is not written *for* intellectuals. ... This book is written for those readers who are willing to join with me in a search for some understanding of a distinct segment of the population whose activities can have, and have had, momentous implications for nations and civilizations. ... *Intellectuals and Society* seeks instead to explain ideological differences by differing underlying assumptions about the facts of life, the nature of human beings and the nature and distribution of knowledge." Sowell begins his journey through his explication of intellectuals stating what should be intuitively obvious, but obviously is not at all intuitive to many.

Intellect is not wisdom. There can be "unwise intellect," as Thomas Carlyle characterized the thinking of Harriet Taylor, the friend and later wife of John Stuart Mill. Sheer brainpower—intellect, the capacity to grasp and manipulate complex concepts and ideas—can be put at the service of concepts and ideas that lead to mistaken conclusions and unwise actions, in light of all the factors involved, including factors left out of some of the ingenious theories constructed by the intellect.

Brilliance—even genius—is no guarantee that consequential factors have not been left out or misconceived.

The capacity to grasp and manipulate complex ideas is enough to define intellect but not enough to encompass intelligence, which involves combining intellect with judgment and care in selecting relevant explanatory factors and in establishing empirical tests of any theory that emerges.

Intelligence minus judgment equals intellect.

Wisdom is the rarest quality of all—the ability to combine intellect, knowledge, experience, and judgment in a way to produce a coherent understanding. ... Wisdom requires self-discipline and an understanding of the realities of the world, including the limitations of one's own experience and of reason itself. The opposite of high intellect is dullness or slowness, but the opposite of wisdom is foolishness, which is far more dangerous.

George Orwell said that some ideas are so foolish that only an intellectual could believe them, for no ordinary man could be such a fool. The record of twentieth century intellectuals was especially appalling in this regard.¹⁵

Sowell goes on to describe what he means by intellectuals, categorizing "intellectuals" as "people whose occupations deal primarily with ideas—writers, academics, and the like." He suggests that most people do not consider brain surgeons or engineers as intellectuals, despite the demanding mental training and challenges required for those occupations. "At the core of the notion of an intellectual is the dealer in ideas¹⁶, as such—not the personal applications of ideas, as engineers apply complex scientific principles to create physical structures or mechanisms."

An intellectual's work begins and ends with ideas, however influential those ideas may be on concrete things—in the hands of others. Adam Smith never ran a business and Karl Marx never administered a Gulag. They were intellectuals. Ideas, as such, are not only the key to the intellectual's function, but are also the criteria of intellectual achievements and the source of the often dangerous seductions of the occupation.¹⁷

Intellectuals are ultimately unaccountable to the external world. "The prevalence and presumed desirability of this are confirmed by such things as academic tenure and expansive concepts of 'academic freedom' and academic 'self-governance.' In the media, expansive notions of freedom of speech and of the press play similar roles. In short, unaccountability to the external world is not simply a happenstance but a principle. ... Not only have intellectuals been insulated from material consequences, they have often enjoyed immunity from even a loss of reputation after having been demonstrably wrong."¹⁸

One of the surprising privileges of intellectuals is that they are free to be scandalously asinine without harming their reputation. The intellectuals who idolized

Stalin while he was purging millions and stifling the least stirring of freedom have not been discredited. They are still holding forth on every topic under the sun and are listened to with deference. Sartre returned in 1939 from Germany, where he studied philosophy, and told the world that there was little to choose between Hitler's Germany and France. Yet Sartre went on to become an intellectual pope revered by the educated in every land.¹⁹

Sowell distinguishes between special knowledge concentrated among intellectuals and mundane or intellectually unimpressive knowledge scattered among the population at large. As he notes, "mundane knowledge can vastly outweigh the special knowledge of elites, both in its amount and in its consequences." He further notes that it is doubtful whether the most knowledgeable person on earth has even one percent of the total knowledge on earth—even one-millionth of one percent would be mathematically improbable.

There are many serious implications of this which may, among other things, help explain why so many leading intellectuals have so often backed notions that proved to be disastrous. It is not simply with particular policies at particular times that intellectuals have often advocated mistaken and dangerous decisions. Their whole general approach to policy-making—their ideology—has often reflected a crucial misconception about knowledge and its concentration or dispersion.

Many intellectuals and their followers have been unduly impressed by the fact that highly educated elites like themselves have far more knowledge per capita—in the sense of special knowledge—than does the population at large. From this it is a short step to considering the educated elites to be superior guides to what should and should not be done in a society. They have often overlooked the crucial fact that the population at large may have vastly more total knowledge—in the mundane sense—than the elites, even if that knowledge is scattered in individually unimpressive fragments among vast numbers of people.

If no one has even one percent of the knowledge currently available, not counting the vast amounts of knowledge yet to be discovered, the imposition from the top down of the notions in favor among elites, convinced of their own superior knowledge and virtue, is a formula for disaster.²⁰

Sowell questions why decisions have been transferred from those with personal experience and a stake in the

outcome to the intellectual elite, those with neither, can ever be expected to lead to better decisions. He writes, "The ignorance, prejudices, and groupthink of an educated elite are still ignorance, prejudice, and groupthink—and for those with one percent of the knowledge in a society to be guiding or controlling those with the other 99 percent is as perilous as it is absurd." He adds, "it is far easier to concentrate power than to concentrate knowledge. That is why so much social engineering backfires and why so many despots have led their countries into disasters." In addition to the educated elite, Sowell considers the role of the "expert."

Experts have their place and can be extremely valuable in those places, this no doubt being one reason for the old expression, "Experts should be on tap, not on top." For broader social decision-making, however, experts are no substitute for systemic processes which engage innumerable factors on which no given individual can possibly be expert, and engage the 99 percent of consequential knowledge scattered in fragments among the populations at large and coordinated systemically during the process of their mutual accommodations to one another's demand and supply.²¹

Decision making by third party (intellectuals, bureaucrats, and experts) fiat allows the superimposition of their preferences on others at no cost to themselves, and to become the arbiters of the economic and social welfare of others without accountability for the consequences. The question to be asked is why? Why have the 99% succumbed to the ideological nonsense of the less than 1%? "One of the fertile sources of confusion in discussions of ideological issues is the dichotomy between the political left and the political right. Perhaps," he says, "the most fundamental difference between the left and the right is that only the former has even a rough definition. What is called 'the right' are simply the various and separate opponents of the left. These opponents of the left may share no particular principle, much less a common agenda, and they can range from free-market libertarians to advocates of monarchy, theocracy, military dictatorship or innumerable other principles, systems and agendas."

To people who take words literally, to speak of "the left" is to assume implicitly that there is some other coherent group which constitutes "the right." Perhaps it would be less confusing if what we call "the left" would be designated by some other term, perhaps just as X. ...

A rough summary of the vision of the political left today is that of collective decision-making through government, directed toward—or at least rationalized by—the goal of reducing economic and social inequalities. There may be moderate or extreme versions of the left vision or agenda but, among those designated as “the right,” the difference between free market libertarians and military juntas is not simply one of degree in pursuing a common vision, because there is no common vision among these and other disparate groups opposed to the left—which is to say, there is no such definable things as “the right,” though there are various segments of that omnibus category, such as free market advocates, which can be defined.²²

At this point, I must ask for your indulgence for I admit to being a impractical practitioner of mathematics—indeed, I have been known to have discovered the near infinite number of wrong answers to $2 + 2 = ?$ while failing miserably to note the one correct answer which has forever eluded me. While I have considered this a weakness and a dismal failure on my part, it would seem I was born too soon, for according to the Mathematics Association of America, $2 + 2$ can equal any answer you choose; to disparage any answer as wrong is, wait for it, “racist!”

It is time for all members of our profession to acknowledge that mathematics is created by humans and therefore inherently carries human biases. Until this occurs, our community and our students cannot reach full potential. Reaching this potential in mathematics relies upon the academy and higher education engaging in critical, challenging, sometimes uncomfortable conversations about the detrimental effects of race and racism on our community. The time is now to move mathematics and education forward in pursuit of justice.²³

So, for anyone who has a gift for numbers and formulas and strange symbolisms, I will readily stand corrected for what follows, after all what should one expect from a septuagenarian white male. The formula I have devised is my own and I am reasonably certain that any bright inquiring mind will point out the illogic of it square away. So be it. I have devised it merely to express and explicate what Sowell has so wisely stated.

$$\{X\} \rightarrow \sum_n^{x-1} \{X\}$$

I must admit, it looks exquisitely complex and perhaps, a bit mysterious, but rather mundane in explanation. Simply put, X is the set of those constituting “the left,” who *do not* belong to the sum of all groups (sets) that are *not* X ($\neg X$) that is, those who constitute “the right.” In other words, “the left,” though much smaller than the totality of groups that make up “the right,” being a more cohesive and exponentially more vocal ideology, easily outshout any one of the diverse groups that are lumped together under the poor umbrella called “the right.” I would be remiss to not point out that the main reason “the left” can outshout “the right” is their near complete possession of the media megaphone. As Sowell points out, “Perhaps if liberals were simply called X and conservatives were called Y there would be less confusion.” Personally, I have my doubts.

Conservatism, in its original sense, has no specific ideological content at all, since everything depends on what one is trying to conserve. In the last days of the Soviet Union, for example, those who were trying to preserve the existing Communist regime were rightly referred to as “conservatives,” though what they were trying to conserve had nothing in common with what was advocated by Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek or William F. Buckley in the United States, much less Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, a leading conservative in the Vatican who subsequently became Pope. Specific individuals with the “conservative” label have specific ideological positions, but there is no commonality of specifics among “conservatives” in different venues.²⁴

Clearly, there is a conflict of visions between “the left” and everyone not on “the left.” As Sowell describes it, “The conflict between these two visions goes back for centuries.”

Those with the tragic vision and those with the vision of the anointed do not simply happen to differ on a range of policy issues. They *necessarily* differ, because they are talking about very different worlds which exist inside their minds. Moreover, they are talking about different creatures who inhabit that world, even though both call these creatures human beings, for the nature of those human beings is also fundamentally different as seen in the two visions.

In the tragic vision, there are especially severe limits on how much any given individual can know and truly understand, which is why this vision puts so much emphasis not only on specialization but also on systemic

social processes whose economic and social transactions draw upon the varied knowledge and experience of millions, past and present. In the vision of the anointed, however, far more knowledge and intelligence are available to some people than to others, and the differences between them and the masses are far greater than in the tragic vision.

These opposing visions differ not only in what they believe exists and in what they think is possible, but also in what they think needs explaining. To those with the vision of the anointed, it is such evils as poverty, crime, war, and injustice which require explanation. To those with the tragic vision, however, it is prosperity, law, peace, and such justice as we have achieved, which require not only explanation but constant efforts, trade-offs, and sacrifices, just to maintain them at their existing levels, much less promote their enhancement over time.²⁵

While everything I have written above has largely focused on the public square, religion is not in the leastwise absent its own coven of intellectuals with their own visions of the anointed. What is common among intellectuals in the main, whether secular or religious, is the emptiness brought about by intensely gazing inward on the self and away from God. "If the things we do are intended to build a kingdom of the self, the foundation we build on is one of sand. Things we once may have pursued out of a genuine interest are no longer recognized as gifts but instead start to tyrannize our lives and identities."²⁶ What is becoming alarmingly obvious is this obsessive self-promotion and concomitant demotion of God. It is everywhere, but it is most prevalent outside the home and inside the classroom and houses of worship, be it church, temple, or synagogue. As one prominent educational theorist (intellectual) put it, "[the teacher] must make it possible for his students to create meanings in a cosmos devoid of objective meaning, to find reasons for being."²⁷ According to this "intellectual", from this perspective, truth, meaning, and reality are neither verifiable nor real, and certainly are not revealed by God; instead, we construct it all for ourselves, and envision—imagine—the results will be something that will give our lives meaning.

If knowledge is constructed by the self in the classroom, we shouldn't be surprised to find individual identity being self-constructed outside the classroom as well. Everything is merely a creation of the human will; as the current slogan goes, "Live your truth." But if this is

the constructivist end-game, why play along in the game of school? If there is no objective meaning, the whole enterprise of education is on shaky ground. If truth and meaning are relative to each individual's construction, why bother with the educational endeavor in the first place?²⁸

Is there any question why the public education cabal have no problem with closed schools and empty classrooms? Is it any wonder that we have all become relativists? A 2019 Barna survey shows that 83 percent of surveyed teenagers said moral truth depends on the circumstances, while only 6 percent said moral truth is absolute.²⁹ Silence on matters of truth and morality speak volumes, resounding throughout our formative years and well into adulthood. "When relativism reigns in the classroom, narcissism tends to follow." With parents and teachers too hesitant to take a stand, the message for young people is that they know what is best for themselves. "Instead of being directed towards truth, goodness, and beauty, children are left to play in the mud of the baser instincts and shallow entertainment." Without moral guidance, children are trapped in a narcissistic cycle of the self, digitally reflected and intensified by the dopamine hits of social media and popular culture. Such neutrality results in indoctrinating the young into a secular worldview, a view without God, eradicating absolute truth from their lexicon.

Viktor Frankl, while interned in Auschwitz, wrote in his life-affirming book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, "Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose." He observed that people in the most degrading and tormenting conditions, whose life could be snuffed out at any moment, could endure any horror or suffering and not lose hope if they had something beyond the self to live for. He believed that commitment to a purpose beyond the self was vital for human flourishing. When belief in a transcendent purpose is absent, people find substitutes in all the wrong places, be it entertainment, hedonism, or collectivist politics. "If the *sine qua non* of human flourishing lies outside the self, then a commitment to some goal beyond the self literally makes the difference between life and death. Man searches for meaning because man needs meaning."³⁰ In our search for meaning, we have, instead, encountered the virtue of meaninglessness, adopting various forms of

compulsive or addictive behaviors which have made adventure, sex, and even ourselves meaningless in the process. Life without meaning is life not worth living. Is it any wonder that crimes against humanity—murder, human trafficking, suicide, torture, cancel culture, tyranny, socialism, communism, totalitarianism, Marxism, bigotry, hate, war, terrorism—are on the rise and threatening to overcome us?

People with opposing visions of the world do not simply happen to reach different conclusions about the young and the old. On these and innumerable other issues, the conclusions reached by each are entailed as corollaries of their underlying assumptions about knowledge and wisdom. The education of the young has long been a battleground between adherents of the two visions of the nature of human beings and the nature of knowledge and wisdom. William Godwin's notion that the young "are a sort of raw material put into our hands" remains, after two centuries, a powerful temptation to classroom indoctrination in schools and colleges. In the early twentieth century, Woodrow Wilson wrote of his years as an academic administrator when he felt "I should like to make the young gentlemen of the rising generation as unlike their fathers as possible."

This indoctrination can start as early as elementary school, where students are encouraged or required to write about controversial issues, sometimes in letters to public officials. More fundamentally, the indoctrination process habituates them to taking sides on weighty and complex issues after hearing just one side of those issues. Moreover, they are habituated to venting their emotions instead of analyzing conflicting evidence and dissecting conflicting arguments. In short, they are led to prepackaged conclusions, instead of being equipped with the intellectual tools to reach their own conclusions, including conclusions different from those of their teachers.³¹

There is much more to be said here but time has grown short and the litany of words overlong. Whether one may reach this point in this lengthy exercise is of some concern so I will leave what yet needs to be said for another essay.

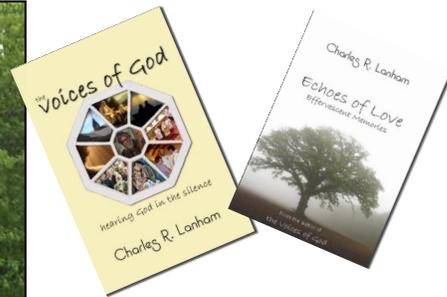
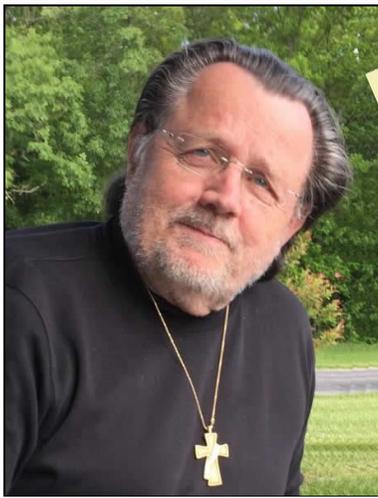
1. This view insults and ignores the existence of God and his creation of the human person, created in the image of God, a being at once corporeal and spiritual. The biblical account expresses this reality in symbolic language when it affirms that "then the Lord God formed

man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. Man, whole and entire, is therefore *willed* by God (CCC §362). In Sacred Scripture the term "soul" often refers to human *life* or the entire human *person*. But "soul" also refers to the innermost aspect of man, that which is of greatest value in him, that by which he is most especially in God's image: "soul" signifies the *spiritual principle* in man (CCC §363). The human body shares in the dignity of the "image of God": it is a human body precisely because it is animated by a spiritual soul, and it is the whole human person that is intended to become, in the body of Christ, a temple of the Spirit: Man, though made of body and soul, is a unity. Through his very bodily condition he sums up in himself the elements of the material world. Through him they are thus brought to their highest perfection and can raise their voice in praise freely given to the Creator. For this reason man may not despise his bodily life. Rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and to hold it in honor since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day (CCC §364). The unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the "form" of the body: i.e., it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; Spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature (CCC §365).

2. O. Carter Snead, *What It Means to be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2020) 2-3.
3. **Hubris** (/ˈhjuːbrɪs/, from ancient Greek ὕβρις) describes a personality quality of extreme or foolish pride or dangerous overconfidence, often in combination with (or synonymous with) arrogance. The term "arrogance" comes from the Latin *adrogare*, meaning to feel that one has a right to demand certain attitudes and behaviors from other people. To "arrogate" means "to claim or seize without justification.... to make undue claims to having", or "to claim or seize without right... to ascribe or attribute without reason". Hubris often indicates a loss of contact with reality and an overestimation of one's own competence, accomplishments or capabilities.
4. Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) §1702.
5. CCC §1703.
6. CCC §1704.
7. CCC §1705.
8. CCC §1700.
9. Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), 80.
10. Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2019), 1.
11. **Publican**: a tax collector.

12. *Marplot*: one who frustrates or ruins a plan or undertaking by meddling.
13. *Parricide*: the killing of a parent or other near relative.
14. G.K. Chesterton, *Introduction to The Defendant, 1901*, from *"In Defense of Sanity: The Best Essays of G.K. Chesterton"* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2011), 1-4.
15. Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011), 3-4.
16. The thought immediately arose as to the rather quixotic similarities between a "dealer in ideas" and a "dealer in dope" which seems too close for comfort.
17. Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society*, 4-5.
18. Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society*, 10.
19. Eric Hoffer, *Before the Sabbath* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 3.
20. Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society*, 17-18.
21. Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society*, 27.
22. Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society*, 98-99.
23. Barrett Wilson, "Mathematics association declares math is racist", *American News*, October 3, 2020.
24. Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society*, 102.
25. Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society*, 96-97.
26. Peter Biles, "Retaking Delight", *Salvo*, Issue 56, Spring 2021, 11.
27. Maxine Greene, *Existential Encounters for Teachers* (Random House, 1967), 3.
28. Joshua Pauling, "No Teacher Neutrality", *Salvo*, Issue 56, Spring 2021, 12. In her book *Total Truth* (Crossway Books, 2004, p. 242), Nancy Pearcey recounts a story showing just how pervasive constructivism has become. Pearcey spoke at a Christian educators' conference on the Darwinian and relativistic roots of constructivist educational theory. After her address, a Christian school superintendent said, "All my teachers are constructivists—all of them." Pearcey asked, "But don't they realize what that means for their faith? ... If knowledge is a social construction, then that applies to Christianity as well—it's just a product of social forces." The superintendent responded, "I know, I know. But constructivism is what they learned at the university under the auspices of the 'experts,' and they don't question it. They just keep their religious beliefs in a separate mental category from their professional studies." Pearcey reflects that, "as a result of this compartmentalization, the teachers had unwittingly embraced a radical postmodernism that reduces all truth claims to merely social constructions."
29. "Americans Are Most Likely to Base Truth on Feelings," The Barna Group, Ltd. (Sept. 18, 2019): [barna.com/research/americans-are-most-likely-to-base-truth-on-feelings](https://www.barna.com/research/americans-are-most-likely-to-base-truth-on-feelings).
30. John D. Martin, "Our Search for Meaning", *Salvo*, Issue 56, Spring 2021, 29. .
31. Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society*, 110. To support this argument, Sowell cites John Stuart Mill, "On Liber-

ty," *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Vol. XVIII, p. 245. "He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that ... Nor is it enough that he should hear the arguments of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. That is not the way to do justice to the arguments, or bring them into real contact with his own mind. He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them; who defend them in earnest, and do their very utmost for them. He must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form ..."



COMING SOON!
COLLOQUI
VOLUMES I, II, III, IV

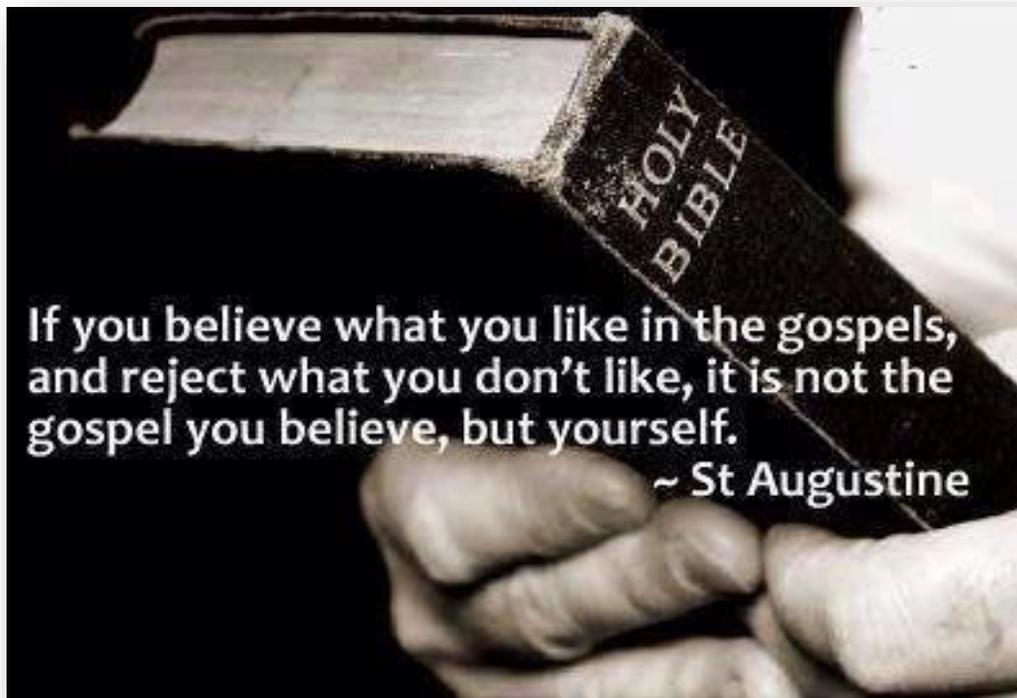


Books are available on
Amazon.com or from the
author's web site at:
deaconscorner.org

Deacon Chuck Lanham is a Catholic author, columnist, speaker, theologian and philosopher, a jack-of-all-trades like his father (though far from a master of anything) and a servant of God. He is the author of **The Voices of God: Hearing God in the Silence**, **Echoes of Love: Effervescent Memories** and has written over 500 essays on religion, faith, morality, theology, and philosophy.

Deacon Chuck can be contacted thru email at

deacon.chuck@deaconscorner.org



Colloquī, the present infinitive of *colloquor* (Latin: *to talk, to discuss or to converse*) is a Deacon's Corner weekly journal. Its mission and purpose to encourage serious discussion, to promote reasoned debate, and to provide serious content for those who hope to find their own pathway to God. Each week **Colloquī** will contain articles on theology, philosophy, faith, religion, Catholicism, and much more. Be forewarned! Essays may and often will contain fuel for controversy, but always with the expressed intent to seek the Truth, the whole Truth and nothing but the Truth, so help us God.

Colloquī is published weekly by Deacon's Corner Publishing. Each issue of **Colloquī** is available online: <https://deaconscorner.org>

Copyright © 2020 by **Deacon's Corner Publishing**. All rights reserved. Produced in the U.S.A. <https://deaconscorner.org>.