Episode 847: A Conflict of Visions: Michael Malice and Tom Talk Thomas Sowell

Guest: Michael Malice

WOODS: All right, let me introduce what we're going to be talking about today. For a project you're working on, you were reading some Thomas Sowell and you looked at his book, *A Conflict of Visions*. And it's a book that I've heard of a number of times — that one and *Knowledge and Decisions* were the ones that people were telling me I should read. And I had always read some of his lesser known and less celebrated ones that I liked very much.

Well, I sat down to read this one and he says in the beginning it's his favorite of his books. And I started reading it, and I instantly thought, Wow, he's even greater than I thought. And it's true that the ideas in the book are not absolutely original to him, but I think the way he arranges and organizes the argument I think does help people understand where we're all coming from and why it would be — it can't just be a coincidence that a lot of times the same kind of person who believes in green energy also has a particular belief in income inequality. There's no particular reason that that should be the case, and yet it is.

And so what he's trying to do in this book is show that there are these underlying visions — visions of the world, visions of man, visions of limits, visions of lack of limits on what's possible — that inform the ideological struggles of the day. So it's a super, super great book and I'm glad you had me read — I pretty much do whatever you tell me to do, so I read it.

MALICE: [laughing] That's very sweet.

WOODS: And you said let's talk about this, in particular his idea of the constrained versus the unconstrained visions of man. So do you want to lay that out?

MALICE: Yeah, well, first of all, just a couple of things for listeners about Thomas Sowell. I think Thomas Sowell is probably the second best of the conservative writers out there. I have a very low opinion of most conservative writers. I can't recommend many of them. He's number two on my list. Number one would be James Burnham. And though he's not as original as Burnham, his clarity of prose — it's very, very, very hard, as you know very well, to take concepts and philosophical concepts and translate them into clear English and have it be easy to read, and yet you're getting information. And he does it — I'm reading it and my jaw's on the floor, it's so well done.

But what was specifically interesting about this book, which was shocking me to know, I thought this concept was universally known in libertarianism the way it's very heavily known in conservatism, and that's not the case. And I was surprised because I think this idea he has of the constrained versus unconstrained visions of humanity are as important as, let's say, public choice theory. And yet many of the libertarians I've spoken to aren't familiar with this dichotomy at all, and it actually harkens back to our debate. I touched on it, and I didn't get into it at length because I really thought this was a given that people understood this, and it's not a given so that's on me completely.

So what people often talk about — and this drives me crazy — how libertarians are neither a right wing or a left wing. And that's false. It depends on your axis of whether you're talking about what right means and what left means, and on each of these different independent axes, the libertarian is going to be on one side or the other. And of course there are different kinds of libertarianism. So in terms of social issues, you might have some people who are on the left and some on the right, but the idea that we transcend these dichotomies is nonsense.

And one of the biggest ways where libertarianism is far right is on this issue of constrained versus unconstrained visions of humanity. And what does Sowell mean by this? What he means is when we are born, is there a very finite, malleable clay that we can work with in terms of changing what humans are and what they're capable of, which is the constrained vision? Or is it, you can do anything you want; as long as we set our minds to it, we can remake society and it's just a technical problem we haven't worked out yet? And sane libertarians, in my opinion, are all agreeing with the former, that human beings are very limited in the scope of the extent they can change society.

WOODS: Let's go through a little bit with what is implied in the constrained and unconstrained visions. First of all, Sowell gives two people as paradigm cases of each one. I'm not sure Adam Smith is the best example for the constrained vision, but he's an example. And William Godwin for the unconstrained.

The idea is that Smith views human beings as being limited, for example, in the extent to which, frankly, they care about other people. I could hear about a terrible tragedy five countries over and it's a terrible tragedy, and then that same night I'm sleeping in my bed with a smile on my face with no discomfort at all. And likewise, to get people to do what you want them to do, you've got to give them an incentive to do it. It's not enough to say, In the abstract it would be good for you to do this.

Whereas Godwin thinks, No, to the contrary, that is what we should be striving for, is to have people who don't need to be goaded by incentives because that's what people can ultimately become, that's what they have the potential to be, but they've either been corrupted by institutions or by people like Adam Smith who keep trying to nudge them around with incentives. So that's a part of it.

But the difference in visions goes well beyond that. It's also the idea, if you think about the constrained versus unconstrained vision, which one would be more likely to think that society could be centrally planned? Obviously the unconstrained. There are no limits to what we can accomplish if we hold our hands and put our heads together.

So you can see how rich these ideas are. Now let's take this and see if we can use it to make sense of arguments people have today, right now, right this minute, 2017.

MALICE: Well, actually, I wanted to go back to arguments people were having in 1789.

WOODS: I like those.

MALICE: Yeah, yeah. So I know you're not a Jeffersonian, per se, meaning you're a Jeffersonian in the broad sense but you find people who are in his camp much preferable to him personally. Right, isn't that your position?

WOODS: He has some quirks that I don't care for, but he has some good qualities that I like. But I don't believe that he was an optimist about human nature, because if that would be the case, then why would he want to keep political units so broken up and small?

MALICE: Okay, here we go. Perfect. So this is something that I was kind of touching on in our debate. Now, it's useful although not often accurate to have these dichotomies to discuss philosophy. The classic one is like Nietzsche with Apollo versus Dionysius, and there's others — Plato versus Aristotle is another classical one. Thomas Aquinas versus Augustine. Now, these are extreme cases and oftentimes they have a lot of overlap, but when it comes for philosophy it's kind of good to have these two separate issues.

Now, Jefferson and Hamilton, if we have a forced choice between the two of them, it was Hamilton — and this is kind of, people still ask me why I like Hamilton so much. It is Hamilton who specifically of all the Founding Fathers had the constrained vision, because part of the constrained vision is the idea that you are always going to have corruption and evil and bad people looking out for number one in a bad sense. And how do you take that energy and control it as opposed to pretending it doesn't exist or thinking you're going to be able to marginalize it?

And a good example of this is a story — which, I don't know if it really happened — where it's Hamilton, Adams, and Jefferson. Again, I'm not sure that this actually happened, but it's an example of their thought. And Jefferson says the best constitution is the French Constitution. And Adams says the best constitution is the British Constitution except for the corruption. And Hamilton says no, it's the British Constitution because of the corruption. And Jefferson looks at him — his eyes pop out of his head and he kind of shakes his head and leaves the room. Now, this is exactly the difference between the constrained and the unconstrained version. Are you going to account for having bad people doing bad things, or are you going to have this kind of — and he very much had this utopian worldview, where you could have a society where these people are effectively marginalized.

WOODS: All right, my turn.

MALICE: Yes.

WOODS: It seems to me that the ideas, the constitutional ideas of the two people fit in pretty well into the constrained and unconstrained categories. You have Jefferson, the strict constructionist, and you have Hamilton, the broad constructionist. Now, if I were somebody who thought, Look, there's only so much government can accomplish and otherwise it can be a very, very dangerous thing, then I would want to keep it absolutely strictly confined to what the constitution authorizes. Whereas if I were some wide-eyed utopian, I would say, Well, look, the elites can be trusted to make sure that we don't abuse power, and it's too clunky to try to insert everything we might want to do into the constitution, so we'll just have this discretionary power where we'll be able to — Do you see what I mean? It seems to me that based on that, it's clear that Jefferson is the constrained vision.

MALICE: No, okay. No, no, no, he's not saying that the elites can be trusted. Hamilton is saying we have no choice but to trust them. The constrained vision means you are always going to have people in power, and that's a starting point, and what happens now?

WOODS: All right, I accept that. I mean, I accept that that's the argument.

MALICE: Do you not think that that's true in real life?

WOODS: What, that there will always be people in power?

MALICE: Yes, right.

WOODS: Well, it depends on — [laughing] I'm sorry to sound like the Clintons, but it does depend on what you mean by "power," because what's the point of being an ancap if you don't think that at some point it's at least conceivable that you could have a society based on some other arrangement?

MALICE: I think even in an ancap society you're going to have people who are more powerful than others.

WOODS: Okay, yeah, yeah, yeah. If that's how we're understanding it, then fine. But look at the way — look at Jefferson's vision of society. And by the way, we can't make this into just Jefferson and Hamilton, because there's more here than just that. But look at his vision for society. The states can nullify unconstitutional federal laws. Toward the end of his life he's favoring the ward republic scheme, where just a part of a society would be in charge of the schools and whatever the local institutions are, and so you wouldn't have some gigantic national institution; you'd have these little, tiny things, which if you have an unconstrained vision, you tend to be a universalist. You tend to say, Well, national boundaries are but nothing compared to the glorious liberty of mankind. Let us spread liberty around the world.

MALICE: Oh my God, oh my God.

WOODS: Jefferson favors very small political units.

MALICE: Wait, are you sincerely saying that you think Jefferson is less of a universalist than Hamilton?

WOODS: Actions speak louder than words.

MALICE: Yes or no?

WOODS: No. Look at his arrangement. He's not calling for — He doesn't even believe there is such a thing as an American people. He thinks there are Virginians —

MALICE: Right, like a universalist, he thinks that there's a brotherhood of humanity that transcends the world. That's a universalist model, isn't it?

WOODS: [laughing]

MALICE: I'm not joking.

WOODS: No, but —

MALICE: But that's the thing. They're against nationalism because they think we're all brothers.

WOODS: Are you not getting my point here, that — ?

MALICE: I'm not agreeing with your point here.

WOODS: His whole system runs contrary to every utopian dreamer's plan, which is —

MALICE: I don't believe that utopianism and universalism are synonymous, and I don't' think you do either.

WOODS: All right, maybe I'll try and explain it this way: a lot of people use a lot of flowery language. They use it all the time. I just got an email today from Meetup about how now they're joining the Donald Trump resistance movement. Now, I'm sure that's because they thought it would benefit their bottom line to do that. There are a lot of people who give pretty speeches about a lot of things that nothing ever comes of.

Jefferson may well have thought that the human race is ultimately one — and of course to some degree, of course it is. But the point is that how did he actually live his life? He lived his life thinking of his country as being just Virginia. He lived his life thinking that most people should be concerned just about what goes on in the ward they live in, for heaven's sake. He thought small. Yeah, yeah, yeah, when he's sipping tea with philosophers he thinks about people all over the world, but he's actually quite constrained in his outlook. That's why his political system is so limited. Strict construction and states' rights.

MALICE: Okay, Tom, the Declaration of Independence is pretty much a great universalist document in the basis of what was later used in the UN, which is the most

universalist kind of establishment on Earth. And you say it doesn't matter what people are doing when they're sitting there sipping tea, and in one sense, that's fair. Like, Hamilton might say one thing and then the Whiskey Rebellion happens, and it's like, which one of these really matters? What he says, or what he does on horseback? And that's a fair argument.

My point is when you're dealing with such giants, you have to look at their writing, because that's as much their legacy as their actions. For Jefferson, it would be the Declaration and his other voluminous writings, which are extremely influential and important. And for Hamilton, it's things like The Federalist Papers. And I think Jefferson, even if in practice his politics would be much more localized than Hamilton, in terms of his culture, he would be in the left side of the aisle in terms of saying he has as much empathy with a Frenchman as he does someone from New York.

WOODS: It's interesting that you say Frenchman and New York, though, because would — I mean, this is a Jefferson who thought that probably whites and blacks could not even live in the same country.

MALICE: But everyone thought that.

WOODS: Okay, so there is a constrained vision. There is a constrained vision.

MALICE: Oh, come on, are you serious? Constrained doesn't mean — I mean, just because someone is a racist, in terms of — let's say for them in terms of the white race —

WOODS: You can't be a universalist if you're a racist.

MALICE: Yes, you can; you just read black people out of the human race like people did at the time. Easily.

WOODS: I don't think Jefferson actually claimed black people were not human beings, or there wouldn't have been any moral problem to wrestle with. All right, you and I can talk about Jefferson and Hamilton till the cows come home — I hate that expression [laughing]. For some reason I — I know you must hate it. For some reason that's why I used it.

MALICE: No, you must hate it because it reminds you of Kansas.

WOODS: Yeah, well, no doubt.

MALICE: [laughing]

WOODS: I could say that it was Russell Kirk, his view of Hamilton was that — basically he didn't say that Hamilton believed in the unconstrained vision but that because Hamilton wanted to remake America and make it into this big industrial power through artificial means instead of just letting society progress organically on its own, that's the opposite of the constrained vision. So let me give you a chance to say something to that.

MALICE: Are you saying that — I appreciate the dig and that's a good blow to land, to bring in Russell Kirk, who was garbage. However, you surely don't think that saying that one economic system is better than another and wanting to make America into a powerhouse is the same as having the unconstrained vision. And let me just bring you to the present day and how it relates to contemporary discourse in a manner that you and I are going to be in complete agreement.

WOODS: Okay. So now it's boring for the listeners, but go ahead [laughing]. No, it'll be good. Go ahead. Let's do that.

MALICE: No, it's not boring, because this is something that people are aware of on a subliminal basis but they aren't aware of consciously, and once you point this out, everyone's just like, Oh, wow. Oh my gosh, how did I not think of this?

One of the things that — I was born in the former Soviet Union, as you know, and one of the things my dad always taught me — people who are Jewish in Russia are treated terribly. And when I was working with D.L. Hughley in his books — he grew up in South Central — he told me all these horror stories about how he ten years old and being harassed by the police, things like this. And one of the things that D.L. and I agreed on, one thing my dad told me is, You are always going to have prejudiced people. And that's the starting point. You're never going to get rid of it. It's something you have to grapple with and accept.

However, for many people on the left, they literally think you can make racism and racists vanish. And when you ask them, What happens to democracy when racists have votes?, or you say, You can't allow racists to have power. Literally, what are you going to do with them? Are you going to teleport them into the middle of the ocean? And they never have an answer. They're imagining a society where these people no longer exist. But that's something that's absolutely impossible. And when you listen to them talk, it's like, Yeah, yeah, yeah, I like your goal, but you're talking about something that is so impossible to put into practice — which is what allows them to justify such absolute draconian control over people's lives. Because only if you control every aspect of somebody's life and thought are you going to be positioned to wipe out wrong ideas from society completely.

WOODS: Well, that leads me into the question I wanted to ask you from the beginning. Given that you've written so much about North Korea, spell out the connection — because I know there is one — between the unconstrained vision and totalitarianism.

MALICE: Right. So any totalitarianism — and the word totalitarianism obviously has the word total in it, which is a type of cereal which communists like. No, no. It means complete and absolute. If you look at Nazi Germany, if you look at Soviet Russia and contemporarily North Korea — although this is decreasingly the case there, which I can get into in a second — they start out with, We are going — How human beings are is not a given. We are going to take them, and through — what did Lenin — I think it was Lenin who said, Give me a child and I'll make him a communist. You take them as kids, you teach them in the schools what you want them to learn, you punish them as adults in terms of their private life, and by bits and pieces, you mold them and remake them. And Marx had this idea that after a certain point, you would have the new communist

man, and you wouldn't need the government because everyone would be so changed that they'll do what they "should" without any other sense of coercion.

Now, of course, that's not what ended up working out in practice. What ended up working out in practice is you were effectively putting people into a meat grinder, often somewhat literally, because they weren't fitting the slots of your cockamamie program. And they have to be punished for being human beings as opposed to you having to be punished for having a crazy philosophy that's not based in reality.

WOODS: All right, so the totalitarians, we see that. Garden-variety leftism, we see that. Can we say something about neoconservatism and the unconstrained vision?

MALICE: Well, yeah, because neoconservatism comes heavily from progressivism. I say that they're just progressives with an old lady at the wheel driving the speed limit. And if you look at the Iraq War, they really thought, We're going to go in and make these Iraqis into Americans. We're going to apply our American system to them; it's going to fit them like a shirt. Maybe it'll take them five years to learn about executive, legislative, and judiciary. And by the time we're done, everything's going to be great. Well, that's not how it works. Human beings are not infinitely malleable, and even if they are malleable, it's going to be over a very, very long time and you're going to have to convince them of this philosophy.

So the idea that it's going to be easy from the top down to kind of — and this is conservatism's best argument. The idea that a bunch of people can sit down and basically remake society in a generation and you're not going to have enormous unintended, unforeseen consequences is insane. And Chesterton, whom I'm not a big fan of, had this great quote, which I'm going to mangle, to the effect of, Before you take down a fence, make sure you know why they put it up first. And that is the constrained vision to a T, that we're basically one accident away from *Lord of the Flies*, and you always have to be aware of this kind of savage, feral nature that works inside all of us, and to pretend that that's not there is absolutely terrifying and destructive.

WOODS: That's exactly the way I feel about this, so it's interesting that as we wind down that we're coming to that level of agreement. I'm just thinking about the way somebody who believes in, let's say, the unconstrained vision would react to this conversation. And I think their view would be that we're condemning the human race to a lot of —

MALICE: We're sick.

WOODS: Yeah, to a lot of avoidable suffering, because — And by the way, also, I think the point I'd rather make, actually, is that this is the reason that a lot of superficially intelligent people wind up being socialists or social democrats: because they feel like, well, I'm really clever and I built a lot of interesting contraptions when I was 12 years old. Surely I can build an economy. Or surely I can build a health care system or whatever. I can devise things from the ground up. I can scrap everything we've learned from the past, which is all stupid and backward and idiotic, and from my own brain I can devise it all. And they don't want to be told they can't. They think that anybody who tells them they can't do that must by definition be an anti-intellectual boob.

MALICE: And what's amazing is that when you talk to them about anarchism and you talk about, let's say, private police forces —

WOODS: That's utopian.

MALICE: Not only that; they think about it for 30 seconds, can't figure out how it's going to work, and they're like, Well, therefore it can't be done.

WOODS: Yeah, isn't that something [laughing]?

MALICE: Right, because you, who's thought about this for 30 seconds, couldn't figure it out, as if there's not one mind on Earth who could figure this out, that just really speaks to the narcissism of the unconstrained vision, because their vision is based on, I can use my imagination — I'm Walt Disney — an remake the world however I like, and it's going to be easy, and the only thing stopping me are people who are obstinate and in my way. Whereas in actual fact, human nature and laws of economics and laws of politics and even the weather are all things that are going to get in your way that you can't account for ahead of time.

WOODS: And I rather suspect that in the back of the minds of some of the real atrocity-doers in the world has been this thought that, These people are in my way.

MALICE: Oh yes.

WOODS: I can create this society, and these stupid people are in my way.

MALICE: Well, why else isn't it working? I know I have the answer. The answer's not coming. Clearly someone — And Tom, this is the case in every society that has —

WOODS: Saboteurs.

MALICE: The wreckers. In the Soviet Union it's the wreckers. In America it's the racists. Or it's also, from the right wing, it's the people who are anti-patriotic. It's always someone getting in the way of your plan as opposed to — You know what I mean? It's like someone's putting together a roof and then it's leaking, and it's like me yelling at the clouds. No, it's you. You're stupid and you think you're really smart, and now when you have power, you stupid person, you're going to take your stupidity and cause untold harm to many people because you made yourself dictator.

WOODS: And of course this plays right into what we would read from a lot of the utopian reformers of the 19th century. The public education guru, Thomas Mann, whose view was that if we could get rid of ignorance, then 905 of the crime would go away. If we could get the kids in school to — get kids into school, 90% of the crime would go away. Now, of course 90% of the crime is now in the schools, so that —

MALICE: Well, not only that. You and I are both bright people, but we are probably ignorant of 99% at least of human knowledge.

WOODS: Oh yeah, yeah, totally.

MALICE: Completely.

WOODS: Yeah, you much more than me, but yeah, sure.

MALICE: [laughing] You got one in. I'm very proud of you, Tom.

WOODS: Oh yeah, I'm marking this one down. This is February 13th, 2017.

MALICE: [laughing] Are you dropping the mic right now, Tom?

WOODS: [laughing] Yeah, that's right. I'm actually out of here.

MALICE: [laughing] Jerk store.

WOODS: Yeah, exactly. "Jerk store" was the line. It's so funny that so many of my listeners are so young, they don't even know the jerk store reference. Google it for your own cultural literacy. But also there were people who thought private property encourages rivalrousness. We have to get rid of private property and have communal towns or the John Humphrey Noyes people in Vermont, the — now I can't remember the name of the community. But they thought that bourgeois marriage was the problem, because then men were jealous of each other's wives. So if everybody could enjoy each other's — So whatever it is — or it's alcoholic drink. If we could just get rid of that — it's always some thing out there that if we could just get rid of, then everything would be fine.

MALICE: And they know what that one thing is.

WOODS: Of course. And man, you'd better not get in their way.

MALICE: Because you're the devil. Listen, if you've been told this is the one thing keeping humanity from having paradise on earth and you're like, Oh, it's too hard, you're a monster. From their perspective, that is fair to say. If I knew there was one thing that if I pressed this button we would have paradise on earth and Tom Woods was standing in my way, are you kidding? Of course it's like, forget it. But that's how they think.

WOODS: Yeah, yeah, no doubt. All right, we're going to have to cut it there. I've got to get you on more often. That's one thing. But I'm glad to see you're on *Red Eye* a lot, and I see your clips on your Facebook page. And I think 2017, I personally think it's going to be the Year of Malice.

MALICE: Well, given the president. What I really like is how so many of your listeners follow me on Twitter and seem to be having the times of their lives, because I really go hard on Twitter at celebrities —

WOODS: Oh yeah.

MALICE: — and people really seem to enjoy it.

WOODS: You're so funny, so I am going to make an appeal. I'll put your Twitter on the show notes page. But come on now, I know I have some people on Twitter who listen to the show. How long's it going to take you to follow Michael Malice? His Twitter, it's just @michaelmalice. There's not trick to it. Just go ahead and — I mean, this guy should have — You remember that thing? Who was I talking to? Oh no, I was talking to Heather, but I thought I was on the air when I was saying it. But I remember that chat I had — I was off the air with Milo Yiannopoulos, and we were talking about you and his first reaction was, Why isn't he famous? And I said, I hate living in a world where Michael Malice is not a household name. So anyway, I don't know if 2017 is that particular year, but I believe it is the Year of Malice. And we've kicked it off with a fun episode, so a great w ay to get started. Thanks, Michael. See you later.

MALICE: Talk soon, Tom.