



The Quest for Cosmic Justice

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From Library Journal "Much of the world today and down through centuries of history has suffered the terrible consequences of unbridled government power, the prime evil that the writers of the American constitution sought to guard against." It is this "unbridled government power" that prolific political theorist Sowell (Affirmative Action Reconsidered) fears most as something that follows necessarily when societies try to achieve "cosmic justice" (as opposed to "social justice"). "Cosmic justice," he asserts, "is not about the rules of the game" but rather about "putting particular segments of society in the position that they would have been in but for some undeserved misfortune." Referring often to 20th-century world history, he argues persuasively that whatever benefits one might hope would result from trying to right the past wrongs of the world (instead of trying to repair the present world), they are not worth the almost inevitable risks of the loss of freedom and the rise of despotism. As Sowell does so well in his other booksAmany of which analyze the tradeoff between freedom and equalityAhe presents his case in clear, convincing, and accessible language. Strongly recommended for most public and academic libraries.

The Quest for Cosmic Justice Details

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From Reader Review The Quest for Cosmic Justice for online ebook

bartosz_witkowski says

The Quest of Cosmic Justice is a collection of four essays written by Thomas Sowell.

The first essay in the book (titled like the book) is an interesting essay about social justice.

It starts by defining what social justice is and what it is not. While social justice is often distinguished from "normal" justice as being about righting ills, the proponents of social justice aren't the only ones that care about wealth disparity or other disparities. Those are all universal sentiments. How proponents of social justice distinguish themselves is that they believe that the pursuit of social justice should trump all other considerations, no matter the cost.

Normal, everyday justice is a process. A trial is fair only if it's done with accordance to the laws of the land. A fight or a contest is fair in similar ways in that it is only fair when the rules were applied equally to all contestants. The outcome doesn't matter.

In contrast, social justice isn't about the process, it's all about the outcome.

According to proponents of social justice a process must be inherently discriminatory if the outcome of that process doesn't exhibit equal representation. For example unequal employment of women is only explainable by discrimination: whether by the employer or by society. This is extremely galling when one considers the fact that "equal representation" doesn't happen anywhere or in any society. In other words "unequal representation" shouldn't be something worth explaining as its opposite - "equal representation" is something that's unnatural.

Social justice gets nicknamed a lot in the book. It is called "unsocial justice" - because it is the kind of "justice" that doesn't look at social costs of having it. Another name for social justice is "cosmic justice"; cosmic because social justice doesn't only want to right social wrongs but even the wrongs of birth or circumstance. In other words it wants to reverse cosmic happenstance.

The author goes in depth about the consequences of seeing justice this way and trying trying to right. The key point to take is that the proponents of social justice are more likely to be swayed by feel-good policies, looking at "historical" injustices, disregarding flesh-and-blood people and being ignorant to the incentives that their policies create. All of which contribute to an environment which hinders the stated goal - justice.

The second essay The Mirage of Equality is centered around the various concepts of equality and inequality.

The inherent problem around equality is how can we compare people and their multi-dimensional characteristics between each other. No two people are truly the same and sometimes even the same person can have different characteristics from day to day - like his concentration levels or productivity. Yet those comparisons are made very frequently in the name of social justice. Employers are blamed for unequal payment of women, banks for discriminating lending practices, universities for biased admission standards. Most often then not those comparisons are only possible by disregarding variables that make people or groups different like different working hours, credit scores or inherent characteristics.

The rest of this essay explores the folly of paying lip-service to equality - trying to "redistribute wealth",

lowering admission standards, forced parities in employment. The author provides several examples of how trying enforce equality of outcomes without touching the process is usually most detrimental to the people that the policy was supposed to help.

Sowell writes a particularly insightful discussion about envy and how it fits into the discussion of equality. Envy can be a constructive force when it is used to change oneself but it can also be detrimental to the individual and society when it strengthens divisions and promotes a crabs in a bucket/dog in a manger world view. Unfortunately, most policies that are ostensibly about promoting equality are actually about promoting envy. Of the bad kind.`

The Tyranny of Visions is the next essay in the book and is about visions - visions are preconceived notions about how the world operates. Visions aren't inherently dangerous in themselves only visions that are insulated from reality.

An example of two visions is war deterrence through disarmament (the "peace" movement) and war deterrence through acquiring weapons and allies. Much is said about how those two contrast: the most important characteristic is that the second vision doesn't give any special moral standing to it's supporters. This simple fact and the sheer popularity of the vision gives it a dangerous status. The proponents of the vision don't feel that the vision needs to be tested by reality - instead it's accepted as the default and detractors are deemed as not only wrong but also morally lacking. While those two visions are only one example the author asserts that they're an example of a more general pattern of visions - something explored more in the book The Conflict of Visions.

The Quiet Appeal of American Revolution is the last essay of the book. Sowell contrasts the American political philosophy (checks and balances, division of power) against well meaning ad-hoc solutions added in the name of Social Justice. The author shows how those additions erode the laws of the land into a tyranny of interpretations and makes mockery of what was an once an unique justice system.

While the essays are great in themselves - offering a concise and easily digestible explanation of the topics they discuss I found them to be little repetitive. The themes from A Conflict of Visions, Vision of the Anointed and Intellectuals and Society seem to be repeated throughout this book which made me a little bit disappointed of not discovering anything new.

Joel Tumes says

Typical Libertarian attack on social policy with a bunch of anecdotal illustrations and plenty of straw man arguments.

Amanda says

This book is my least favorite of all of Sowell's books I've read thus far. There were parts that I thought were brilliant, but most of the book I found lacking the clarity of which I expect of Sowell's writing. I will admit it may be a personal weakness in that I associate the use of the word cosmic with mystical applications, but I struggled following his defense of the problems caused by the quest for cosmic justice. I do not believe I had any/many points of contention with his conclusions, I just felt the book was lacking the clarity and ability to

grasp my attention so commonly found in his works. I felt like he was trying to take a slightly different (maybe more abstract?) approach to communicate his typical rational observations of society and the economy. In my opinion Sowell missed the mark. However, I still have great respect for his insights and writing. I have begun reading Basic Economics which I find more engaging and in Sowell's signature.

Nico Alba says

Finally read my first Thomas Sowell book; picked this one up based on a recommendation by @jimmy__delacruz. To put it simply, Sowell is a giant who is way ahead of his time. His story is a remarkable one--Southern-born and Harlem-raised, Sowell's father died before he was born and he was raised in poverty by his aunt. As the first person in his family to study beyond the 6th grade, Sowell dropped out of high school to provide for his family but eventually went on to receive his PhD in Economics from Univ of Chicago.

In *The Quest for Cosmic Justice*, Sowell shows how misguided notions of equality and justice end up producing inequality and injustice. He shows how the tyranny of visions produces self-exalting "solutions" to social problems that not only ignore contrary empirical evidence, but ignore the actual consequences of enforced policies on the ostensible beneficiaries and on 3rd parties. He discusses the difference between cosmic justice and traditional justice—a terribly important distinction—with incredible clarity. His input is data, and his output is facts—facts that tend to crush the souls of the "morally anointed". The man is 87 years old and has written 30+ books, but he's still kicking and I'm incredibly excited to read more.

Ross David Bayer says

For me, the book had two main counterpoints:

1) THE GOOD

The book presents a very interesting core hypothesis, one I'd never actually encountered before, which is that when people casually use the words "justice" and "equality", there are actually two fundamentally different meanings for these words - and amazingly, not just different but also **incompatible** with each other. The consequences of this range from the lesser, like friends talking past each other in an argument at a complete loss as to how the other person can have such a different worldview (assuming of course that they have the same hidden meaning of the word "justice"), to the greater, like split decisions and multiple rounds of repeals of decisions in local, state, federal, and ultimately Supreme Courts for both as judges use different conceptions of justice. I found this very compelling and I think it will actually very concretely change how I approach conversations about justice and equality, and stories about such legal questions in the news.

2) THE BAD

After making this initial point very well, the author proceeds to set about essentially arguing that attempts to enforce "cosmic justice", one of the two main types, has inevitably led to undesirable consequences. His point is generally fair, but he goes about trying to prove it by bringing up case after case of historical incident in which the underlying context is explained poorly (so often I felt like I just didn't understand enough to even get his point, and didn't feel like researching every single case he goes through), and then he makes

very broad pronouncements/judgements about complex cases without citing real evidence, oftentimes without even citing a reference! It left the skeptic in me often just responding, "ok, well that's a bold claim without anything backing it up - guess I'll ignore that". This tendency, together with a clearly libertarian bias (which would be perfectly fine *if* the arguments were actually presented in well-argued-with-clear-evidence-and-logic form), made the second half of the book really drag on and even grate for me a bit.

Overall, I feel mixed. I think the core concept is well worth understanding and a real eye-opener for me, and probably would be for many others who care about issues like this. But the actual book is not particularly enjoyable to read. I think that if someone were to read just the first chapter (of the four chapters in the book), they would get almost all of the value of it. And I think even more ideal would be a concise article just summarizing the main idea. Nonetheless, the book must get some chops for actually changing the way I will think about core issues of justice, and how many books can claim a tall order like that. So overall, I come out mixed and give it a 3/5.

Kevin Stilley says

Social justice should be a concern for all of us. However, much of current thought on the issue is more emotional than rational (and that is being kind). Thomas Sowell's book *The Quest for Cosmic Justice* is a good corrective to the fuzzy thinking that plagues many of those advocating for social justice.

Toe says

Sowell discusses two very different conceptions of justice in this thoughtful and important book. The traditional concept is that the rules or standards are known to all participants and applied equally. Rewards and punishments are doled out based on these widely known, equally applicable rules. Sowell argues that this is the concept known to the founding fathers and the one that works best in practice. The amount of knowledge required to implement this form of justice is manageable—one need only know the rules and whether these rules have been violated in a given situation. This consistent principle allows people to behave and plan with reasonable certainty, which leads to economic growth and relative societal harmony.

Cosmic justice, on the other hand, is the idea that humans should be judged based on all factors that impact their lives, including the circumstances and events over which they had no control. This latter conception of justice is part of what is meant by "social justice" and seeks to take into account literally everything; it seeks to equalize nature, which is inherently unequal. For example, when a man named Richard Allen Davis in 1996 brutally murdered a 12 year old girl named Polly Klaas, his difficult childhood was brought into consideration even though the victim, the girl, did not cause his past difficulties. Only cosmic justice would consider this relevant. Another illustration: those born with physical or mental handicaps obviously did not choose these disabilities, but, in the quest for cosmic justice, some attempt to force others to hire these disabled people no matter what additional costs must be borne by the employer. Cosmic justice is much more difficult for humans to sift through and tally. Sowell is correct when he argues that it is beyond the capabilities of humans to know or implement cosmic justice. Those who advocate it do so out of a sense of self-righteous moral superiority. They never consider the additional costs that others must bear, the perverse incentives it creates, the uncertainty it generates, and the trampling of some people's freedoms that invariably ensues.

After introducing these two different views of justice, the rest of this work exposes how these two competing visions are mutually exclusive, why the traditional concept is better and the cosmic concept is impossible and undesirable, the motivations of those supporting cosmic justice, and specific examples of the harm brought about in the attempt to implement cosmic justice. Sowell specifically discusses:

1. Equal processes are replaced by an attempt to generate equal results that those with the cosmic vision of justice mistakenly believe would occur naturally, despite a complete lack of evidence for this belief;
2. Property rights are infringed to the detriment of all;
3. Judicial activism and all its related uncertainty arises;
4. Burdens of proof are shifted to the accused in cases such as anti-trust law, employment discrimination, environmental law, tort liability, sexual harassment, and others; and
5. The erosion of the Constitution.

As always, Sowell peppers his general analysis with relevant data to support his claims. The following are specific examples from this book, many of which are unfortunately drawn from earlier Sowell efforts.

Sowell points out that slavery is not the cause of many of the social problems faced by modern blacks. The data does not support this simplistic and incorrect explanation. For instance, many try to argue that it is the legacy of slavery that has created such large numbers of illegitimate black children. However, the marriage rates of blacks living chronologically closer to slavery (the late 1800's and early 1900's) were on par with and sometimes higher than whites living at the same time. It wasn't until the 1960's, when so many of America's problems first arose, that black illegitimacy rates skyrocketed. Stated a different way: If slavery is indeed the explanation for or cause of illegitimacy, then it only makes sense that blacks actually living under slavery or those living closer to it would have higher illegitimacy rates, much like the damage from a volcano or hurricane is greatest at the epicenter and dissipates as the distance from the epicenter increases. The data, however, do not support this explanation.

Sowell blasts the concept of proportional representation here as he has done elsewhere. Many legal rulings and pieces of legislation operate under the assumption that in the absence of discrimination, the demographics of any profession or subset of the population will be distributed in a manner equal to the demographic makeup of society as a whole. So, for instance, if blacks make up 13% of the American population, then they should make up 13% of the PhD's, medical doctors, engineers, software engineers, etc. Women, constituting half of the population, should make up half of every profession. Cubans should make up their proportion, Asians, etc. Many courts, operating under this assumption, have reversed the concept of "innocent until proven guilty" in these cases. In other words, the plaintiffs are often not required to actually prove discrimination, but the defendants must prove they are NOT discriminating given the racial breakdown of their employees. Of course, one can never prove a negative, so many companies take the economically rational route and just settle, which activists then cite as evidence of discriminatory practices. Sowell does what so many refuse to do when considering this argument: he looks at the facts. Nowhere throughout human history has there been this equal proportional distribution. In different places and in different times across the globe, various groups of people have excelled in certain areas or professions. Here are some examples Dr. Sowell gives:

1. More than 80% of doughnut shops in California are owned by people of Cambodian ancestry.
2. During the 1900s, over 80% of the world's sugar-processing machinery was made in Scotland.
3. As of 1909, Italians in Buenos Aires owned more than twice as many food and drinking establishments as the native Argentines, more than three times as many shoe stores, and more than ten times as many barbershops.
4. During the decade of the 1960s, the Chinese minority in Malaysia supplied between 80 and 90 percent of all university students in medicine, science, and engineering.

5. In the early twentieth century all the firms in all the industries producing the following products were owned by people of German ancestry in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul: trunks, stoves, paper, hats, neckties, leather, soap, glass, watches, beer, confections, and carriages.

There are many more examples, but all have the same theme: none of these extraordinarily overrepresented peoples were themselves in a position to discriminate. They were minorities who simply out-competed others in their various industries. I would add to Sowell's list the overrepresentation of blacks in modern professional American sports. No one argues that these athletes are discriminating against whites, Hispanics, or Asians. Everyone just accepts that Kobe Bryant is a better basketball player than John Doe, Juan Doe, or Jian Doe who didn't make the cut for the L.A. Lakers. Why then is it so difficult to accept that some groups are simply better at taking the MCAT, LSAT, SAT, or firefighters' exams in Connecticut?

Society benefits most when the rules are known by all and apply equally to all. America is about putting the best person in the job regardless of ethnicity, religious affiliation, age, gender, income level, childhood advantages or disadvantages, and all the other innumerable factors that impact a person's life and skills. Sowell maintains that disregarding standards, lowering standards, or shifting standards to meet some elusive concept of cosmic justice is detrimental to human progress and peaceful coexistence in a heterogeneous society. We should celebrate our strengths and abilities--from whatever source derived--and enjoy the fruits of other people's skill. We can all watch Kobe Bryant or Tiger Woods compete at the highest level of sport on a TV made by Sony's engineers while sipping a Shiner Bock distilled from centuries of German brewing knowledge. We acquire the means to pay for these products, the best humankind has to offer, by marketing whatever particular skills with which we happen to be blessed.

Freedom is a higher ideal than equality. They are also incompatible. Despite the self-congratulatory desires of some to make a name for themselves regardless of the costs or harm they impose upon others, it's neither possible nor meaningful nor desirable to have equality in any sense other than equality of opportunity. The quest for cosmic justice, a world devoid of any "unfairness," is a Quixotic and dangerous one.

Memorable Quotes:

"We better start doing something about our defenses. We are not going to be lucky enough to fight some Central American country forever. Build all we can, and take care of nothing but our own business, and we will never have to use it. Our world heavy-weight champion hasn't been insulted since he won the title." - Will Rogers

"Nature can be neither just nor unjust. Only if we mean to blame a personal creator does it make sense to describe it as unjust that somebody has been born with a physical defect, or been stricken with a disease, or has suffered the loss of a loved one." - Friedrich Hayek

"A society that puts equality--in the sense of equality of outcome--ahead of freedom will end up with neither equality nor freedom. The use of force to achieve equality will destroy freedom, and the force, introduced for good purposes, will end up in the hands of people who use it to promote their own interests." - Milton Friedman

"You do not take a man who, for years, has been hobbled by chains, liberate him, and bring him to the starting line of a race, saying, 'You are free to compete with all others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair." - Lyndon Johnson

"The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the

streets and to steal bread.” – Anatole France

"We must begin with the universe that we were born into and weigh the costs of making any specific change in it to achieve a specific end. We cannot simply 'do something' whenever we are morally indignant, while disdaining to consider the costs entailed."

"Such a conception of justice [cosmic justice:] seeks to correct, not only biased or discriminatory acts by individuals or by social institutions, but unmerited disadvantages in general, from whatever source they may arise."

"Cosmic justice is not about the rules of the game. It is about putting particular segments of society in the position they would have been in but for some undeserved misfortune. This conception of fairness requires that third parties must wield the power to control outcomes, over-riding rules, standards, or the preferences of other people."

"Implicit in much discussion of a need to rectify social inequities is the notion that some segments of society, through no fault of their own, lack things which others receive as windfall gains, through no virtue of their own. True as this may be, the knowledge required to sort this out intellectually, much less rectify it politically, is staggering and superhuman."

"What the American Constitution established was not simply a particular system but a process for changing systems, practices, and leaders, together with a method of constraining whoever or whatever was ascendant at any given time. Viewed positively, what the American revolution did was to give to the common man a voice, a veto, elbow room, and a refuge from the rampaging presumptions of his "betters"."

"James FitzJames Stephen pointed out in 1873 that every law and every moral rule, being general propositions, 'must affect indiscriminately rather than equally.'"

"Too often this confusion has been made a virtue with claims that the "complexity" of the issues precluded a "simplistic" choice. But irreconcilability [between traditional and cosmic justice:] is not complexity. Nor are attempts to square the circle signs of deeper insight. More generally, there is no a priori reason to prefer complex resolutions over simpler ones for, as Aristotle said, 'things that are true and things that are better are almost always easier to believe in.' In short, the truth often seems "simplistic" by comparison with elaborate attempts to evade the truth."

"Judge-made innovations are, in effect, ex post facto laws, which are expressly forbidden by the Constitution and abhorrent to the very concept of the rule of law. For the courts to strike like a bolt from the blue hitting an unsuspecting citizen, who was disobeying no law that he could have known about beforehand, is the essence of judicial tyranny, however moral or just the judges may imagine their innovation to be. The harm is not limited to the particular damage this may do in the particular case, great as this may sometimes be, but makes all other laws into murky storm clouds, potential sources of other bolts from the blue, contrary to the whole notion of 'a government of laws and not of men.'"

Mark Geise says

"The Quest for Cosmic Justice" is another quality work by Thomas Sowell. The book is made up of three essays adapted for a popular audience, but the three essays are intertwined and explore the same general

theme. There are two different definitions of justice, and many arguments and disagreements can be traced back to the different definitions. One conception of justice means that everyone should be treated the same and should play by the same rules. This is traditional justice. The other conception of justice indicates that we should seek to equalize natural inequalities. This is cosmic justice.

Those who seek cosmic justice do not accept or acknowledge the many problems associated with trying to achieve cosmic justice. First of all, cosmic justice is impossible to accomplish; we are all born with different interests and skill sets into different cultures. To attempt to achieve cosmic justice, we must inherently treat people differently under the law and under the economic system. It is impossible to objectively determine how one's given advantages and disadvantages should be weighed and calculated. Sorting out these cosmic advantages and disadvantages is an unachievable task, and the costs of trying to "level the playing field" are not fully appreciated by those with the cosmic vision. Those with a traditional view of justice typically understand the idea of tradeoffs, so decisions must be made with costs and benefits at the forefront.

Sowell's work on these issues will continue to be relevant for the foreseeable future. The ideas of traditional justice and cosmic justice will continue to come into conflict with one another. They will continue to talk past one another because their conceptions of "justice" are so different. "The Quest for Cosmic Justice" does a very good job of laying out these ideas, why these ideas are seductive, and the many issues toward which these ideas lead.

Jim Strasma says

This book was recently suggested to me by a fellow blog commenter who assumed I'd read it from the point I was making. As much as I love Thomas Sowell's writings, I decided to rectify that mistake, and am glad I did, as once again he explains important matters in simple ways anyone WILLING to learn can follow.

I then recommended it to another commenter on a different topic in economics, who was very confidently trashing everyone else's ideas as being unproven, while offering no proof of his own beyond ad hominem attacks and assumption of his own superiority because he is a part-time teacher of economics somewhere with strong feelings, so must therefore be right.

In response, he glibly dismissed Sowell as a trickster not worth reading, which seems a strange thing for a self-proclaimed Bernie Bro to say about a famous Harvard-educated African-American economist who has authored dozens of best-selling books.

Anyone interested in convincing me about an aspect of justice and inequality would do well to first read and understand Sowell's explanations of how those came to be, and the costs of lessening them.

Doug says

As a young conservative in the 1980s, I was a cheerleader for Thomas Sowell's work. It was a bit of a surprise, then, to see him using so many of the same arguments in this book, almost verbatim from his earlier works. Like many conservatives, Sowell writes very much as if he's stuck in the debates of the 1970s. As in many of his econ books, the options here are economic extremes, Cold War extremes; it's always a choice between a free market and a Stalinist command economy. Even his examples remain stuck in hot topics of

the 1970s and 80s -- Vietnam, Carter, Pol Pot, Bork, Reagan, overpopulation, comparable worth, rent control, the Cold War, even Lenin, over and over. And his main foil is John Rawls' 1971 opus on justice. By missing the debate of the last two decades, Sowell's work comes off as being only interested in cementing the convictions of conservative true believers. He's been left behind in the debate and so no longer even tries to connect or persuade opponents.

Sowell also has this rather bizarre inability to see how most of his criticisms of his opponents could easily be turned on himself. He argues without a hint of self-consciousness. For example, in his other recent works (e.g., *The Vision of the Anointed*) and here, he's very big on the facts and using the facts to solve all of our policy decisions: "anointed visionaries can hold tyrannical sway in disregard or defiance of facts" (100). For him, it's only the anti-capitalists who show little attention "to testing theories logically beforehand or empirically afterward" (137). His opponents are always dreamers and visionaries who never think to consider evidence and logic. But this is what every vision says of its opponents. Every. Sowell's opponents have been writing big fat books for decades trying to show how factually disconnected conservatism is. Does he really not realize every side believes this about the other? The complaint about factuality is so naïve and trivial that most debaters don't even raise it. We all get it. But for Sowell it's actually a discovery.

A similar lack of self-consciousness shows up in Sowell's worries about how his enemies demonize their opponents. Like most conservatives, Sowell pictures himself as a victim of intellectual bullies who demonize him and his friends. For these anointed visionaries, "those who disagree with them must be correspondingly degraded or demonized" (103; 137). This nasty demonizing means that they depict conservatives as "intellectually deficient, lacking in imagination, or blinded by habit" (103). But this is exactly the language Sowell himself uses to describe his opponents. They have "the arrogant vision of the anointed elite" (140), a "vision which its devotees are loath to relinquish, even in the face of evidence" (141), indicative of "their heavy emotional investment in their vision" (ibid.). Within one essay, he must bandy his meat-fisted "anointed visionaries" at least forty times like a sophomore without genuine argument. Is he really so disconnected and wounded that he can't see what he's doing? We all have blind spots, but this is unnerving.

Sowell is always very quick to complain about "conceptual difficulties" (59) and his opponents' lack of clear and precise definitions. And yet when he comes to wield the conservatives' favorite way to silence just about any criticism – the ominous charge of envy – Sowell gives us little. The closest is that envy is "hostility toward others" (78), and he suggests it's synonymous with the claims of "social justice" (77). Well, why write the rest of the chapter, then? If that's what envy is, then no more argument is needed. And count Jesus and the prophets as the most envious spokesmen in history. Sowell's vision is just too easy and sloppy.

Perhaps the most unnerving thing about Sowell's argumentation is the Pollyanna way he views the world working. It is a world where money has no power, a world where there are no corporate lobbyists, a world where the rich never use the state to increase their wealth, a world where only the poor envy, a world where every country was much poorer before capitalism, a world where sweatshop work is a step up for the poor, a world where military industries reject war profits, a world where international economics is really about raising the standard of living for everyone. In his world, the rich can never do evil because free exchanges are always voluntary and stateless. For him, only the state can mess things up, the state apparently as this bodiless, impersonal, poor spirit, driven only by envy and emotion. It's a good thing the rich have never been interested in wielding state power. Sowell might have to notice.

In the first essay, "The Quest for Cosmic Justice," Sowell makes the most amazing concession. He spends plenty of time seemingly trying to show that the woolly, irrational, Marxist Cosmic Vision of Equal Justice is bad, but no, he narrows that to the claim that the good state should only deal with impartial, procedural justice due to its lack of omniscience. In fact, it turns out Sowell defends a brand of Marxism: "Nobody

should be happy with cosmic injustices....[T:]hose who see cosmic justice as a dangerous mirage [i.e. Sowell:] must also recognize how naturally people of all philosophical persuasions prefer the vision embodied in this quest and attempt to practice it, whenever circumstances permit....Even the most conservative families often operate on the Marxian principle, 'From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs,' when they spend heavily for the present and future benefit of children who are themselves earning no money. Indeed this pattern sometimes extends into the children's adulthood and it often extends to other family members struck by medical or financial disasters" (43,44).

He's quite right. For Christians, though, Sowell's hard distinction between state and family confuses things. Because a central tenet of Christ's gospel is the creation of a kingdom that is a family. In Christ, we are all brothers and sisters. Blood relations become secondary but the Church is a new international family, in which, "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it" (1 Cor. 12:26). As an anarchist, I don't extend this in the state socialist direction of trying to make the nation state into a family. Instead, Sowell's Marxism in the family should rightly push Christians to a greater embrace of the economic mission of the Church. Though Sowell's good state society can allow for some people to go without medicine, water, and live in squalor, the Christian Church can't do the same. We are a family after all, and some of our family are holding the Eucharist in city dumps and killing themselves to make my clothing. Forget the State. The Church can't let this go on. These are sisters and brothers. It's a question of family justice, as Sowell says.

Conservatism gets Christians to think of Sowell's impersonal, procedural justice as the most important brand of justice. But he concedes that's false for our most important loves. Conservatism encourages Christians to ignore justice as a species of love, since, for conservatives, justice should only be a procedural state issue. Political conservatism can't envision the biggest justice as love at all, and so it pushes us away from the prophets, apostles, and Jesus. Here's a test. When have you ever heard a Christian political conservative talk like this "Marxist" statement from the apostle John? "But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (1 John 3:17). Which world are we in?

Randy Bies says

A great explanation with excellent examples of how people can be made to be worse off by people trying to help them. The world is inherently unfair, people are born with different innate abilities, to different situations, different locations, all of which affect their lives differently from the next person. Does it even make sense to try to correct all of this unfairness? It makes you wonder if we might be further ahead without trying to fix so many things and makes you decide what you think is fair, equal opportunity or equal outcome.

Terrence Daugherty says

I am utterly "Sowellled out" at this point, after reading three other Sowell books before this one, but I have to say something about this magnificent work. Contrary to what one reviewer stated, Sowell is not obsessed with economics. Rather, he is obsessed with facts and data that run contrary to the prevailing "vision" (narrative) in controlling society. I appreciate his works for this reason alone; Sowell cares about making distinctions and he cares about logic and facts when combating fallacies. He is meticulous, perspicuous, and

intelligent without being condescending.

Despite his erroneous views on "libertarianism" as being too atomistic (an error often made by people who misidentify libertarianism as a Randian philosophy despite its origins in Murray Rothbard and ongoing work in Hans Hermann-Hoppe), the book was overall an excellent indictment against self-anointed authoritarians with their vain pursuits to correct "cosmic injustices" via the State.

Shelli says

Thomas Sowell is an economist at Stanford University. He has a popular blog on economics and politics. I like his writings because they are practical and accessible to someone like me with no background in economics. In this book, he discusses how our quest for cosmic justice actually brings about greater inequality and social injustice. There is no such thing as cosmic justice since none of us are gods and can't change the laws of the universe. Emotions tend to cloud our judgment as we seek to make things "fair" and "equal". These policies and practices include affirmative action, which Dr. Sowell is firmly against, as am I. Being a black man himself, Dr. Sowell offers a unique perspective regarding racial prejudices and injustices and why our current solutions to these are inadequate and even fantastical.

Ari says

The first half of the book is really excellent; the writing is crisp, the ideas are fresh and well presented, and the examples are apt and un-obvious. I think Sowell has gotten hold of one of the really key differences between right-wing and left-wing views of the world, and he explains it very clearly.

The second half is quite good, but one gets the sense that the author is a bit of a cranky grandparent complaining about everything that he's impatient with. And while the impatience is justified, it's a bit less interesting to read about.

MrsER says

In my humble opinion, Dr. Thomas Sowell is one of the most brilliant men in America today. His book should be read and re-read. The importance of what he was arguing when he first wrote it, became even more acute today. Our schools are now grounds for social justice warriors who are destroying the minds and character of our children. The merit system in which men such as Dr. Sowell, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln were raised, has been almost completely dismantled. Two plus two no longer makes four, but is relative. If you didn't read this book, I highly suggest you give it a try—no matter what your political leaning might be; open minded people always benefit even if reading something with which they disagree. To an idea of what the book is about watch this fantastic 30-minute video about it:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkDMV...>

Allison Baltzersen says

As I had been listening to the banter on cable news over "social justice" issues, I couldn't help but think that in each debate, the two sides were approaching the conversation with different definitions of the same word. And it took reading 'The Quest for Cosmic Justice' to fully understand why I was getting that impression: because it's true. As Sowell explains, there is TRUE justice in which the PROCESS is equitable and the RESULT is variable (a criminal defendant stands trial and the outcome may either be an acquittal or imprisonment), and then there is COSMIC justice in which the RESULT is engineered to be equitable while the PROCESS is variable, regardless of the cost to society as a whole (e.g., the military's softening of physical requirements so women can join, regardless of the diminished strength of the military as a whole). Sowell also points out that true justice is administered to the here-and-now INDIVIDUAL, whereas cosmic (social) justice is often administered to a GROUP based on ills suffered in the past, possibly not to any of the actual individuals in the group at issue (Victim Group X was treated unfairly in the past, therefore present-day Perceived Aggressor Group Y should make accommodations for the victims, even if none of the individual victims are alive today and none of the perceived aggressor group individuals were party to the victimization at issue). It's a fascinating read which has helped me to quickly identify which definition is being used by various commentators on the news and how to distill their positions in either the true or cosmic approaches to justice.

Jeremy says

"A society that puts equality – in the sense of equality of outcomes – ahead of freedom will end up with neither equality nor freedom. The use of force to achieve equality will destroy freedom, and the force, introduced for good purposes, will end up in the hands of people who use it to promote their own interests." Milton Friedman

"In short, traditional justice is about impartial processes rather than either results or prospects."

"The challenge of determining the net balance of numerous windfall advantage and disadvantages for one individual at one given time is sufficiently daunting. To attempt the same for whole broad-brush categories of people, each in differing stages of their individual life cycles, in a complex and changing society, suggest hubris."

"Even those who proclaim the principles of justice, and call these principles more important than other benefits, as Professor Rawls does, seem unlikely to act on such principles in real life, given the costs of doing so. Imagine that a ship is sinking in the ocean with 300 passengers on board and only 200 life-preservers. The only just solution is that everyone drown. But most of us would probably prefer the unjust solution, that 200 lives be saved, even if they are no more deserving than those who perish."

"We can, of course, create new injustices among our flesh-and-blood contemporaries for the sake of symbolic expiation, so that the son or daughter of a black doctor or executive can get into an elite college ahead of the son or daughter of a white factory worker or farmer, but only believers in the vision of cosmic justice are likely to take moral solace from that."

"Recognizing that many people "through no fault of their own" have windfall losses, while those same people – and others – also have windfall gains, the time is long overdue to recognize also that taxpayers

through no fault of their own have been forced to subsidize the moral adventures which exalt self-anointed social philosophers.”

“The abstract desirability of equality, like the abstract desirability of immortality, is beside the point when choosing what practical course of action to follow. What matters is what we are prepared to do, to risk, or to sacrifice, in pursuit of what can turn out to be a mirage.”

“However, most income cannot be redistributed because it was not distributed in the first place. It is paid directly for services rendered and how much is paid is determined jointly by those individuals rendering the service and those to whom it is rendered.”

“But to invoke the blanket slogan ‘Question Authority’ is to raise the question: By what authority do you tell us to question authority?”

“Virtually no one seriously questions the principle of equal regard for human beings as human beings...It is the fatal step from equal regard to equal performance – or presumptively equal performance in the absence of social barriers – that opens the door to disaster.”

“On issue after issue, the morally self-anointed visionaries have for centuries argued as if no honest disagreement were possible, as if those who opposed them were not merely in error but in sin. This has long been a hallmark of those with a cosmic vision of the world and of themselves as saviors of the world, whether they are saving it from war, overpopulation, capitalism, genetic degradation, environmental destruction, or whatever the crisis du jour might be.”

“The British, American, and other Allied soldiers who paid with their lives in the early years of the war for the quantitatively inadequate and qualitatively obsolete military equipment that was a legacy of interwar pacifism were among the most tragic of the many third parties who have paid the price of other people’s exalted visions and self-congratulation.”

“...it is necessary to explore what purposes are served by these visions, by their evasions of particular evidence, and – especially in the case of the humanities – by their denigration of the very concepts of evidence and cognitive meaning.”

“Desperately ingenious efforts to evade particular evidence, or to denigrate objective facts in general, are all consistent with the heavy emotional investment in their vision, which is ostensibly about the well-being of others but is ultimately about themselves.”

“The prerequisites of civilization are not an interesting subject to those who concentrate on its shortcomings – that is, on the extent to which what currently exists as the fruits of centuries of efforts and sacrifices is inferior to what they can produce in their imagination immediately at zero cost, in the comfort and security provided by the society they disdain.”

“It may easily be seen that almost all the able and ambitious members of a democratic community will labor unceasingly to extend the powers of government, because they all hope at some time or other to wield those powers themselves.” Alexis de Tocqueville

“As Aristotle said, ‘things that are true and things that are better are almost always easier to believe in.’ In short, the truth often seems ‘simplistic’ by comparison with elaborate attempts to evade the truth.”

“There is no way to specify in precise general rules, known beforehand, what might be necessary to achieve results that would meet the standards of cosmic justice.”

“Just as freedom of the press does not exist for the sake of that tiny minority of the population who are journalists, so property rights do not exist for the sake of those people with substantial property holdings.”

“The inefficiency of political control of an economy has been demonstrated more often, in more places, and under more varied conditions, than almost anything outside the realm of pure science.”

“For the courts to strike like a bolt from the blue hitting an unsuspecting citizen, who was disobeying no law that he could have known about beforehand, is the essence of judicial tyranny, however moral or just the judges may imagine their innovation to be.”

“In other words, the federal government may do only what it is specifically authorized to do, while the people or the individual states may do whatever they are not specifically forbidden to do.” (Referring to the 10th amendment)

“Schemes to extend federal power into the nooks and crannies of local and even private activities are never publicly advertised as expansions of federal power, much less erosions of the Tenth Amendment, but always in terms of the wonderful goals they are said to achieve – ‘universal health care, ‘investing in our children’s futures,’ ‘insuring a level playing field for all,’ etc.”

“The much-vaunted ‘complexity’ of constitutional law comes in most cases not from the Constitution itself but from clever attempts to evade the limits on government power set by the Constitution.”

“The rise of American society to pre-eminence as an economic, political, and military power in the world was thus the triumph of the common man and a slap across the face to the presumptions of the arrogant, whether an elite of blood or books.”

Purple Wimple says

Sowell hits it out of the park. The most interesting parts to me were the discussions of pacifism in the early 20th century.

Sowell has drunk the Bork kool-aid about judicial restraint; but other than that, it's a terrific tome.

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Matthew says

fascinating -- I thought what was presented neatly was very well done -- but some of it (I'd argue a majority) was just sloppy. Many of the arguments that Sowell presents are very hard to counter until you realize that his claims are sometimes riddled with the same "cherry-picking" holes that he accuses his "intelligentsia" opponents to have.

Bottom line: It's a good book to read to see an interesting view of justice, but don't expect it to *do justice* to the whole argument.
