



## Two philosophies and a hope

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As a nation, we appear to be struggling as to which of two competing, yet often compelling, philosophies we will follow as we head into the future. One of these philosophies is that espoused by many of those with conservative views. It derives, in part, from the writings and speeches of Ayn Rand in the early Twentieth Century during which she offered a “rational objectivist” perspective. There is much to admire about this philosophy and it is clear that Ms. Rand possessed a keen intellect. In keeping with this philosophy, some current followers of Rand’s beliefs, for example, John A. Allison, now President and CEO of the Cato Institute, promotes the view that there is no such thing as a society, there are only individuals. They believe we should let individuals pursue their self-interest unhindered by concerns for the well-being of others. Any expression of altruism runs counter to this system of beliefs. Many followers of this philosophy also believe that pure free-market capitalism, unfettered by government regulation of markets, is the world economy’s only hope.

The second philosophy might be called the philosophy of social responsibility. In this approach to our direction as a nation we would see ourselves as members of a society and responsible, at least in part, for the well-being of our fellow citizens. Followers of this philosophy tend to hold more liberal views and believe that his or her well-being and advancement is strongly dependent on the well-being and advancement of others. Certainly a number of religions have espoused views compatible with this philosophy. Many environmentalists seem also to have accepted this philosophy and even to be arguing to enlarge its scope to include all of life in order to ensure the lives and wellbeing of future generations.

But however broadly or narrowly one believed in the benefits of social responsibility, the aims of one’s actions are to at least minimize the harm to others as one advances one’s own life.

Individual adherents to each of these philosophies exhibit different behaviors in their pursuit of what they believe is best for themselves and mankind but in our nation’s current state it seems unlikely that any consensus will be formed regarding the best way for our country to move forward. However, others are concerned that time is running out for humanity and that we must mobilize ourselves for the common good. Thus it was that earlier this year the Vatican hosted a gathering of scholars from the social and natural sciences (with no requirement regarding the religious beliefs of the participants) to reflect on the major issues facing humanity. Included in these important issues were: unsustainable consumption, population pressure, poverty, and environmental degradation. These self-destructive elements of our collective behaviors are, of course, strongly related to one another.

In a recently published paper two of the participants in this workshop summarized the group's considerations as follows: The common good would best be served if 1) We stabilize climate change; 2) We do a much better job of accounting for natural capital including such elements as ecosystem services in our estimates of a nation's wealth, making beneficiaries pay for such services, and using such funds to compensate all of a nation's citizens, and 3) We make universal access to energy a priority. In addition, all participants urged that we radically alter our behavior toward nature (including ourselves) from one of exploitation to one of protection.