

new thinking

THE NORMATIVE ROLE OF UTOPIANISM IN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, it has been argued, is the benchmark by which all subsequent literary depictions of imaginary ideal societies must be measured. However, More's effort to conceptualize novel social arrangements was not at all new for his time. At least since Plato's *Republic* highly descriptive accounts of hypothetical communities have been carefully recorded. It is the narrative form of the traveler discovering a foreign and perfectly organized society, described in a concrete and detailed manner, which was More's fresh contribution.¹ Krishan Kumar acknowledges the significance of this development in his *Utopianism*, in which he states that: "With the invention of utopia, we cross the divide between ancient and modern history."²

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UTOPIANISM: A THEORETICAL NECESSITY

Utopia, moreover, plays as important a role in political circles as it does in literary ones. More's *Utopia* is no mere fantasy: it can be read as a scathing criticism of both the governmental policies and everyday attitudes of the people of sixteenth century England.³ Given the dual nature of utopias—their being both literary and political—we can identify at least two distinct facets of the utopian project: the constructive (imaginative; exploratory) side and the critical (reformist; satirical) side.⁴ Both of these functions of utopias, Kumar believes, are dynamically interrelated and essential to the practice of political philosophy.

With the historical developments of the late twentieth century still fresh in our collective memory (most notably the ascents and eventual failures of fascism and Stalinist communism), utopianism has fallen into conceptual disfavor, and unfairly so. It is a mistake to link utopianism only with its miscarriages without considering its successes (liberal democracy and cosmopolitanism were, for example, at one time nothing more than the wishful thoughts of a handful of intellectuals). The thesis of this paper is that utopianism is a theoretical necessity—we couldn't, for example, engage in normative political philosophy without it⁵—and, further, that in consciously embracing utopianism we will consequently experience an enrichment of our political lives. Thus, the title of my paper, "The Normative Role of Utopianism in Political Philosophy," has a double meaning: it highlights the fact that utopianism *always* plays a normative role in political philosophy, as its concern is inevitably the promotion of a certain vision of the good life; and secondly it suggests that there normatively 'ought to

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be' a recognized and respectable role for utopianism within political philosophy. The first meaning, I believe, is self-explanatory. Regarding the second, it expresses my hope to—in short—take what is old, and through a modest process of rehabilitation, make it new again.

UTOPIA IN DISREPUTE

*Would you like to swing on a star?
Carry moonbeams home in a jar?
And be better off than you are?*⁶

If we define utopias as “ideal states” then, by definition, utopias are unrealizable—for if they were ever realized, they would cease to be ideal; and thus cease to be utopias. The real can approach the ideal, but can never *become* it. This *prima facie* futility inherent to subscribing to an unrealizable ideal has inspired the pessimistic use of the adjective “utopian” to describe (read discredit) proposals or ideas seen as foolhardy or fantastic. The origin of the anti-utopian attitude can be traced back at least as far as Engels and Marx, whose dismissal of utopian socialism was harsh and damning.⁷ However, this criticism was also ultimately hypocritical. Marx’s vision of an egalitarian socialist order arising from the carcass of an expired capitalism is as improbable a vision as any other utopian scheme. This consideration has not, however, served to cleanse the stain that Marx has left upon utopia’s name.

The influence of authoritative anti-utopian voices has been felt in far-ranging and important areas. The Canadian public school system, for example, has come to play a part in indoctrinating

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children against the corruptive influence of utopian schemes. Too much idealism in the schools is looked upon by the crafters of curricula as deleterious, much the same as dieticians frown upon too much sugar in a child's diet. The reading list of high schools and junior high schools alike are stocked with such anti-utopian, or dystopian, readings as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids*, and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and *1984*. Perhaps the Department of Education prescribes these tomes as remedies for the "fairy-tale-thinking" of youthful daydreamers, but it is just as likely hoping to convey the message "Don't try this at home" to nascent dissidents. After all, utopianism is not only the refuge of pitiable escapists, but also ascendant subversives.⁸ Utopians of the latter type, who forcefully argue for alternate social arrangements and institutions, are viewed as threats to the *status quo* by those in power. Utopianism, seen as laughable to the skeptical many, is also seen as threatening by the powerful few.

Conservative academicians, eager to uphold the respectably sterile nature of their profession, have as much of an interest in deflating utopianism as anxious politicians do. There is much administrative pressure put on professors and instructors to avoid being perceived by others as overtly subversive, or even "too idealistic." Defending utopianism has thus become the intellectual analogue to holding the Alamo.⁹ The usual attacks on utopian ideology focus on the "impracticable" or "preposterous" character of any particular vision being advocated.¹⁰ Yet utopia's unrealizability may, ironically, be its most redeeming quality.

Although the ideal state of affairs for humanity might theoretically be a "perpetual peace" of the kind Kant hoped for, it is generally accepted that in practice material conditions often

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change, and that the interests of individuals are far too divergent to permit an enduring social harmony. In fact, many authors of dystopias have predicted that perpetual peace would result in human stagnation, a ‘flat’ society wherein human virtue would atrophy.¹¹ Understanding that utopia is a state that is not intended to be realized, but merely to be striven for, helps us evade the skeptic’s charge of “impracticability” and arrive at a revised conception of the utopian project. That is to say, we may step inside the shoes of the fictional explorer who seeks out an already-existing utopia, as opposed to playing the part of the social architect who creates her own. Rather than worrying about what we will build, then, we should be worrying about what to pack.

Or would you rather be a mule?

UTOPIA AS JOURNEY, NOT DESTINATION

Utopia’s value lies not in its relation to present practice but in its relation to a possible future. Its “practical” use is to overstep the immediate reality to depict a condition whose clear desirability draws us on, like a magnet.¹²

-Krishan Kumar

Utopia, I want to argue, is not a “destination” in the ordinary sense of the word. This is because utopia is, by definition, a perfect state of affairs,¹³ and it could easily be objected either that (a) perfection itself is impossible to attain, or (b) that there exists no objective criterion for perfection that would let us know when it had been attained. Such a “destination” would truly put us on the road to

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nowhere. Rather, I would like to discuss utopia as a goal; as an abstract target. Compare our movement towards utopia to the movement of Achilles towards the Tortoise in Zeno's Paradox of Motion: Achilles constantly nears the Tortoise but never quite catches up to it, because it has moved on slightly by the time that he has made up the distance between himself and where it (the Tortoise) was previously. This process can be thought to repeat itself in an infinite series of smaller and smaller distances. Still, we must admit, this is a kind of progress. It doesn't so much matter whether or not we actually arrive at a utopia, whether or not there is a final, definitive moment of impact. What matters is that we are continually moving—perhaps imperceptibly at times—towards our goal, and along the way constantly reforming and improving our sociopolitical lives.

Still, if utopia is a journey, what makes it a trip worth taking (other than the fact that the road to utopia isn't choked with other travelers)? Having previously discussed the theoretical necessity of utopia, I will now argue for the desirability of utopia, by way of analogy. Just as an individual, without any idea of who she would like to become, is unable to make sound choices regarding her future, so too is a people, without any conception of what kind of society they would like to live in, unable to make sound choices about its collective future. Utopian thinking, then, is a necessary impetus for progress within any given culture; it is the carrot, dangling just out of reach, which keeps the mule moving forward.

On an individual level, the analogue for utopia is excellence: in the schema of virtue ethics, it is in the act of striving towards excellence that one becomes a virtuous person. Ostensibly, the aggregate of our individual strivings towards virtue should bring our society as a whole closer to collective excellence, or what we

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might call a utopia, an “excellence of state.” Indeed, utopia’s link to ethics lies even deeper than this, for if utopia is a “good” place, then “actions that lead to utopia are *right* actions.”¹⁴ This then, is the underlying *ethos* of utopianism: our “journey,” as it were, is one of a morally justified nature, almost providential in character, and inseparably bound to progress.

Oscar Wilde once famously captured this line of thinking in the maxim, “Progress is the realization of Utopias.”¹⁵ And because a utopia—once realized—ceases, by definition, to be a utopia, progress never halts in its march ahead. Thus it is *in the act of striving* to realize the ideal state that societal entropy and stasis are overcome, *not in the realization* of that ideal.¹⁶ Whether or not a utopia is physically realized is relevant neither to the endeavor of utopian theorizing, nor to utopianism’s greater role in political philosophy.¹⁷

What *does* matter is that having a common utopian goal should, theoretically, produce a higher degree of social cooperation between the inhabitants of societies that have one, over those that do not. To help us understand this, we can think about our social interactions generally as large, complex rational decision problems. We come out best in such problems if we know the goals of the other agents working through the same problems at the same time as us (i.e., if there are any salient features of the problems which are known to all players). If the players can successfully cooperate with each other towards a mutually beneficial goal, then they will maximize their best possible mutually acceptable outcomes and “win.” This kind of outcome is possible in our society-wide utopian rational decision problem as stated, because what the salient feature is to each player (in any given situation) is the utopian vision itself. If the utopian goal of a

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society is known to each of its members, then each member will know, basically, (1) what to do in order to bring the utopian goal closer to realization, and (2) that each other member—if and when behaving rationally—will also be working towards that same goal.¹⁸ Under such conditions, helping our neighbors becomes easier for us to do, because in effect we are helping ourselves, as well as them, move closer towards our best possible mutually acceptable outcomes—in this way, conflicts of interest do not obtain in the context of the utopian enterprise.

To enter into such a contract of cooperation is to adopt what Bernard Suits calls the “lusory attitude,” in other words, to desire to achieve a specific state of affairs (in this case, the realization of a utopia), and at the same time to desire to adhere to only legal and/or legitimate means of realizing that specific state of affairs.¹⁹ This “lusory attitude” is what makes game-playing—or any other structured social activity for that matter—possible in the first place. Oddly, however, to desire a specific state of affairs would require our players to have in mind a common utopian destination, even though they should never realistically expect to reach it. Is such a proposition rationally feasible? The answer to this question must be yes, for if we believe that (i) utopia is the theoretically optimal state of human affairs; that (ii) utopia is not realizable in practice; that (iii) working towards a common vision of utopia will promote a higher degree of societal cooperation than presently obtains; and that (iv) societies with high degrees of social cooperation are, *ceteris paribus*, more desirable than societies with low degrees of the same; then rationally we must also hold that (v) working towards a common vision of utopia is the most optimal state of human affairs realizable in practice. Thus our cooperation

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in utopian practices is rationally demanded of us, even if the utopian goal itself is not compatible with reality.

Utopia, then, is not just any journey; it is a journey demanded of us by rationality—one that we must take with others who share our rational convictions and supra-rational goals. The journey itself may be actual (we may engage in joint activist ventures or community-building) or figurative (we may simply read or write utopian fiction as part of a literary community). Either way, once we have proceeded together for some distance down one of these roads, it may be possible to gaze back reflexively on where we have come from—without being turned into a pillar of salt in the process. To put the point more finely: the practice of utopian journeying creates theoretical distance between ourselves and our home cultures; the distance required for us to be able to perform effective critiques of them, without giving rise to the fear that we are denigrating or imperiling ourselves in the process. At the same time, utopia offers us nurture and support by proffering a surrogate hypothetical community: an atemporal, extra-spatial touchstone accessible to all those who are moved by its vision.

UTOPIA AS DETACHED CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

*In my utopia, human solidarity...is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered but created.*²⁰

- Richard Rorty

The utopian thinker, claims Amitava Ray, is “free to imagine and create a world without being tied up to any particular type of

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methodology.”²¹ Although utopias are, to a large extent, reactive products of their environments,²² they are also capable of transcending the boundaries of time, space, and culture. The utopian writer is by no means prescient or omniscient, but through her imaginative faculties she is capable of portraying ideal ways of living set in the past or in the future, within her own country or on a distant planet, portraying lifestyles that closely resemble those of her own society or ones that differ radically from them. Such feats of the imagination facilitate the act of distancing required for authors to perform critiques of their societies—from the outside as well as from within; from the hypothetical perspective of the utopian as well as from the actual perspective of the citizen. At the same time, new sites of solidarity are produced that cut across traditional social divides.

The literary narrative of a utopia plays an important role in promulgating its message. Not only does the narrative form make the utopian ideal accessible to the public in a manner not possible via discussion of pure theory alone; but it also suggests a “meta-narrative,” if you will, between the society that *is* and the society that *could be*. The reader, accordingly, is entreated to fill in the gaps between these disparate realities with their own thoughts, efforts, and real or figurative journeys.

One problem, it might be objected, with articulating a positive vision of utopia is that others may have different visions of what utopia ought to be. This would mean that one utopian might be engaged in a direct conflict of interest with another, a state I previously claimed was theoretically impossible for two rational utopian agents to find themselves in. Such conflict would be devastating to utopian efforts, which require unity of purpose if they are to be conducive to societal cooperation. Having

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contrasting visions of utopia compete with each other would lead to a situation wherein no one vision of utopia could be approached; utopianism under these conditions comes, then, to resemble a war of all-against-all rather than a pleasurable stroll towards a mutual destination. In a situation, then, where two pictures of utopia are mutually exclusive, we must decide which one of these utopias is the less rational of the two. For the sake of avoiding conflicts of interest, we have to assume that only one of them can be the “true” utopia, and that the true utopia must be the more rational one.

Let us consider that historical figures as diverse as Hitler and the Marquis de Sade have each had what have been called “utopian visions,” each of which greatly contrasted with what other people of their times would have considered to be an ideal scheme of social arrangements. Hitler craved a Europe devoid of Jews, under German dominion, and the Marquis de Sade called for a culture of wanton sexuality aimed at the overthrow both church and monarchy.²³ Yet both of these “utopias” excluded significant segments of their purported and potential audiences, and can hardly be said to have captured a rational, inclusive vision of the good for all. The Marquis’ utopia fails to redress the obvious pitfalls of self-destruction and transgression against others that result from adherence to an *ethos* of unbridled hedonism, while Hitler’s utopia is straightforwardly morally abhorrent, and unapologetically so. If utopia is to remain a “good place” then it must have the support of both those who will take up the journey there with us, and also those who our journeying would affect. This line of reasoning, however, again implies that there is only one “true” or “right” utopia: the least offensive, most inclusive and most rational utopia. But, at the end of the day, what would such a

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utopia look like? And how could we conclude that it was “the right one?”

In the face of these theoretical difficulties, Adorno’s concept of the negative utopia gains in appeal. The main thrust of Adorno’s argument regarding negative utopias is that although we may never find a universally satisfactory idea of utopia to work towards, we may at least find a universal idea of what kind of society *we don’t want* to live in. This is a picture of utopia in reverse: if only we can cut out the features of society that are undesirable to all, then what is left over should be (minimally) acceptable to everyone. But Adorno’s utopian journey has an endpoint—it does not go on forever, constantly striving to approach the ideal; rather, it runs out steam once it has succeeded in surgically amputating all of society’s universally undesirable features. After this point, society can progress no further, but rather aimlessly drifts, bereft of a theoretical destination. The sickness is cured, in this case, but at the cost of killing the patient.

Though we must allow that sometimes monsters will attempt, in their own misguided ways and for their own misguided reasons, to build exclusive, irrational “utopias” to showcase and indulge their perverse fantasies, we must not allow this fact to deter us from constructing our own inclusive, positive vision of utopia: a rational utopia that incorporates and respects the preferences of as many potential members as possible. A utopia perhaps not so different from the one Rawls hopes we can arrive at through wide reflective equilibrium in the original position. After all, Rawls’ thought experiment is simply another variation on the narrative form that provides us with an alternate foundation upon which to base our social critiques. It is in the practice of theorizing viable alternatives to existing social practices that we gain the altitude, so

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to speak, to loom over our current ways of doing things and see the folly in them; to view the maze, as it were, from above. A negative utopian vision cannot help us predict what will emerge from a cocoon—it cannot bring us the perspicuity to divine what the next stage of our society ought to be. Nor can it negotiate a full societal transformation—it can only surgically reform what already exists, bereft of a standpoint towards novel potential or emergent social practices. And although the idea of constructing the “right” utopia might now seem to be a daunting project, it has not yet been shown it to be an impossible one: in fact, as I mentioned above, Rawls has brought us closer to this ideal than was previously thought to be possible.

UTOPIA AS A STATE BUILDER

*Clear voiced cuckoo,
Even you will need
The silver wings of a crane
To span the islands of Matsushima.*

- Sora (17th century Japanese poet)

Despite the fact that utopias are generally formulated for the purposes of facilitating social cooperation, ethical instruction, and critiques of sociopolitical practices, at certain historical junctures utopian devotees have attempted to construct earthly representations of their “good places.” Those who tired of the ceaseless utopian journey set up campsites to rest in; these campsites slowly became villages; these villages became towns; and the towns became vibrant cities. But these physical traces do

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not a utopia make; for utopia, we must recall, is unrealizable by its nature. Utopia, then, is only something that is ideologically experienced among the members of a community... perhaps the *cooperative ethos of the journey* I spoke of earlier. Along the way, land may be cleared, slogans formulated, and buildings erected, but these activities of state-building are merely the expressions of a community acting in unison: and it is the character of those actions, not their products, which can be fairly characterized as utopian.

From the religious utopia of the “promised land,” to the socialist utopia of life under communism, the promise of a better tomorrow has been evoked perennially for the purposes of building solidarity within various communities. The physical edifices constructed by these communities, however, were considered to be further down the line in importance than the mental states of their community members. State building took a back seat to social wellbeing; earthly profit was secondary to purity of practice.

Representing the opposite perspective, it was Karl Mannheim who most influentially advocated the idea that the value of a utopia should be judged by how realizable it is.²⁴ This judgment of “value.” it seems, can only be extended to the external trappings of a utopia—i.e., to what extent the utopian state has been made materially manifest. The work of Rawls would seem to be in line with Mannheim’s analysis, as Rawls claims to be interested in engineering a “realistic utopia” via his ideal theory, which would require the construction of new (or the reform of preexisting) institutions aimed towards ensuring optimal fairness in social practices. Granting Mannheim and Rawls a temporary reprieve from the definitional objection to a realizable utopia, voiced earlier in this paper, we leave ourselves free to consider the following

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questions: “What would be the consequences of a utopia-come-true?” and “How would such a state of affairs manifest itself?”

Having freed utopia of its definitional constraint of unrealizability, it seems as if we might have some trouble recognizing the realization of a utopia from the attainment of any other state of affairs arising from the communal efforts of various groups of people. Let’s say, for example, that the Starbucks Coffee Company just opened up its one billionth locale. Now the ratio of Starbucks coffee shops to human beings on Earth would be (approximately) one to seven (1:7). So the goals of a group of people have been met, and no one really objects to the expansion of the Starbucks operation on moral grounds: no one, for example, is barred from entering their stores. A decent cup of coffee is now available virtually anywhere in the world, and to further sweeten the deal the Starbucks Coffee Company dedicates itself to giving a larger portion of its profits back to charity. Everybody wins, or so it would seem. But would this state of affairs count as a utopia-come-true? I would like to say that it wouldn’t, because most Starbucks employees (unless they’re fanatically dedicated to their company) are just “along for the ride”: that is, they don’t share a truly “utopian” vision—a vision that is fully inclusive of all members of the organization, a vision that each of those members is equally rationally compelled to adhere to and continually strive for. And the owners of the Starbucks Coffee Company, having the ultimate goal of making more and more money by having more and more people drink more and more of its coffee, fare no better. Their goal (in and of itself) constitutes a system with no endpoint, no appreciation of its own limits. So it’s not that Starbucks is not utopian because its goals are reachable—quite the contrary—it’s that Starbucks is not utopian because its goal is of the wrong *kind*.

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Having the “right” utopia implies having the “right” goals. In this way, we can say that the most rational utopia requires a cosmopolitan component—we must consider each human to be a potential member of our utopian society when we settle upon our utopian goal. There are important theoretical reasons supporting inclusiveness as a criterion of utopian “rightness,” which I shall explore in more detail below.

Literary utopias are usually portrayed as having a cosmopolitan *ethos* towards the practice of hospitality: guests are typically invited into utopia and guided through it in order that they come to understand how deficient and/or inferior their home cultures are. Kant no doubt had these kinds of cultural exchanges in mind (albeit in the real world) when he wrote on the subject of cosmopolitan hospitality. But a “true” utopia—the utopia that lies not in bricks and mortar but in the relationships between the utopians themselves—cannot bear outsiders; or at least outsiders who are beyond utopian conversion. The arrival of the recalcitrant stranger signals the destruction of paradise, as it is the stranger who exposes the willfully overlooked faults that make the illusion of utopia possible to maintain for its inhabitants.²⁵ This disillusionment upsets the internal dynamic that exists between the members of a utopian community and draws into question the beliefs in the utopian ideal that facilitated a high degree of social cooperation in the first place. The death of the utopian dream symbolically triggers the dramatic undoing of all communal relationships and efforts, and even the physical architecture of the community will be neglected and eventually crumble once the members’ conviction in their utopian vision wanes.

The singular vision required by one’s adherence to a given utopia is not unlike the blind faith required of believers in certain

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religions. Evidence of the viability of foreign and attractive ways of life poses a serious challenge to the faith of utopian devotees, just as the worship of other gods can serve to draw into question the validity of one's theological convictions. The other ways of life, often, become the new "utopias" to be sought after. Utopian beliefs, like religious beliefs, are at their core very personal: there may not be a "fact of the matter" in the world regarding what is and what is not the best way for everyone to live. Thus again we face the charge that it may never be possible to formulate "the right utopia." Still, the utopian has resort to reason: the stranger can hopefully be convinced, through rational argument, that certain practices of the outside world *are* indeed less desirable than those carried out within the utopian community, and come to see the normative desirability of utopia. It is this possibility of rational conversion through discourse that is the greatest weapon in the utopian's arsenal; and it is the practice of cosmopolitan hospitality that brings outsiders within its firing range.

Utopianism is an absolutist ideology—it strives to include every person in the world. Its vision reaches out to encompass all of humanity in its grasp; each and every stranger must come to recognize its superior practices. But when failing to achieve this level of ideological subsumption in reality, it must keep outsiders and non-believers safely at bay. In Sir Francis Bacon's utopia, *New Atlantis*, we see this tension manifest: the existence of the island of Bensalem must be kept secret from the rest of the world, or paradise will be lost. Utopia, if it hopes to survive, cannot be the treading-ground of barbarians who would seek to exploit it. But the only reliable—and utopian—manner in which to eliminate the threat of outsiders is to make everyone an insider through rational persuasion. We can safely assume, however, that there are

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individuals and groups that will refuse to engage in rational discourse with the utopians, and their existence will therefore pose a great danger to the continuing success of utopian practices. Thus, if utopian practices are to persevere, utopian communities must have recourse to non-rational (yet legitimate) methods of persuasion, along with a theoretical basis that is wide enough to absorb discontents along with paradigmatic utopian cooperators. Utopia must therefore take the form of global governance—an all-encompassing system of government the rejection of which would be a futile gesture, with access to overwhelming military strength too great to resist.

In my essay “Making the Case for Strong Global Governance,”²⁶ I argue that the surest route towards minimizing the risk of international military conflict, and establishing a peaceful network of worldwide social cooperation, is to strengthen and expand existing forms of global governance. I posit that the alternative—the continuation of the practice of military competition between states—can only result in the continuation of existing, and prosecution of future, wars. The idea, however, of a strong global government is seen as “utopian in a bad way” to many. Theorists like Michael Walzer worry that the establishment of a world-state would lead to a centralized totalitarian dominion. But a utopian world-state would only be truly utopian if all rational citizens of the world-state rationally subscribed to its particular utopian vision—as we cannot be dominated by that to which we freely and rationally give our ongoing assent. The problem here is a practical one: how are we to formulate and promulgate such a utopia and then secure the rational assent of each potentially incorporated individual? In the past, wars have served to advertise and advance ideologies. Utopia, however, possesses no cannons

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(only canons)—and even if it did come to have a military arm, a fully inclusive utopia would not have call to use it in bloody conquest, but rather only in defending itself and policing non-rational groups within it. Patience and rational deliberation are acceptable strategies where the application of force—except in the sense of “the force of the better argument”—is not.

In time, perhaps some definitive list of universal psychological and sociological similarities between peoples of all cultures could be assembled, and a socio-scientific utopian constitution formulated on its basis, in the tradition of B. F. Skinner’s *Walden Two*. Or perhaps we will (each of us) have the occasion to enter into a global original position at some time or another. Rawls, after all, thinks this is the best way to get at principals of maximal fairness that will hold over time and across cultures. Whatever the ultimate means of formulating such a utopia, they are not as crucially important as adherence to the general utopian principle of social cooperation. This principle in itself can guide our actions now, while we wait, and hope, and work together towards universal agreement on a mutually ennobling end. This is the normative role of utopianism in political philosophy.

CONCLUSION

Utopianism is more than a longing for a time and place that never was; rather, it is the hope for a time and place that might yet be. Nostalgia for times and places we never lived in, and that perhaps never even existed, I call “malchronesis”: the feeling that one is living in the wrong place at the wrong time. Malchronesis, I posit, is not an expression of utopian longing, but rather a symptom of

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utopian failure—the failure to act to realize a utopia in one’s own time; the failure to find belonging in a cooperative human venture. Utopianism is more than just a way of doing things: it is a way of thinking that holds out hope for instilling a universal sense of belonging in humanity, and thus saving humanity from its self-destructive elements. It is a way of thinking that frees us from a Hobbesian state-of-nature mindset and allows us to move towards a more positive conception of human nature: towards a lasting (though perhaps not perpetual) peace. We do not live up to our collective intellectual responsibility when we both theoretically and practically settle for less than this. Utopia is better than a self-fulfilling prophesy: it never even has to be realized in order for it to produce the best possible mutually beneficial and practicable state of affairs, increased social cooperation and harmonious relationships with others. We tell our children the story of utopia, and that is enough to put their fears, and our own, to sleep.

NOTES

1. Krishan Kumar, *Utopianism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1991), p.31.
2. Ibid., p.42.
3. Ibid., p.52.
4. Ibid., p.97.
5. Here I am siding with Kumar’s assessment to the same effect (p.95), and to lesser extent Rawls in the first section of his *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).
6. These are lyrics from the song “(Would You Like To) Swing on a Star,” written by Johnny Burke. My grandfather used to enjoy listening to it with me as a child, as we relaxed together on his backyard swing. It’s one of

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those songs I'll never forget, yet rarely think of either. Buried in childhood, that storehouse of utopias.

7. See Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Hertfordshire: Syracuse University Press, 1990), chapter 2.
8. Kumar, *ibid.*, pp.86-7.
9. Ultimately futile, but intellectually heroic. Perhaps also tragicomic, as the attempt to defend a sandcastle against the encroaching tide would be.
10. Those who have had the privilege of attending lectures by Kai Nielson may have noticed that when he discusses unrealistic utopian ideas he often colorfully refers to them as sub-domains of "cloud-cuckoo-land."
11. In my undergraduate honours thesis at Dalhousie University, "The Experience Machine: Bentham and Nozick's Contrasting Treatments of Pleasure," I put forward the notion that "...the price of producing overall happiness, the prerequisite of lasting societal peace, [is] near-total homogeneity in human behavior." (p.20)
12. Kumar, *ibid.*, p.3.
13. *Ibid.*, p.62.
14. Amitava Ray, *Political Utopianism: Some Philosophical Problems* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates Ltd., 1979), p.1.
15. Wilde, quoted in Kumar, *ibid.*, p.95.
16. See "Introduction" in Malcolm Schofield, *Saving the City: Philosopher-Kings and Other Classical Paradigms* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
17. I have argued this point previously, in my "Utopianism as a Rationale for Egalitarianism" (published in *Gnosis: A Journal of Philosophic Interest*, Vol. VII, No. 1, Spring 2003).
18. This is because the goal of a utopia is perfection: the most ideal arrangement of social relations conceivable. Since no rational player can hope to do better than perfection, it will be maximizing for each to cooperate in every reasonable way, where such cooperation moves all players one step closer to the realization of the utopian vision.
19. Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p.36.
20. Richard Rorty, from the introduction to his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p.xvi.
21. Ray, *ibid.*, p.89.

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22. Kumar, *ibid.*, p.48.
23. *Ibid.*, p.57.
24. *Ibid.*, p.92.
25. I am inclined to insert a related note from the world of pop culture here. Those familiar with the original Star Trek series can attest that the dramatic arrival of the outsider (usually in guise of Captain James Tiberius Kirk—played by McGill alumni William Shatner) symbolically signals the disruption of the social equilibrium and the end of utopian revels. In the Star Trek tradition, the physical architecture (along with the conceptual architecture) often comes down upon the heads of the utopian true believers in the form of mock (Styrofoam) masonry.
26. Presented at ‘Colloque Fodar: Perspectives Philosophiques sur la Mondialisation’, at the University of Quebec at Montreal, October 2003.