

EXCLUSION AND UTOPIAN THINKING

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I was supposed to speak to you today about the social function of the idea of Utopia, but I have decided not to pursue that topic, at least not directly. Instead I want to offer a few comments on the *Utopian Visions* program as a whole.

Over the course of this series, I have been struck by a persistent trend toward exclusion. I refer here to the notion that Utopia is attainable only if some social or intellectual tendency is strengthened and its opposite is removed or curbed. Implicit in this perspective is the assumption that Utopia must take a pure undiluted form, uncontaminated by contradictory impulses.

The most patent example of this reasoning was provided by our keynote speaker, Kirkpatrick Sale. In his view, modern society is dominated by an unholy alliance of consumerism and technology, exemplified by the computer. The predominance of computers hinders the emergence of what he conceives to be the Utopian ideal, namely, a society in harmony with the natural world.

Kirkpatrick Sale is by no means alone in adopting an exclusionary stance. I have heard similar opinions expressed from opposite quarters of the ideological spectrum. For example, several members of the audience have suggested that science is the only viable model for a contemporary utopia. In their view, what needs to be excluded is certain mythical or mystical tendencies that inhibit the final victory of the scientific world view.

The idea of exclusion was also prominent in the two dystopias we considered, Brave New World and 1984. There, however, it was because of exclusion that the idea of Utopia had become problematic. Both works are designed to compel recognition that something is missing from the projected ideal, that exclusion has created profound loss.

The coupling of utopian ideals with exclusionary tendencies has ancient roots. In the Republic, Plato suggested that poets should be disbarred from the ideal state. It was his belief that poetry was inherently corrupting to social discipline and would therefore have to be eliminated. This seems a strangely ironic view for a follower of Socrates, who was ordered to commit suicide for similar reasons.

However, the starkest instances of exclusion occur not within philosophy, but religion. With few exceptions, the spiritual version of utopia, heaven, is always coupled with its exclusionary opposite, hell. Here again, we find the implicit belief that the ideal can be attained only if opposing tendencies are repressed or eliminated.

What I want to suggest to you today is that this assumption is mistaken. An ideal society cannot be created through a process of intellectual distillation, in which discordant ideas are progressively removed, until only the pure essence remains. What this is, really, is a recipe for stagnation and repression. A better model for utopia, I think, is that of dynamic balance. That is to say, the ideal society is generated not through a radical purge, but through a creative tension between divergent tendencies. I want to put some emphasis here on the word *creative*, because the resulting conflict is not always productive. Social chaos is certainly a frequent, and perhaps the most likely outcome. *Creative* interactions occur only when the larger political and intellectual framework is conducive. For me, then, the question is not what to exclude, but how to arrange society so that differing perspectives interact dynamically and productively instead of superficially and destructively.

Since I am, and always have been, somewhat of a loner, social theory is not my strong suit. So rather than address this question directly, I would like to enfold it within a broader philosophical discussion. Though its relevance may not be immediately obvious to you, this more abstract frame of reference does have some bearing on how one conceives of the nature and goal of a utopia.

Let me begin by suggesting that the human mind apprehends reality through two basic modes, the quantitative and the qualitative. The quantitative mode is rational, disciplined, and empirical. This is the domain of fact, measurement, science, and technology. Its denizens are machines, tools, and formulas. Here two and two always equal four.

The qualitative mode, on the other hand, is intuitive, impulsive, and imprecise. This is the realm of art, mysticism, poetry, and imagination. It is populated with ghosts, gods, symbols, and allusions. Here the boundaries are more fluid and permeable, often receding into the haze of infinity. Two and two may or may not equal four.

To put the distinction more compactly, the quantitative mode defines spatial and temporal relationships, while the qualitative mode discloses human relationships.

The distinction I am making here is more commonly described using the words "objective" and "subjective." I have avoided these terms, however, for two reasons. First of all, they concern particular instances or special examples of the categories I have in view. Subjectivity is confined to private experience, while the qualitative

mode, as I shall make clear, pertains to societies as well as to individuals. My second reason for avoiding standard terminology has to do with its connotations. Within contemporary society, the notion of subjectivity generally carries a certain pejorative taint. There persists a widespread belief that reality and perspective are neatly separable categories. That is simply not true, however. The observer and the world are embedded within each other.

What I have called the qualitative and the quantitative are not opposite, but complementary paradigms. Each defines a separate dimension of the same reality. At bottom, both are simply a way of organizing the world and making it comprehensible to the human mind. The nature of that organization differs, but its ultimate basis within empirical reality does not.

This brings me back to my intended point. In my view, the ideal individual is a harmonious union of both modes. Genuine insight and creativity occur only when both faculties are present and actively engaged. Where the qualitative mode is lacking, the result is an arid rationality, knowledge without wisdom; where the quantitative mode is absent, the result is ardor without discipline, vision without focus. Where the two intersect, genius bursts out.

Now I have said that my intellectual strengths do not lie in social theory. Nonetheless, since this is a forum on utopia, I would like to extend this line of reasoning to include society as well. A utopia, I suggest, can exist only where there is an optimal balance between the quantitative and the qualitative. A dystopia, on the other hand, will occur where one mode is emphasized to the exclusion of the other. To be more specific, a society dominated by qualitative thinking will be repressive, superstitious, and disconnected from biological and physical realities. A society dominated by quantitative thinking will lack clear values, direction, and purpose.

One can easily point to periods in history when these imbalances have occurred. In medieval Europe, for example, faith demanded the sacrifice of reason. More recently, the Soviet Union enforced ideological purity through systematic propaganda and periodic purges. In both instances, dogma predetermined how fact was understood.

In the modern West, on the other hand, the opposite trend predominates. Increasingly, we live in a society empty of overarching purpose and coherence. At school, at work, and in the media, the world is presented not as meaningful whole, but simply as a mass of data. Science and philosophy are largely dominated by reductionistic schemes, in which human values are at best irrelevant.

Despite that, I suggest that we are not so very far from the dynamic balance that constitutes my version of Utopia. What we need is a unifying myth. Many of you may

find this notion a bit quaint. I am not, however, suggesting that we adopt an Olympian pantheon or a three level universe such as that conceived by the ancient Hebrews. To be effective, a myth must be consistent with the world view in which it appears. In our particular case, that means the myth must be democratic and scientifically viable.

One further caveat is necessary. A myth is not, as some would have it, simply a fiction. Myth is a way of visualizing the world, and thereby making it accessible to human participation. It is only when a myth is unable to establish this connection that it degenerates into mere fancy.

I have no intention of elucidating a suitable myth for you. Nonetheless, it seems to me that a prime example lies close at hand. As you all know, our topic today is Utopia. I suggest that it is quite proper to describe that ideal as a mythical concept. I think most of us would agree that such a society probably will never be fully realized, at least not on a large scale. It does not follow, however, that thinking about Utopia is an exercise in futility. By visualizing how the world should be arranged, we make that world imaginatively present. The myth of utopia provides a clearly defined model; it establishes a goal, a direction, in which to move. When enough people agree on that course, society will in fact be transformed. It cannot be said, therefore, that myths are irrelevant fictions. They have produced real change in the past and can continue to do so even today.