An introduction to Utopian Thinking

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Utopia is defined as either a good place or no place. In some sense the different definitions can be reconcilable because as people move towards the shores of utopia, the island itself drifts away. Such a metaphor describes that a perfectly good place is something that we never perfectly reach, and as we get closer there are new issues that arise that can get resolved in ways that make social relations even more utopian. However, just because we never arrive at perfection does not mean that people can not make progress towards utopia. Notions of good politics, economics, and social relations – good as in that which should be – should not be static ahistorical notions. Instead, notions of the good place ought to be rooted in actual possibilities – possibilities that are changing with conditions that are in a process of becoming.

Out of a critique of that which exists – the notion that the world is not perfect – comes a notion that the world could be better. From critique of that which exists, and knowledge of that which could be, a notion of that which should exist emerges out of actual possibilities – possibilities which are not all equivalent. However, the criteria for evaluating different possibilities is highly contested terrain. Different utopian theories try to answer the question of "what political, economic, and social relations ought to exist?". Different utopian theories answer that question in a way that is more holistic than many normative ethical approaches because of the way that utopian theories flesh out criteria for a good society that often has multiple aspects not reducible to a singular particularistic metric.

Utopias describe and prescribe a gestalt of good principles and practices for political economic social relations rather than being preoccupied with the scale of what a good individual life is, or what good intentions are, or good particular actions, or good character traits. Those latter dimensions of the good that can only be answered holistically through a political, economic, and social context. Utopian theories are able to flesh out prescribed social relations that can either directly or indirectly arrive at the above normative ethical pursuits – or at least be a constitutive of or catalyzing towards such normative ethical processes. Many utopian theories are even structured around arriving at classic normative goals such as consequentialism, virtue ethics, deontology, etc., whereas other utopian theories are related to classical normative ethical theories in indirect ways, or through seeing all of the above – theories of good place and more individuated theories of the good life – as mutually constitutive of each other in some way or another.

There are fictional utopias which give a fictional account of what a good place would be like. Fictional accounts of the good place are connected to imagination – a key tool for finding out

what could be. Fictional accounts of the good place are often rooted in philosophical utopian theories. It makes sense that utopian theories have a relationship to fiction because utopian processes are in many regards about co-creating a reality that doesn't exist yet within the bounds of actual possibilities within the bounds of developmental conditions that exist. Philosophical utopias are broad theories of what good places ought to be. Theories of good political, economic, and social relations use some criteria of what the good is – whether it is explicit or implicit. People's utopias are attempts to put philosophical utopias into practice – that is to apply general principles rooted in actual possibilities to concrete conditions. The theory and practice of utopia ought to mutually inform one another.

Pejoratively, utopia can mean something that is fantastical and not rooted in actual conditions. This can be seen in Marx's critique of the utopian socialists. The pejoratively utopian socialists advocate for building utopia without a revolution that qualitatively shifts social relations. Marx critiqued the pejoratively utopian socialists for prescribing utopia within bourgeoisie property relations instead of through revolution. Such pejorative utopians advocate for merely building communes and cooperatives rather than building utopia out of oppositional politics. Such pejorative utopians are merely utopian rather than also looking at how a utopian process could unfold given the mode of production that exists. In many ways, Marx himself is deeply utopian. Marx acknowledges the importance of gleaning a vision of a good society from utopian thinkers – as Marx himself did. Marx's notion of distribution according to abilities and needs and abolishing value – not just class relations – places Marx's communism as more utopian than mere prescriptions of communes and cooperatives. Marx's critique of pejorative utopianism is that the utopians do not root their analyses in the actual conditions developing – which under capitalism requires people to build utopia out of struggle to arrive at the good place. Marx's critique of pejorative utopianism is not a critique of all forms of utopian thinking; in many ways Marx affirms and refines utopian praxis by adding the necessity of oppositional politics and changing the political economic limits of society as a whole – and not just building the new world without regard for the old.

However, it can also be said that Marx wasn't utopian enough. Marx did not actually write much about what socialism and communism entails and ought to look like. Marx wrote far more critiquing capitalism than espousing communism. Marx was rather skeptical about our ability to flesh out utopian ideals beyond very minimal aspects. Although blueprint models of utopia are too strict, it can also be said that loose conceptions of utopia are too vague. The notions we have of the relations that ought to exist create a directionality for our praxis and require means that are constitutive of such ends if there are means constitutive of such ends. We ought to prefigure the new world within the shell of the old – which means we should flesh out what that new world ought to be to a significant degree – but we ought to take into consideration how the development of a new world is limited by the old world that still exists, as well as in part determined by practices employed to abolish the old world, and how the new world requires oppositional politics and revolution against the capitalist mode of production and hierarchical relations more broadly.

Endnotes:

1. Anthropology of Utopia by Dan Chodorkoff

2. The Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx