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Utopia reconsidered: Two levels of perfection in society

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Abstract

Every person has wondered whether idealism without naïveté or realism without cynicism is possible. In common parlance, utopia is not only eu-topic (a place of the good), but also forever a-topic (without place). Who is right: the idealist who believes, or the realist who disbelieves, in the possibility of a perfect society? This article suggests that utopia both is and is not possible. There are two ways to understand the idea of a “perfect society.” In an absolutely perfect society there is no reality of sin. Given this reality, however, in some societies it nonetheless is easier to be good. Thus, a certain level of perfection is possible: the best possible level. The often ignored principle of the two levels of perfection may diffuse tensions, close off powerful temptations towards naïveté and cynicism, and give birth to new openings in political and theological discussion.

Keywords

utopia, perfection, realism, idealism, politics

“Realism is the ability to maintain the noblest aspirations of the soul even as one remains beset by personal weaknesses.”

—Alexandre Havard, *Virtuous Leadership* (New York: Scepter, 2007), 135

“[The lawgiver] had not given [his countrymen] absolutely the best [laws], but the best which they were capable of receiving.”

—Origen, *Contra Celsum*, iii

Introduction: Utopia?

In 1516 Thomas More wrote what would become his most famous work: *Utopia*. Raphael Hytholdaeus shares an incredible story: he claims to have visited an exceptionally wonderful island called Utopia, its citizens lacking vices, and its form of government lacking the weaknesses that beset all other known societies. As we know, the word utopia derives from this classic book. The word utopia has found its way, often unaltered, into most common languages. In common language, utopia stands for “a perfect society” or “a perfect state.”

But despite the assumed perfection, both academic political thought and common parlance attach a qualified, pejorative meaning to the word. Utopia is not only eu-topic (a place of the good), but also forever a-topic (without place). Most utopias envisioned and attempted by political theorists turn out to be, often sooner than later, quite horrid places, as history has shown. Indeed, the names of such utopias—say, “The Third Reich,” “eugenics,” and so on—have become bywords for evil, and not even Plato’s “Republic,” “The Kingdom of Heaven”, or “City Upon a Hill” are free of negative connotations.¹ Hence, intellectuals think the only characteristic separating utopia from dystopia is the prefix. Commoners, also, know that utopias “simply don’t work.” Thus, what utopia really means is “a place that does not exist nor ever can—or if it did, it would be a horrible place.” If you believe otherwise, the so-called Realist will label you a naïve Idealist: “How utopian!” The so-called Idealist, in turn, will reply to this charge by reminding the Realist of cynicism’s self-fulfilling nature.

Indeed, all thoughtful people, and most politicians, have contemplated these two timeless questions: (1) Is it possible to remain an Idealist without being naïve? And conversely: (2) Is it possible to remain a Realist without regressing into cynicism?

These universal questions resurface constantly, restated in various forms. Is it possible to proceed in hopeful civic activism without it degenerating into false optimism? Is it possible to squarely acknowledge evil-infested reality without it lapsing into acceptance of this reality, in other words, without embracing fatalist pessimism?

I am sure most would agree that the answer to these two interrelated questions is, “Yes, it is possible.” Idealism without otherworldliness is difficult but possible; and realism without cynicism is likewise difficult but possible. Some of us know this to be so for having experienced it ourselves. Some have witnessed it in others. There are various relevant factors, including potent Christian virtues and doctrines, which can contribute to the compatibility of idealism and realism, free from naïveté and cynicism.² In this article, I propose only one.

1. For a recent discussion of the dangers of programmatic utopias, see Roger Scruton’s aptly titled *The Uses of Pessimism: And the Danger of False Hope* (New York: Oxford, 2010).

2. See Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For an account of the interplay between the virtue of love and public life, see Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love* (Chicago: Chicago, 2008). As for the doctrine of sin in its classic form, Reinhold Niebuhr has written that it “offends both rationalists and moralists by maintaining the

It is a less obvious and less discussed factor, a simple logical conclusion found upon an analysis of the idea of a perfect society. Who is right: the Realist who disbelieves, or the Idealist who believes, in the possibility of a perfect society? I will suggest that they are both right. Perfect society both is and is not possible.

From here on, I use “utopia” and “perfect society” synonymously. As this article is an exercise in logic, not a historical analysis, by “utopia” I mean, not particular historical experiments, but simply the more abstract “a society where all is well.” This exercise in logic is not, however, simply an intellectual balancing act. As a theologian, educator, and leadership trainer, I have witnessed its efficacy in response to quandaries citizens face.

Levels of perfection: Absolute versus possible

Utopia is an illusion

It seems that there are two ways to understand the idea of “perfect society,” a society where all is well. The first is an absolutely perfect society. A society not beset by vice, by crime, by suffering, by exploitation, and so on. In theological terms, a society not invaded by the reality of sin and its corrosive consequences. The Realist is right. Such a society does not and cannot exist. Not that the goal of policy-making and law is not the eradication of vice and injustices—it is—but by itself it cannot fulfil the task. This is not only a practical truth, but a fundamental one, for virtue cannot be “forced” from the outside. If a politician believes otherwise, if they believe that the solutions to all societal problems are simply technical ones at the law-makers’ ready disposal, the Realist’s charge “How utopian!” is quite justified.

Utopia is not an illusion

But the idea of a “perfect society” can be understood in another way. True, all structures eventually crumble; all fixes fail or eventually lose their effective power. Architectural styles vary, but the builders and the building material is always the same: human beings. It merits us not to blame the wall, if the bricks, by nature, are variously bent and cracked. However, as Charles Mathewes notes, misery is “not [only] a matter of individuals’ wanton rapaciousness; there are material and structural forces shaping our behaviour.”³ In some societies it is easier to “be good” than in others (or more difficult to “be bad”). Certain structures support

(note continued)

seemingly absurd position that man sins inevitably and by a fateful necessity but that he is nevertheless to be held responsible for actions which are prompted by an ineluctable fate” (*The Nature and Destiny of Man* [1941], I, 241), quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), I, 279. This “two-horned dilemma” of Christian anthropology, the inevitability of sin and our responsibility for sin, has been resisting the corresponding extremes, moralism and fatalism, throughout history.

3. Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 75.

the cultivation of virtue better than others. Certain structures appear to be more solid. In other words, it is possible, to a certain extent, to lessen the derogatory influence of the bent bricks themselves. This is why societies opt for different forms of government, why there exist the police force, schools, law-courts, and so on. In addition to these concrete institutions, at work within societies are various non-governmental organizations, impersonal forces and trends, family cultures, and the like, that may encourage constructive proactivity and in many ways support the cultivation of virtue. Some societies do this better than others, of course. There is also the element of contingency: it may be that a given structure or policy works best in certain historical, social, or cultural settings, and worse in others.

Thus, the second way to define a “perfect society” is the best possible society. A perfect society with qualifications. We cannot attain an absolutely perfect society, but a certain level or approximation of this ideal is attainable: the best possible level.

This realization may seem too simple to be taken seriously. But the Idealist is right, too. Such a society is possible, because we are speaking, by definition, of the best possible society. This level acknowledges the limits of our human nature, which affects both our everyday behaviour and our ability to envision, implement, and sustain good policies. The irony is that perfect society—utopia—in this sense is not necessarily forever a-topic (without place), but a real possibility.

This conclusion, although a truth in itself, does not, of course, work out the means to the end. It does not supply the details of, for example, which policies work best in a given country in a given time. Only prudence does. But it can provide motivation to work out the means. Fiddling with pieces of a puzzle may be fun for a time, but if your goal is actually to match the right pieces to create an elaborate whole, it helps to know that this whole is both theoretically and practically attainable, even if you are not quite sure what the finished work will look like.

This said, the “puzzle pieces” of society are always the same. They include policy-making, education, the role and relationship of various institutions, like Church and state, and so on. Lest our understanding of “perfect society” remains vacuous to the extent of disappearance into mere abstraction, we need to root our discussion in some of these more concrete elements that together make up a society.

Shades of perfection: The challenges of policy making

The puzzles of policy making are fundamentally challenging. Every parent knows the difficulty of child raising. Many things need to be taken into consideration in the education of our children. It can fail for a great number of reasons. We may, for instance, educate for the wrong reasons, make uninformed or destructive choices, err in a seemingly endless number of ways. Despite our best intentions the consequences of our choices are often unpredictable. What is more, children are separate individuals with their own free wills, and can choose to behave or react

in whimsical ways. Our “lack of control” over the matter is not only practical, but also fundamental, for, as noted above, it belongs to the authentic nature of virtue that it cannot be forced.

If policy-making on this “simple” family level is so complex, we can imagine the insurmountable challenges policy makers on the municipal, national, or international levels face daily. Take, for instance, the problem of alcoholism or drug abuse. Most people would agree that there is something disturbing about these phenomena. But that is where simple agreement ends. There are many different ways to deal with or tackle these social problems, some of which are mutually exclusive.

It is important to note that disagreement or lack of unanimity in these matters does not rule out the possibility of shades of perfection. Shades of perfection in turn presuppose perfection, so disagreement in fact supports the thesis of the two levels of perfection. Disagreement does not disprove the existence or attainability of ideal policy, rather it presupposes it. Between extremes there is much room for constructive discussion and legitimate variety. In one way, the clear cut continuum from a “less” to a “more” perfect society is misleading, for all imperfections are deviations of perfection, not only simplistic defects or excesses.

One central question of policy making concerns policy-making itself: what form of government is optimal in a given historical setting, and how much power should this government wield? Is the government really responsible for the moral perfection of its citizens and to what extent? We may argue that family and non-governmental vitality must be protected, even at the expense of government vitality. There are no easy answers. But, again, we can see that this challenge or objection does not nullify the principle of the best possible level. For in any case, in a perfect society the government wields an optimal amount of power, as much power as is needed for the longevity of the best possible society.

Planes of perfection: Religion and public life

Challenges more relevant to political theology are (1) the structural relationship between Church and state and (2) the theological relationship between faith and public life. As regards the first, Church and state, many models have been suggested. Some models are obviously bad. There is the extreme of militant, totalitarian atheism: a state of affairs where the state actively combats religion, or a state that actively promotes moral vice. Another extreme, paternalistic theocracy, sends (I hope) similar shivers down our spines. Forced virtue and forced religion pervert the good they seek to promote, because, yet again, fundamental to the nature of virtue and religion is freedom.

The relationship between faith and public life may be even more multifaceted. At this point it might be worthwhile to return to the idea of perfection. For we may ask, by perfection do we mean the “natural” common good, the fullness of virtue in citizens, or is it the “supernatural” common good, the forgiveness of sins, the sanctification of citizens? Or, to put it in crude but instructive terms, in a perfect

society, do we have perfect social-work or perfect evangelism?⁴ The distinction between the so-called natural and supernatural planes may be a necessary one. But two things must be said.

First, as we know, distinction does not mean separation. The two orders or planes of perfection (to separate them from the two “levels” of perfection) are intricately joined. There may be intimate links, both one-way and two-way, bridging the two planes. The one may affect the other. I spoke earlier of the virtue of prudence. Etymologically, *prudencia* comes from *providentia*, and according to philosopher Peter Geach, although “etymologies are often misleading, this one is not.”⁵ Mathewes agrees: “True prudence is a deeply theologically informed approach to valuing and inhabiting our existence... To be worldly, we find we must raise issues that are properly theological, while our theological interests are always cashed out in worldly ways.”⁶ The second point to note is that, regardless of which plane we choose as the proper paradigm for an ideal society, the principle of the best possible level still applies. There is an optimal state of affairs for purely “natural” perfection, and there is likewise an optimal state of affairs for “graced” perfection. These states of affairs may, or may not, coincide.

Conclusion: A tautology

The best possible society is possible, and it is the best possible society. This, the single argument of this article, is both humble and lofty. Humble because it is a tautology; and, like all tautologies, amounts to the astonishing $2 + 2 = 4$. Lofty because, like in mathematics, “the highest does not stand without the lowest.”⁷ The higher mathematical truths are as tautologous as the elementary ones; the tautologous element of the elementary truths is just easier to detect. Or, it may be that in some cases elementary truths are more difficult to detect. There is always a first time for everything. The first time you realize that $2 + 2 = 4$ may be a groundbreaking experience.

Indeed, I anticipate two possible responses. I said earlier that this principle may be too simplistic to be taken seriously. For some, the best possible society is possible is a mere tautology hardly worth pronouncing. True, it is a tautology.

4. “Christians have survived,” writes Charles Mathewes, “many different political structures in the world. Good Christians live as subjects of the tyrannical autocracies of East and Central Asia, in the oligarchic kleptocracies of the Middle East, in the semi-democracies of Latin America, even in the complete ‘stateless’ conditions across much of Africa” (*Theology of Public Life*, 23). True, many have suffered from poor political structures, but they would certainly rather suffer from good ones. Mathewes’s point is, however, elsewhere: his goal is “not to use faith to support *democratic* culture, but the reverse, and more—to use our civic interactions with one another to deepen faith” (23, emphasis added).

5. Peter Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 70.

6. Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 79–80.

7. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 2:10.

“But tautologies,” reminds C. S. Lewis, “are not always barren tautologies.”⁸ Thus, for a second group of people, caught up in the interminable realism versus idealism—pessimism versus optimism—debate, the principle of the two levels of perfection in society may diffuse tensions and give birth to some new openings. It begins by closing off powerful temptations towards naïveté and cynicism.

Author biography

Jason Lepojärvi is a member of the Finnish Graduate School of Theology (University of Helsinki) and leadership trainer (Providentia). Born to a Canadian mother and Finnish father, Lepojärvi currently lives in Helsinki. His most recent publication is “Does Eros Seek Happiness? A Critical Analysis of C. S. Lewis’s Reply to Anders Nygren” (NZSTh, in print 2011).

8. C. S. Lewis, “We Have No ‘Right to Happiness’”, in *God in the Dock* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 97.