

The Death of Utopia Reconsidered

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THE TANNER LECTURES ON HUMAN VALUES

Delivered at
The Australian National University

June 22, 1982

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When I am asked where I would like to live, my standard answer is: deep in the virgin mountain forest on a lake shore at the corner of Madison Avenue in Manhattan and Champs Elysees, in a small tidy town. Thus I am a utopian, and not because a place of my dream happens not to exist but because it is self-contradictory.

Are all utopias self-contradictory? This depends, of course, on the way we define the word; and there is no compelling reason why we should narrow its meaning down to those ideas of which either logical inconsistency or empirical impossibility are patent. In talking about utopia, we ought to stay reasonably close to the current usage of the word, even though we realize that this usage is to a certain extent shaky and imprecise. It is an interesting cultural process whereby a word of which the history is well known and which emerged as an artificially concocted proper name has acquired, in the last two centuries, a sense so extended that it refers not only to a literary genre but to a way of thinking, to a mentality, to a philosophical attitude, and is being employed in depicting cultural phenomena going back into Antiquity, far beyond the historical moment of its invention. This fact suggested to some historians and philosophers that we had to do with an everlasting form of human sensitivity, with a permanent anthropological datum for which an English thinker in the sixteenth century simply invented an apt name. This may sound plausible on the assumption that we inflate the concept to such a size as to pack into it (as Ernst Bloch did) all human projections of something better than what is and, on the other hand, all the religious images of paradisaical happiness. Thus enlarged, however, the notion is of little use, since everything people have ever done in improving their collective or even individual life, as well as all their eschatological expectations, would have to be counted among "utopian" projections, whereby the concept would not be applicable any longer as a tool in any

historical or philosophical inquiry. On the other hand, the adjective “utopian” has been given a pejorative sense in everyday speech and is applied to all projects, however trivial, which for any reason are impracticable (“it is utopian to expect that we shall be on time for dinner tonight”), and such a concept, again, is of no value in studying human culture.

Considering, therefore, that an amount of arbitrariness is unavoidable in trying to restrict the concept and that it is commendable to remain roughly within its current use, rather than to employ an existing word for entirely foreign purposes, I suggest that we proceed with a double limitation. First, we shall talk about utopias having in mind not ideas of making any side of human life better but only beliefs that a definitive and unsurpassable condition is attainable, one where there is nothing to correct any more. Second, we shall apply the word to projections which are supposed to be implemented by human effort, thus excluding both images of an other-worldly paradise and apocalyptic hopes for an earthly paradise to be arranged by sheer divine decree. Consequently, conforming to the second criterion, the revolutionary anabaptism of the sixteenth century may be included in the history of utopias so conceived, but not various chiliastic or adventist movements and ideas which expect the Kingdom on Earth as a result of Parousia. On the other hand, according to the first criterion, I would not describe as utopian various futuristic technological fantasies if they do not suggest the idea of an ultimate solution of mankind’s predicament, a perfect satisfaction of human needs, a final state.

Being thus restricted on *two* sides, the concept is widened insofar as it may be applied not only to global visions of a definitively saved society but to some specific areas of human creativity as well. We may speak, for example, of epistemological utopias, meaning the search for either a perfect certainty or an ultimate source of cognitive values: neither can anything prevent us from labeling as “scientific utopia” a hope for a definitive foundation of any sci-

ence — in particular of physics or mathematics — or of all empirical sciences, a hope which, once fulfilled, would close the path to future progress except for applications of the ultimate equation in specific cases. It would be difficult instead to look for architectural or artistic utopias, as one may hardly find in the history of human thought — much as it teems with wild expectations of an Eschaton — the idea of an ultimate building or an ultimate poem.

Descartes may be called the founder of the modern epistemological utopia. He did believe — and perhaps rightly so — that if no source of an absolute unshakable certitude can be found, no certitude at all is conceivable and therefore no truth except in a pragmatic sense. And he believed that this ultimate cognitive assurance can indeed be discovered and that he had revealed it. He did not reveal it in the Cogito alone: had he been satisfied with the Cogito as the only truth resisting all possible doubts, he would not have been capable of going beyond this discovery and the latter would have remained a self-contained, empty tautology leading nowhere. To proceed from this initial illumination to a trustworthy reconstruction of the universe, he had to be possessed of universally valid criteria of truth which he was unable to legitimize without the omniscient divine mind. A vicious circle which the first critics noticed in his reasoning (the criterion of clarity and distinctiveness of ideas is employed in proving God's existence, whereupon God appears as a guarantor of the reliability of clear and distinct ideas) and which would be subsequently discussed by philosophers to our day need not bother us now. Whether or not his proposal was logically sound, he asked (or revived) the formidable utopian question which has kept philosophy busy for centuries: is perfect certainty attainable at all; and if so, can it be reached without an appeal to absolute divine wisdom? If not — are we bound to give up, together with the ultimate foundation of knowledge, the very concept of truth in the usual, that is, transcendental sense and to be satisfied with practical criteria of acceptability, renouncing forever the dream of episteme? Whatever

the answer might be, the question was not trivial, and the crucial moments in the vicissitudes of modern philosophy are marked by clashes between empiricists and skeptics on the one side and the defenders of sundry forms of transcendentalist approach on the other. The epistemological utopia has never died away in our culture, and its most stubborn and bravest defender at the beginning of our century was no doubt Edmund Husserl. Untiringly and unceasingly he kept improving, correcting, and rebuilding the Cartesian project, drilling deeper and deeper into the layers of transcendental consciousness in the quest for the ultimate ground of all grounds, a ground we can reach without appealing to the divine veracity. He was driven not only by a philosophical gambler's curiosity but also by a conviction that the skeptical or empiricist renouncement of the idea of certainty, and thereby of truth, would spell the ruin of European culture.

The philosophical movement did not go, though, along the grooves he had started to furrow. Even among those who were ready to take up his ideas, the most important thinkers — Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty above all — abandoned the hope for a radical phenomenological reduction. They did not believe that we might ever set ourselves in the position of pure subjects of cognition who have gotten rid of all the historically relative, socially assimilated sedimentations of our consciousness and start afresh, as it were, from a zero point. No matter at what moment we begin our reflection, we are already thrown into the world, we are moulded by experience and compelled to express ourselves in a language we have not invented. However far we might go, or imagine to have gone, in hunting the perfectly unprejudiced, “pre-suppositionless” beginning of knowledge, we will always be in the middle of the road. There is no absolutely transparent distance (let alone abolition of distance) between us and the world, no cognitive void whereby the world, in its undistorted shape, could reach and enter our inner space. The division into the external and the inner world which the Cartesian tradition established and

which was a condition of the quest for the ultimate epistemological foundation was, of course, repeatedly attacked in the nineteenth century, by Avenarius and Mach among others, in fact by all post-Darwinian philosophers who believed that cognitive acts could be properly interpreted within a biological framework as defensive reactions and who thus dismissed the traditional search for truth as a result of metaphysical prejudices. It was against those anti-Cartesians that Husserl undertook his arduous journey into the Unknown of transcendental consciousness and tried to reverse the trend of relativistic naturalism. He failed to discover or to rediscover the paradisaical island of unshakable knowledge, yet he did open various new paths for thinking and he left the entire philosophical landscape of Europe utterly transmuted; not unlike Descartes, Rousseau, or Kant before him, he compelled the next generations of philosophers, including those who refused to share his hopes, to define themselves in relation or in opposition to him.

A hidden nostalgia for epistemological utopia was still active in some empiricist trends of the first decades of our century: not in the sense of transcendentalist expectations, to be sure, but in the form of the long-lasting quest for the ultimate data of knowledge or ultimately irreducible propositions. And this, too, has gone. Transcendental phenomenology has come to a dead stop in chasing the perfect transparency; logical positivism got stuck in its unsuccessful attempts to devise satisfactory definitions of verifiability and analyticity. A lot has survived from both, no doubt: but not the hope for an epistemological *Ultimum*. Transcendental research retreated in favor of existential ontology which, in a variety of forms, expressed its refusal to believe that we might ever grasp either the subject or the object severally in their uncontaminated freshness, that either the Being or human existence could be conceptually dominated. Logical empiricism has been replaced by the late Wittgenstein, by the ordinary language philosophy. Philosophical utopia seems to have died off. Whether it

is truly and definitively dead or just temporarily asleep, we cannot say with any certainty; but even though we do not detect in this very moment any distinct signs of its resurrection, we may have reasons not to believe in its final extinction. I am strongly reluctant to admit that a philosophical life left entirely as prey to pragmatists and relativists is either likely or desirable, and my reluctance is grounded on a certain understanding of what philosophy is as a cultural phenomenon, and this understanding in its turn is based, of course, on an interpretation of its historical vicissitudes.

My general attitude may be thus expressed. What philosophy is about is not Truth. Philosophy can never discover any universally admissible truths; and if a philosopher happened to have made a genuine contribution to science (one thinks, say, of mathematical works of Descartes, Leibniz, or Pascal), his discovery, perhaps by the very fact of being admitted as an ingredient of the established science, immediately ceased being a part of philosophy, no matter what kind of metaphysical or theological motivations might have been at work in producing it. The cultural role of philosophy is not to deliver truth but to build the *spirit of truth* and this means: never to let the inquisitive energy of mind go to sleep, never to stop questioning what appears to be obvious and definitive, always to defy the seemingly intact resources of common sense, always to suspect that there might be “another side” in what we take for granted, and never to allow us to forget that there are questions that lie beyond the legitimate horizon of science and are nonetheless crucially important to the survival of humanity as we know it. All the most traditional worries of philosophers — how to tell good from evil, true from false, real from unreal, being from nothingness, just from unjust, necessary from contingent, myself from others, man from animal, mind from body, or how to find order in chaos, providence in absurdity, timelessness in time, laws in facts, God in the world, world in language — all of them boil down to the quest for meaning; and they presuppose that in dissecting such questions we may employ the

instruments of Reason, even if the ultimate outcome is the dismissal of Reason or its defeat. Philosophers neither sow nor harvest, they only move the soil. They do not discover truth; but they are needed to keep the energy of mind alive, to confront various possibilities of answering our questions. To do that they — or at least some of them — must trust that the answers are within our reach. Those who keep trusting that are real diggers; and although I can not share their contention that by digging more and more deeply they will eventually reach the *Urgrund*, the foundation of all foundations, I do believe that their presence in the continuation of our culture is vital and indispensable. They are utopians and we need them. Next to diggers, however, we need the healers who apply skeptical medicine in order to clean our minds from prejudices, to unmask hidden premises of our beliefs, to keep us vigilant, to improve our logical skills, not to let us be carried away by wishful thinking. Philosophy to survive needs both diggers and healers, both reckless adventurers and cautious insurance brokers. They even seem to prop each other amidst their never-ending squabbles. The trouble is that whoever says so while being himself interested in philosophical riddles and thus involved in the conflict in one way or another cannot avoid the risk of antinomy or of contradiction: he is not capable of not taking sides in the conflict, and he asserts something that would ultimately compel him to be on both extremes simultaneously. We can escape the contradiction only by trying to place ourselves outside the philosophy, to suspend our interest in the issues and to climb up to a vantage point from which philosophy itself appears as a part of the history of civilization. The trouble is, however, that to reach this point we almost certainly need some premises and some conceptual instruments that have been elaborated in the ambiguous realm of philosophy.

Still, it may be fairly said that today's life of mind is anti-utopian, that more often than not we are ready either to admit inescapable borders limiting the expansion of our cognitive pas-

sions or to argue, more consistently and more in keeping with the tradition of skepticism and empiricism, that the very notion of cognitive value or of “truth” metaphysically conceived is nothing but an aberration of mind which seeks to assert its illusory autonomy and self-reliance instead of seeing itself as what it is, namely, a useful defense device of our organism. It is possible that from a historical perspective some important achievements of twentieth-century science—Heisenberg’s principle and Godel’s theorem—will be seen as contributions to the same anti-utopian spirit of our age; they pointed out fundamental barriers which were imposed—by the nature of Mind, by the great Nature, or by God—on our knowledge.

And when I say that the final extinction of the utopian drive in philosophy is neither likely nor desirable, I do not want to forget its intrinsic and apparently unremovable dangers. Whoever says that it is possible to discover a source of perfect certainty or an ultimate ground of knowledge says in effect not that it is possible but rather that he *has* found it. The expectations of an epistemological last judgment can certainly breed intolerance and self-righteous blindness. And they cannot escape the most traditional skeptical question about the infinite regression: *qui custodiet ipsos custodes?* Whatever criteria we establish, we may always ask what are the criteria of *their* validity.

The danger can be avoided, perhaps, if those ultimate criteria are considered—to use the Kantian idiom—as regulative, rather than constitutive, ideas; they serve us better if they are signposts which show the direction towards an unattainable goal, instead of asserting that the goal has been, or is about to be, reached. In other words, the spirit of utopia has *two* versions: one of them corresponds to the Kantian maxim of pure reason and consists in actually building the ultimate ground, or at least in the belief that the premise of all premises is going to be discovered; the other is the search for a ground of any ground which we believe to have already unravelled, and it corresponds to what Hegel stigmatized as the “bad infinity.” The former includes a hope for finding and

intellectually grasping the Unconditioned in its very quality of Unconditionedness, and thereby a hope for a kind of philosophical theosis, for a finite mind which has acquired God-like properties. The latter includes both the acceptance of the finitude of mind and the will to expand its potentialities without any definable limit being assigned to this expansion.

Analogous remarks may be made about social utopias. It might seem implausible to maintain that we witness the decline of utopian mentality when we observe so many movements promising us a secular or theocratic millennium around the corner and applying all kinds of instruments of oppression and violence to bring it about. I would argue, however, that the decline is going on, that the utopian dreams have virtually lost both the intellectual support and their previous self-confidence and vigor. The great works of our century are anti-utopias or kakotopias, visions of a world in which all the values the authors identified themselves with have been mercilessly crushed (Zamiatin, Huxley, Orwell). There are some works praising utopian thinking, to be sure, yet one can hardly quote an important utopia written in our epoch.

Apart from this matter-of-fact question, I would advocate an approach to the social utopias similar to the approach I tried to justify in discussing the philosophical ones. We know, of course, countless utopian fantasies, some revolutionary, some peaceful, some of socialist, others of anarchist character; and I am not going to make their inventory or to classify them. I want to point out those general characteristics which are relevant to my subject.

First of all, the idea of the perfect and everlasting human fraternity. This is the common and permanent core of utopian thinking, and it has been criticized on various grounds. The strictures boil down to this: first, a universal fraternity is unconceivable; second, any attempt to implement it is bound to produce a highly despotic society which, to simulate the impossible perfection, will stifle the expression of conflict, and thus destroy the life of culture, by a totalitarian coercion.

This criticism is sound, but we should reflect upon the conclusions to which it leads. It is arguable indeed that, by the very fact of being creative and free, people are bound to strive after goals which collide with each other and to be driven by conflicting desires; by this very fact that they can never achieve a perfect satisfaction, human needs can increase and expand indefinitely, and thereby the clashes between them are inevitable. This seems to be a constitutional framework of human existence; it was known to St. Augustine and, for that matter, to all the authors of Christian theodicies. We can imagine the universal brotherhood of wolves but not of humans, since the needs of wolves are limited and definable and therefore conceivably satisfied, whereas human needs have no boundaries we could delineate; consequently, total satisfaction is incompatible with the variety and indefiniteness of human needs.

This is what the utopian mentality refuses to admit and what makes the utopias fundamentally and incurably “utopian” (in the everyday sense). A feasible utopian world must presuppose that people have lost their creativity and freedom, that the variety of human life forms and thus the personal life have been destroyed, and that all of mankind has achieved the perfect satisfaction of needs and accepted a perpetual deadly stagnation as its normal condition. Such a world would mark the end of the human race as we know it and as we define it. Stagnation is an inescapable condition of the utopian happiness; those changes which we used to call progress or enrichment in whatever area of life — in technology, science, art, institutionalized forms of social communication — are all responses to dissatisfaction, to suffering, to a challenge.

Those utopias which —like Campanella’s or Marx’s —promise us a world that combines satisfaction, happiness, and brotherhood with progress can survive only thanks to their inconsistency. Those which are consistent accept and praise a stagnant world in which all the variety has been done away with and human beings

have been reduced to a universal, immobile mediocrity. The most consistent utopia was probably devised by Dom Deschamps. This is a perfect society in which all people are completely exchangeable and entirely identical with each other; all the life forms which might differentiate human beings have been eradicated, and mankind has become a collection of absolutely uniform specimens, not unlike coins forged in the same mint. Social perfection has irreversibly killed human personality. The denizens of this paradise could as well be stones and would be equally happy.

The ideal of equality — conceived of as identity, the absence of differences — is self-contradictory, to be sure, on the assumption that people are what they have been throughout the history known to us. The utopians, nevertheless, keep promising us that they are going to educate the human race to fraternity, whereupon the unfortunate passions which tear societies asunder — greed, aggressiveness, power lust — will vanish. However, since Christianity has been trying to carry out this educational task for two millennia and the results are not quite encouraging, the utopians, once they attempt to convert their visions into practical proposals, come up with the most malignant project ever devised: they want to institutionalize fraternity, which is the surest way to totalitarian despotism. They believe that the evil resulted from faulty social institutions which run counter to the genuine impulses of human nature, without asking themselves how these institutions were created and established. In the famous fragment on the origin of inequality, Rousseau seems to believe that private property was simply invented by a madman; yet we do not know how this diabolical contrivance, opposed as it was to innate human drives, was taken up by other people and spread all over the human societies.

That, as a result of the institutional coercive abrogation of private property, human conflicts, the struggle for power and domination, greed and aggressiveness will remain where they have been or perhaps increase, this was a prediction fairly frequently made long before the prescription for everlasting brotherhood —

worked out on Marxist-utopian principles — was actually applied. This prediction was based on common experience, and it was to be infallibly borne out in the entire history of socialist societies.

An attempt to implement a conflictless order by institutional means can be indeed successful in the sense that it can, by applying totalitarian coercion, prevent conflicts from being expressed. Being incapable, however, of eradicating the sources of conflict, the utopian technology necessarily involves a huge machinery of lie to present its inevitable failure as a victory. A utopian vision, once it is translated into political idiom, becomes mendacious or self-contradictory; it provides new names for old injustice or hides the contradictions under ad hoc invented labels. This is especially true of revolutionary utopias, whether elaborated in the actual revolutionary process or simply applied in its course. The Orwellian language had been known, though not codified, long before modern totalitarian despotism. Rousseau's famous slogan, "One has to compel people to freedom," is a good example. So is the announcement of the Paris Commune stating simultaneously that the compulsory military service has been abolished and that all citizens are members of the National Guard. So is the egalitarian-revolutionary utopia of Tkachev (an important source of the Leninist doctrine) which asserts that the main goal of the revolution is to abolish all the elites and that this task is to be carried out by a revolutionary elite.

In other words the two most common tenets of utopian projections — fraternity by coercion and equality imposed by an enlightened vanguard — are, each of them, self-contradictory. They are, however, compatible with each other, and more often than not they appear jointly in utopian dreams. One can notice nonetheless a difference in the distribution of emphasis in the utopian phraseology. To some utopians a conflictless community is the ultimate goal, whereas others depict equality as the highest value in itself. In the latter case the assumption is thus made that it is not human individuals, their suffering or their welfare that matter, but only

the fact that suffering and welfare are evenly distributed, so that we ought to aim at a perfect equality even if it is likely that all people, including the most underprivileged, will suffer more as a result of the egalitarian order being established. Apart from being obviously self-contradictory (the perfect equality could be conceivably implemented only by a totalitarian despotism, and an order that is both despotic and egalitarian is a square circle), this ideal is a curious phenomenon in the history of civilization; the psychological forces which have sustained and stimulated it can be only a matter of speculation. The dream of a consistently egalitarian utopia is to abolish everything that could distinguish one person from another; a world in which people live in identical houses, identical towns, identical geographical conditions, wearing identical clothes and sharing, of course, identical ideas, is a familiar utopian picture. To preach this ideal amounts to implying that there is an intrinsic evil in the very act of asserting one's own personality, even without harming other people — in other words, that there is something essentially wrong in being human.

Radical and consistent egalitarian utopias are thus anti-human. Based on the aesthetics of impeccable symmetry and ultimate identity, they desperately search for an order in which all variety, all distinction, all dissatisfaction and therefore all development have been done away with forever; even the word "order" is perhaps inappropriate as there is nothing to be ordered in a perfectly homogeneous mass. We recognize in the utopian temptation a vague echo of those oriental and Neoplatonic theologies to which the separation of man from the source of being, from the undifferentiated Whole — and this means individuality itself — was a sort of ontological curse that could be abrogated only once individuality has been destroyed. The perfect egalitarian utopia is thus a secular caricature of Buddhist metaphysics. It may be seen perhaps as a peculiar expression of the suicidal impulse of human society, a drive we detect in many historically relative versions all over the history of religious and philosophical ideas. Ultimately it

amounts to this: life necessarily involves tension and suffering; consequently if we wish to abolish tension and suffering, life is to be extinguished. And there is nothing illogical in this last reasoning.

I am talking about perfectly consistent utopias, of which we have only a few examples. In the inconsistent ones we often discover the same temptation mixed up with ideas which are incompatible with utopian perfection: the praise of creativity, the glory of progress, etc. Few utopians (Fourier was no doubt the most notable example) were aware that the need for variety, for personal self-assertion and distinctiveness were forces that it was impracticable to cancel or to suppress in specifically human life; and they tried to design their blueprints for universal happiness accordingly. They believed that those needs could be met without stirring up hostilities and struggles among people, that competitiveness might be preserved and aggressiveness channeled in harmless directions, thus producing a society which would happily combine satisfaction with creativity and the drive for distinction with universal friendship.

What made utopias look malignant in our century was clearly not the very dream of perfection; whether self-contradictory or not, descriptions of a celestial felicity on earth were in themselves no more than harmless literary exercises. They have become ideologically poisonous to the extent that their advocates managed to convince themselves that they had discovered a genuine technology of apocalypse, a technical device to force the door of paradise. This belief has been the distinctive characteristic of revolutionary utopias, and it was eminently embodied in various ramifications of Marxist doctrine. Having become, as a result of many historical accidents, the main ideological self-justifying and self-glorifying support of the totalitarian cancer devouring the social fabric of our world, the Marxist or quasi-Marxist utopia naturally called our attention to the apocalyptic-revolutionary literature of old which had displayed similar features.

The second important characteristic of this utopia was the belief that the glorious future is not simply predetermined by the course of history hitherto, but that the future was already there, not empirically noticeable and yet more real than the empirical present about to crumble. This belief in a “higher” reality which, albeit invisible, was already embedded in the actual world could be traced back, to be sure, to its Hegelian sources; more exactly, it was an extension into the future — illegitimate in strictly Hegelian terms — of the Hegelian way of investigating the past. This enviable ability to detect in what appears to be something that appears not to be but that in fact is in a more eminent sense than what is “merely” empirical was itself in Hegel a secularized version of the Christian concept of salvation which, though not perceptible directly, is not just inscribed in God’s plan but has already occurred, since in the divine timelessness whatever is going to happen did happen. It justifies the illimited self-righteousness of those who not only are capable of predicting the future but in fact are already its blessed owners, and it gives them the right to treat the actual world as essentially non-existent. The imminent, ultimate revolution being not simply a fortunate step in the succession of historical events but a rupture in continuity, a total beginning, a new time, the past — including everything that might yet happen before the great breakthrough — is not, properly speaking, a progress. The latter means cumulation, gradual improvement, growth; whereas the Ultimate Event, ushering in the new time, does not add more wealth to the existing stock mankind has already capitalized but marks a leap from the infernal abyss to the kingdom of supreme excellence.

These three characteristics of revolutionary-utopian mentality supply justification for three less innocent political attitudes. A hope for the brotherhood into which an illuminated elite can coerce people by decree provides a natural basis for totalitarian tyranny. Believing in a higher-order reality that is set into the present and, though undiscernible to the naked eye, is the genuine

reality, justifies the utter contempt for actually existing people, who scarcely deserve attention when contrasted with the seemingly non-existent but much more important generations of the future. The idea of a new time gives legitimacy to all kinds of cultural vandalism.

In this sense the strictures of utopia are well substantiated. We may even say more: considering that the most perfect specimen of the genre was written in the eighteenth century by the just-mentioned Dôm Deschamps, it is arguable that the socialist utopia had killed itself by its own consistency before it was born.

The same, for that matter, may be said of the individualist quasi-utopia. Probably the most consistent individualist-anarchist utopia was devised by Max Stirner in 1844. Starting with a fairly reasonable premise that social life as such — and not any particular form of social order — necessarily imposes limits on the individual's aspirations and his exclusive concern about himself, it suggested a "liberation" which everyone could separately achieve by abandoning all the norms, restrictions, and requirements that the "society" dictates to him, including logical and moral rules and presumably the language as well. I am talking about "quasi-utopia" because the point is less to invent a perfect society and more to abolish the society for the sake of the highest value, which each human person is to himself.

And yet there is another side of the story which we may not lightly dismiss. The utopian mentality, I should repeat, is withering away. Its intellectual status sank to the level of a pathetic adolescent gibberish surviving in leftist sects; in the established Communist ideologies the utopian language and utopian imagery have been less and less noticeable throughout the last decades.

It is legitimate to ask whether this demise of utopia, however justifiable in terms of the gruesome history of utopian politics, may be seen as a net gain. My argument on this point is analogous to what I have just said about the epistemological utopias. I do believe, indeed, that the dream of an everlasting universal brother-

hood of humankind is not only unfeasible but that it would cause the collapse of our civilization if we took it seriously as a plan to be materialized by technical means. On the other hand, it is too easy to use all the well-founded anti-utopian arguments as a device whereby we may accept or even sanctify any kind of oppression and of blatant injustice if only they are not supported by utopian phraseology. This, again, is not a matter of an abstract possibility but of a well-recorded historical experience. For centuries the intrinsic evil of human nature not only has been invoked as an argument against the attempts to restore the paradisaical conditions on earth but has justified resistance to all social reforms and democratic institutions as well. Therefore, the anti-utopian critique requires important differentiations. The utopian dogma stating that the evil in us has resulted from defective social institutions and will vanish with them is indeed not only puerile but dangerous; it amounts to the hope, just mentioned, for an institutionally guaranteed friendship, a hope on which totalitarian ideologies were founded. Yet it might be no less pernicious to replace this optimistic fantasy with the opposite one, implying that in all human relationships there is nothing but hostility, greed, the lust for domination, and that all expressions of love, friendship, fraternity, and sacrifice are no more than deceptive appearances concealing the "real," invariably selfish, motivations. Whether based on the anthropology of Hobbes, Freud, or early Sartre, this creed makes us naturally prone to accept all man-made monstrosities of social life as inevitable forever. It may be reasonably argued that the fallacy of those who view human nature as hopelessly and utterly corrupted is safer and less sinister than the self-defeating confidence of the utopians: a society in which greed is the dominant motivation is much preferable, after all, to a society based on compulsory solidarity. The total corruption theory may be nevertheless employed as well to support a totalitarian or a highly oppressive order: examples abound starting with the theocratic doctrines and practices of early Calvinism. And the grounds for this

theory are speculative, and not empirical; there is no evidence to refute the common-sense platitude that the potential for disinterested friendship and solidarity is in us as well as the seeds of hatred, envy, and greed. To state that whatever is good in us is but a mask of evil, far from being a report of experience, is a metaphysical axiom; it even makes social life unintelligible: if there is nothing in us but evil, what might the mask be for?

It might be true that the most notable examples of fraternity known to us have often had a negative background and could be found most easily when they were forced on people by a common danger, wars, or disasters. It is true that the experience of all voluntary communist associations — not to speak of compulsory ones — is not very encouraging; nothing of value has survived from the communities established in America by early socialists — Cabot, Weitling, Considérant — or by the hippies. The most lasting and most successful communes are perhaps Jewish kibbutzim, brought to life by joint socialist and Zionist ideals. Some monastic or quasi-monastic communities as well as many informal groups may serve as positive examples. Undeniably, however, people are able to create conditions in which aggressiveness, hostility, and selfishness, if not eradicated, are really minimized.

The general conclusion of these remarks might sound somewhat banal but, not unlike many banalities, worth pondering. It says that the idea of human fraternity is disastrous as a political program but is indispensable as a guiding sign. We need it, to use the same Kantian idiom again, as a regulative, rather than a constitutive, idea.

In other words, both Kant's theory of the radical evil and his belief in the indefinite progression of rationality — a progression which can go on amid the unremitting tension between our love of freedom and our sociability, between individual aspirations and societal order, between passions and reason — are useful to us. In the standard sense of the word "utopia," Kant was clearly an anti-utopian as he had never expected an ingenious technical con-

trivance that would bring about the actual state of perfection and bliss. He did believe, though, in the calling of the human race, in a teleologically propelled movement, the end of which we can never achieve or locate in time — an asymptotic growth, as it were — and which we nonetheless always have to keep in mind if we want to remain human. These two complementary sides of his “as-if” philosophy — a belief in a perpetual motion, loaded with struggles and contradictions, toward a goal, and a disbelief that the goal might ever be effectively reached — are certainly reconcilable in philosophical terms. It is unlikely, however, that mankind as a whole could ever be converted to Kantian philosophy. Therefore it is likely that two kinds of mentality — the skeptical and the utopian — will survive separately, in unavoidable conflict. And we need their shaky coexistence; both of them are important to our cultural survival. The victory of utopian dreams would lead us to a totalitarian nightmare and the utter downfall of civilization, whereas the unchallenged domination of the skeptical spirit would condemn us to a hopeless stagnation, to an immobility which a slight accident could easily convert into catastrophic chaos. Ultimately we have to live between two irreconcilable claims, each of them having its cultural justification.