

Utopia: A Phenomenological Critique with an Architectural Promise

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A Phenomenological Critique

Utopia offers a vision of a perfect society in which the hopes and dreams of humanity are achieved. Equality, liberty, peace, education, wealth, leisure, happiness, justice, and more are enjoyed by all. As such, utopia is not only a work of idealist fiction but also a realization that personal fulfillment is impossible without perfecting the social apparatus. More importantly, utopia is an act of criticism of the living conditions offered and experienced by individuals in a real community.

It is then not surprising that utopia is usually consumed in figuring out the socio-cultural construct necessary to deliver the goods along with providing a clear and consistent narrative. This incurs an important cost: utopia's forgetting, underplaying, or assuming its possible effects on actual human beings, who are often painted in one-dimensional strokes. There are obvious dangers here. Utopia's well intended transference of personal responsibility to the social body has often manifested in top-down controlled and idealized proposals (with Plato's Republic as a great example) and led to oppression if not disaster. One can think of Nazi Germany, Soviet Communism, Jim Jones' Peoples Temple, and the ISIS caliphate as frighteningly real results of pursuing utopian societies. On the other hand, of course, there is nothing wrong and possibly a lot of good in aiming for a better world, even if naively envisioned. But is there? By bringing up and raising expectations, utopia tempts us with something different, better, other than what we have, and therefore potentially creates more dissatisfaction and suffering. Perhaps worse, utopia often asks its followers to sacrifice the present (and sometimes, even human lives) for the sake of that perfect future.

A more damaging critique of utopia simply asks if arriving to its promised land guarantees human happiness, unity, and realization. If all of society's institutions worked perfectly for the common and individual good, if the social infrastructure of life would be resolved, what would utopian residents experience? Wouldn't it be personal bliss at a massive scale? Isn't this what we would expect when all our needs, wants, and more have been taken care of? How does it feel to live in paradise on earth? Although nobody quite knows since utopia has never been attained (and if history is any indication, it never will), there are plenty of indications that, even if realized, utopia would not deliver its residents into rapture or heaven. For we do know that even under the best circumstances humans systematically fail to find peace, contentment, and realization. Quite plainly, the internal world of a majority of us is just not quiet or developed enough to allow for such a state to unfold.

It is hard to find a more concise and clear explanation of our predicament than the one advanced by the French scientist and philosopher Blaise Pascal more than 350 years ago: "*The sum of man's problems come from his inability to be alone in a silent room*"; and a predicament wonderfully represented in American painter Edward Hopper's haunting portraits of people doing just that (refer to Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1: "Morning Sun" (1952) by Edward Hopper.



Figure 2: "Sunday" (1926) by Edward Hopper

Much has been said of the existential alienation displayed in Hopper's solitary individuals. The responsibility has usually gone to the socio-cultural forces in operation in 20th Century America (e.g., industrialization, urbanization, capitalism, etc.), indirectly pointing at possible utopian responses to those overwhelming estrangement forces (Bonney 1989, Renner 1993). However, their alienation could also be blamed on a much simpler and likely cause: our common disenchantment with the present moment. In effect, whatever our condition may be, we desire something else than what is available here and now. Even if we arrive at some contentment, it won't be too long before we are back struggling with our present circumstances. Because it is uncomfortable to remain in such a situation, we escape into subconscious daydreaming, or if we must remain conscious, we use our imagination to move our internal world toward the past (whether nostalgic or real) or a preferred or expected future (however complex, ideal, or trivial). The point is to escape from the present even though, paradoxically, it is the only stage where our lives unfold. Dwelling in their heads, Hopper's characters do exactly that: they disengage themselves from the moment and get alienated from even the most beautiful moments or places that we (external witnesses to the drama) can instead appreciate if we manage to step out of the otherwise absorbing empathy. Their (our) profound existential sickness is expressed well by Czech-born writer Milan Kundera (1960):

"There would seem to be nothing more obvious, more tangible and palpable than the present. And yet it eludes us completely. All the sadness of life lies in that fact. In the course of a single second, our senses of sight, of hearing, of smell, register (knowingly or not) a swarm of events and a parade of sensations and ideas passes through our head. Each instant represents a little universe, irrevocably forgotten in the next instant."

Phenomenologically speaking utopia is born out of and lives on responding to the fundamental existential problem we have in dealing with our present condition. Dissatisfied with what we encounter around us, we declare the social body as responsible, construct a utopian paradise via a series of arguments and social re-arrangements and then promise ourselves to deliver us back to that same but now perfected (albeit future) present—a present from which we (intellectually) run away in the first place. Yet, as we have seen, there is every guarantee that arriving to some utopian world will not save us from our existential built-in challenge. To the contrary, it may make it worse as there would be no excuses to explain our discontent in an otherwise 'perfect' place.

What would happen if we accepted that utopia as the fabrication of some perfect social order is impossible and incapable of responding to our true longing **but** that the experience of utopia – the fulfillment of all desire/dissatisfaction, however momentary – might be attainable. In other words, what about if we took a different interpretation and approach to utopia, one in which the 'ideal

state' would **not** occur in some future time and place but right here and now if we let go of our need to change society and/or our given situation? After all, if utopia is to happen and be experienced, it will have to take place in the present.

This is a vision that some spiritual traditions, notably Buddhism, offer. The experience of enlightenment, *Satori*, is nothing short of arriving to utopia in the present. In fact, mystics of all faiths speak of out-of-this-world, utterly rewarding states (i.e., utopia-in-the-present) when in unity with the divine. Indeed, religious experiences are known to give access to ultimate states of consciousness as American psychologist William James recorded long ago. Premodern conceptions of beauty also recognize that profound aesthetic experiences are able to catapult us into a blissful reality nothing short of utopia. French writer Stendhal is remembered in part for expressing this vision thus: "*beauty is nothing other than the promise of happiness*" (Nehamas 2007). A great example of beauty providing access to some transcendent realm is portrayed in the 'bag scene' of the film "American Beauty" (Figure 3).



Figure 3: 'Bag scene' in the film "American Beauty," directed by Sam Mendes (1999)

Seeing a bag flying under a breeze's whim quickly moves from being a purely sensorial experience to one that is emotional, intellectual, and finally transcendental. Isn't the witnessing of such a perfect moment a manifestation of utopia ?

But other less esoteric roads toward attaining utopia in the present are available as well. For instance, 'peak' or 'flow' experiences that athletes or performance artists report are in this realm (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) as are 'crowd experiences' felt in large events such as concerts, sports, and political rallies (Dreyfus & Dorrance Kelly 2011). Acts of committed charity and compassion offer yet another gate to utopia-in-the-present: what happens when we sincerely and disinterestedly help another human being? Isn't this god at work in the world as Michael Benedikt claims (2007)? What do the parties in such exchanges experience but paradise on earth? These experiences of utopia are far from nihilist pursuits as they engage reality in profound and transformative ways through a complete commitment to the moment. And contrary to what many may think, and as we begin to see, phenomenological opportunities to enjoy utopia-in-the-present abound.

An Architectural Promise

As scholars have noted (Coleman 2005, 2014, Klanten & Feireiss 2011, Tafuri 1979), architecture and urbanism have played relevant roles in supporting, expressing, and/or advancing utopian proposals aimed at large scale social engineering. The real socio-cultural impact of the built environment has been long understood by most utopia proponents, even those without architectural ties. But if instead of going after the perfect future society we seek the perfect present moment, then, how can architecture help us? Since this is a more humble and realistic task to accomplish than transforming entire communities, architecture may have a better chance at succeeding. Not surprisingly, architects have long recognized this potential. For instance, Alvar Aalto literally addressed it (1957):

“The ultimate goal of the architect...is to create a paradise. Every house, every product of architecture...should be a fruit of our endeavour to build an earthly paradise for people.”

This call to ‘create paradise on earth,’ something already cited earlier in this paper, has an inevitable religious, Abrahamic to be more specific, utopian tone. According to Biblical scripture, paradise is our first and final home – our true home. There is something totally comforting and reassuring about such a prospect. Home is a place where we are always welcome, loved, cared for, free, and nothing is missing or lacking. The recognition of the profound relationship between home, architecture and the sacred is long, rich and addressed by many scholars (e.g., Barrie 2015, Cooper Marcus 1997, Lawlor 1994). Many have discussed the biblical expulsion of paradise as causing the Western psyche to feel homeless and condemned to search for that lost/forbidden home. From this viewpoint, seeking utopia is nothing other than trying to find our way back home, and experiencing utopia is homecoming. In this context, sacred space is entrusted to quench our longing for paradise by enabling rituals, secluding us into retreat, and/or absorbing us into the building itself – all three phenomenological modes capable of delivering us into an experience of true home here and now, as comparative religion scholar Lindsay Jones argues (2000). If successful, and for the length of the experience, the sacred space by necessity would become a *no-place* – the Greek etymology of utopia.

Le Corbusier’s discussion of *ineffable space* along with Louis Kahn’s continuous reference to the *immeasurable* are further reminders of the central role that architecture may and should play in inducing experiences that bring paradise or utopia closer to us, as Aalto compels us to do. In my recent book *Transcending Architecture*, I focus on such matters (Bermudez 2015). Although I don’t explicitly refer to utopia in the manuscript, there is a short distance to traverse to make the jump. In fact, I argue that architecture may deliver users to transcendental states via aesthetic, ethical, and sacred paths – not unlike what is being presented in this paper.

There is nothing short of miraculous in the claim and expectation that architecture may induce experiences in which all our needs and wants are satisfied and all our dramas, questions, and insecurities put to rest – even if momentarily. If arriving at such a paradisiac condition may seem like a utopian dream, it is far more likely and real than the way we usually conceive and seek utopia. So, while we shouldn’t necessarily stop from dreaming and aiming at constructing wonderfully perfect societies, we would serve our world better by following Aalto’s advice: to construct earthly paradise here and now by means of architecture.

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