

Levitas' Concept of Utopia: Topics and Questions

1 In her introduction (page 4 ff.), Levitas introduces a trichotomy of "form, function and content" as a taxonomy for characterisation of "utopia" and utopian ideas, and she recurs to these notions from time to time when she reviews the works of utopian writers and their critics in the rest of the book.

When she offers her own definition of "utopia" on pages 7-8 ("Utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being. . . .", 8), she opts rather clearly for "content" over "form" and "function". She also believes rather clearly that such "desire" can and should be "educated" (cf. chapter 5) -- that its 'consciousness', as it were, can and should be 'raised' ("educare" originally meant to "lead out"). One might regard such "education" as an ancillary aspect of its "function".

"Form", however, she leaves more or less open, which seems to me more or less right. This would accommodate Bloch's inchoate yearnings and love of music, as well as talkier (or at least more 'discursive') sorts of arguments and depictions.

One of the reasons for my assignment of Levitas' book, therefore -- aside from her appreciation of Morris, a hero of mine -- is that her arguments clearly acknowledge the **emotional** and **affective** aspects of certain 'rational' ethical and quasi-political ideals (and therefore of serious attempts to envision their realisation(s)).

Correlatively, one the deeper underlying observations feminist philosophers have made, in my view at least, is that emotion(s) are **legitimate** aspects (as well as objects) of philosophical thought and inquiry, and that 'ideals' of 'rationality' which do not integrate and acknowledge them are tedious as well as inadequate and distortive (This is one reason why I prefer "reasonable" to "rational"; the former better reflects this wider sense).

Aspects of such **philosophical emotion** might include, e. g.:

1.1 Aristotle's interest in **philia**, usually translated "friendship", and the near-passionate qualities with which he invests his notion of **theoria**, or "contemplation";

1.2 Hythlodaye's and Wollstonecraft's highly 'rational' reformist anger;

1.3 Kant's uncharacteristically poetic "awe", at the starred heaven above him, and "moral law" within him;

1.4 the 'chiliastic' fervor of John Ball's impassioned invocations of "fellowship"; and even

1.5 Alison Jaggar's syncretic desire to bring many conflicting 'feminisms' into the broad tent of 'socialist feminism'.

Finally, a question or two.

Do some of the utopian writers and critics Levitas considers, and (or) some of the other moral philosophers we have encountered in this course, seem to you to **slight** this need for 'integration' of human emotions quite a bit more than others? Or suppress it in some forms of ethical inquiry, in needless or misleading ways?

Do some even seem to **embody** this need, in their positions or their modes of expression, sometimes more than they are able or willing explicitly to acknowledge?

(It might help to canvass briefly the texts we have read in your mind: Aristotle; the Stoics and Epicureans; More; Hume; Kant; Wollstonecraft; Gewirth and Kohlberg in Phillips; Rawls; Pogge; Jaggar; Marx, Engels, Sorel, Mannheim, Bloch, Morris and Marcuse in Levitas. . . .)

2 Mannheim makes a distinction between "utopias" and "ideologies" and Bloch (a related but somewhat different one) between "abstract" and "concrete utopias". Whether or not you agree with the particular arguments Levitas quotes from either of these authors, do you think there is an ethically relevant distinction to be made here?

It may be helpful to keep in mind as you consider this question that Mannheim's and Bloch's basic common aim were to discern in some functionally useful way between 'real' and 'illusory' utopias, valuable-if-flawed ideals, as opposed to merely 'mystifying' or socially misleading and retrogressive head-trips. In effect, I am asking you whether there is such a distinction, in your view, and how one might try to draw it, if there is.

3 Some writers, of course, have tended to argue that all utopian conceptions are such head-trips, and therefore that any distinction of the sort considered in 2 must itself reflect some sort of self-deception.

Levitas rather persuasively shows, however, that even Marx and Engels (who tended to characterise any ethical arguments which did not meet their 'historical-materialist' criteria for 'scientific' analysis as "utopian" in some dismissive and pejorative sense) were strongly influenced by ideas that are clearly 'utopian' in their nature and origins.

Is this influence itself simply an example of 'mystification' (as many would surely argue, in the ruins of what the rulers of the 'second world' liked to call "socialism")? Or is it an instance of the recurrent power of utopian concept-formation, of the sort acknowledged by Oscar Wilde (of all people), in the quotation on page 5? Or some of both?

If the latter, might a human need to 'dream' reflect a need to project forms of ethical 'transcendence' which may once have been served for most people by religion, and survives now for many 'intellectuals' in one or another secularised form?

And if this observation is right, does it 'humanise' the desire for political and social utopias in some way (or interpret it as an extension of its 'chilastic' and millenarian antecedents)? Or does it simply repose the question about 'mystification' raised above, but now perhaps in more acute, or at least more ironic, form (cf., e. g., Levitas 100-105)?

(Florence Saunders, my wife, was raised by a member of the protestant fundamentalist sect of Plymouth Brethren. Once during the late sixties, at the University of Wisconsin, she listened with me to a long skein of student-political speeches, and suddenly remarked with a flash of recognition: "This 'long-term struggle' they go on about -- it's just 'salvation'!")

4 In passages from William Morris' review of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* which I read in class (Levitas 108-109), Morris decries what later came to be called "real existing socialism" in the 'eastern bloc' as a huge national centralisation, working by a kind of magic for which no-one feels himself responsible. . . . (By contrast) . . . variety of life is as much an aim of true Communism as equality of condition, and. . . nothing but a union of these two will bring about real freedom; . . . modern nationalities are mere artificial devices for the commercial war we seek to put an end to, and will disappear with it.

He also adds

. . . finally, that art, using that word in its widest and due signification, is not a mere adjunct of life which free and happy men can do without, but the necessary expression and indispensable instrument of human happiness.

(emphasis mine)

I've left little doubt that this last judgment seems to me not only correct, but correct in some deep and lasting way.

Even if it is right, however, one might raise some obvious questions about it.

Is it primarily a judgment, for example, about 'human nature'? Or a particular political ideal? Or does it bear on 'the whole' (whatever that might be) of ethics?

(Cf., again, the first question above, about the ethical role of emotions).