

Historical Small Events and the Eclipse of *Utopia*: Perspectives on Path Dependence in Human Thought

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Abstract Questions such as ‘What if such small companies as Hewletts and the Varians had not been established in Santa Clara County in California?’ or ‘What if Q-type keyboards had not been invented?’ are well known among economists. The questions point at a phenomenon called path dependence: ‘small events’, the argument goes, may cause the evolution of institutions to lock in to specific paths that may produce undesirable consequences. How about applying such skeptical views in economics to human ideas and thought in general? That is to say, what if we ask such questions as: what if Greek philosophy had not been interested in ‘essences’ and ‘foundations’? What if Kant had not invented the ‘thing-in-itself’? Nature and society, according to such Platonic philosophers, can be known only if it can be shown that events are governed, regulated and characterised by ‘forms’, which are immutable, complete, and perfect in their nature. But is there an ‘essence’ that makes a man 100 per cent male? Was there really a ‘foundation’ in history that caused a proletarian revolution in Russia? What if we had pushed aside the rhetoric of utopian ideality? What if we had a worldview different than the one depicted by Thomas More in his *Utopia*? The essay points at the possibility of such skepticism in human ideas and thought.

Lenin was carrying a bouquet of roses when he arrived at St Petersburg’s Finland Station in the night of 16 April 1917. He stepped off the train. His comrades welcomed him with tears on their cheeks. He addressed the crowd from the balcony of Kshesinskaya Palace, which was at the time captured by the Bolsheviks. ‘On the journey here with my comrades’, Lenin said, ‘I was expecting that they would take us straight from the station to Peter and Paul. We are far from that, it seems. But let us not give up the hope that we shall not escape that experience’ (Wilson 1953: 472).

It was the early days of the Russian Revolution. Lenin was trying to flee from Switzerland where he had been in exile. He took the train, and entered Russia. He was not caught by the police on the border. Such a small event was very important because its consequences would dominate the world and fuel important political and intellectual movements in the twentieth century. It was a small event that functioned as ‘the key of a philosophy of history [that] fit to an historical lock’ (Wilson 1953: 467).

In *To the Finland Station* Edmund Wilson portrayed a prophecy of the inevitability of socialist revolution as a human phenomenon (see also Murphy 1992: ix–xv). He did not write about iron laws of history but how the execution of Lenin’s brother by the Tsar when Lenin was seventeen affected his views on social revolutions. He did not write about necessities in human history but how Lenin was not allowed to re-enter the University of Kazan, and subsequently started reading Marx by chance. He did not write about abstract principles of nature but concrete events, *historical small events* as many economists have come to know them, such as that it was only by chance that Lenin had not been caught but instead had arrived safely at the Finland Station. He wrote about small events that had big consequences for the future. In fact, in 1989 another small event happened – a wall fell. The event called a halt to all the prophecies about the *historical path* that was thought to construct heaven on earth.

‘Marxism is in relative eclipse’, Edward Wilson had written long before the collapse of the Russian empire. ‘An era in its history’, he had said, ‘has ended. It may be worthwhile at this moment to look back and try to see what has happened’ (Wilson 1953: 475). Today, however, it is not only Marxism that is in relative eclipse. It is, for instance, Samuelsonian economics, the analytical tradition in philosophy, and numerous technologies such as Beta video systems, too, which were once smart inventions but are now in relative eclipse. It may be worthwhile at this moment to look back and try to see what happened. If we are able to detect such small events as Lenin’s not being caught, we may be able to see – if not fix – the problem that caused such grand theories as Samuelsonian economics, analytical philosophy or Marxism to drag along a relative eclipse that ceased to provide what they had once promised.

Path dependence

The idea of *path dependence* in the historical evolution of social institutions has in fact long been well known by economists. Paul David, an economic historian at Stanford and Oxford, published an article in 1985 – entitled ‘Clio and the Economics of QWERTY’ – which was the first of the sequel of articles on path dependence in economics. The article was a short one, and soon became a ‘famous fable’ in economic science.¹ Following David, economists such as Brian Arthur, from Santa Fe Institute, and Douglass North, the winner of the Nobel Prize in 1994 (with Robert Fogel), have contributed to the research on path dependence, and the notion has thus turned into a celebrated one in social sciences (Arthur 1994; North 1990).

The notion was originally applied to the historical evolution of typing machines. During the era of mechanical typewriters, David argued, the principal problem was the clashing and jamming of the mechanical parts of typewriters. The solution was shortly found, and the keyboard of the machine was designed in such a way that the machine reduced the speed of the typist so that the amount of clashing and jamming was less. The solution was initially a smart one because it generated a working solution to a practical problem. It,

¹ See also Spulber (2001: 90–109).

however, turned out to be 'inefficient' when digital keyboards were introduced. The problem of clashing and jamming in digital keyboards had disappeared but the keyboard design was the same. The speed of the typist could have been increased if another keyboard had been introduced. The new digital technology avoided clashing and jamming but the institution – that is, the keyboard itself – has persisted and thus the problem was passed on to future generations.

The way David, Arthur and North, among many others, applied the notion of path dependence to the evolution of mechanical typewriters has been heavily criticised by many economists (see for example, Margolis and Liebowitz 1995). In spite of the debate on the fable of keyboards, the significance of path dependence in the evolution of human institutions was nevertheless acknowledged by many social scientists. The notion has thus become a well-known metaphor among sociologists, political scientists and historians as well as among natural scientists such as physicists and biologists.

'Qwerty-nomics' – as David likes to call it – points at a specific problem in the historical evolution of human institutions: that historical small events can have big consequences in the future. The basic idea behind the story is that the evolution of institutions may *lock in* to specific paths in history because of some unforeseen small events. We may have to confront undesirable – 'inefficient', as economists have called it – outcomes in the future as a consequence of individual preferences in the past. Switching to another path of evolution, under such circumstances, may be difficult or – economically speaking – costly, because it is sometimes impossible or unwise to, say, get rid of old habits or develop new behavioural strategies under conditions of uncertainty or imperfect information. 'Toggling' between paths might also be difficult because old technologies may not allow – as in the case of keyboards – new technologies that would operate more 'efficiently' to develop.

My argument here is that the historical evolution of intellectual institutions, too, is subject to similar 'lock-in processes'. That is to say, in philosophy, sciences and arts we have been dependent upon specific paths, which keep generating undesirable outcomes for today's problems. There are several examples to the case – and I mention some of them below – such as 'The Coase Problem' in economics and the concept of truth in philosophy. Economists have long dealt with questions such as 'What if such small companies as Hewletts and the Varians had not been established in Santa Clara County in California?' or 'What if Q-type keyboards had not been invented?' I now apply such skeptical views in economics to human ideas and thought in general; and I ask: what if Greek philosophy had not been interested in 'essences' and 'foundations'? What if Kant had not invented the 'thing-in-itself'? Nature and society, according to some Platonic philosophers, can be known only if it can be shown that events are governed, regulated and characterised by 'forms', which are immutable, complete and perfect in their nature. But is there an 'essence' that makes a man 100 per cent male? Was there really a 'foundation' in history that caused a proletarian revolution in Russia? What if we had pushed aside the rhetorics of utopian ideality? What if we had a worldview different than the one depicted by Thomas More in his *Utopia*? The essay points at the possibility of such skepticism in human ideas and thought.

Since numerous social scientists have used path dependence within different narratives, its meaning may now be ambiguous. We first have to see that the ‘path’ in the metaphor of path dependence, like many other metaphors, has never been a ‘reality’ – in other words, there has never really been a ‘path’. There has never been any ‘geography’ upon which an economy, society or intellectual traditions could practice human abilities such as walking or running. Social scientists have chosen to use the metaphor of path (dependence) in order to express their dissatisfaction with the present state of the evolution of an institution. Path dependence is used in order to communicate a complaint about the historical condition of such institutions as VHS video systems or Q-type keyboards. It has become a figure of speech representing an economy – and, too, societies, technologies, sciences and arts – as if it moved through a landscape where no destination has been set in advance, or at least, was known by the passenger. The important point about the theory of path dependence is that it points to the way a technological design or an idea such as ‘truth’ may stop functioning well, although it may have been useful within certain contexts in the past.

That is to say, the metaphor of path dependence is only a naming (Dewey and Bentley 1999: 136–43), and it could have also been something else – such as a cube or labyrinth. In fact, in the movie *CUBE*, a group of people are trapped in a cube-cell where the only condition of survival is to move continuously to different cube-cells, because there is no final cell – a perfect cell, in other words – where security and stability ideally are sustained. In *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice travels in a world where norms and conventions are radically altered. Further similar metaphors can be developed.² Path dependence, among them, is another textured product of imagination aiming at telling the reader the undesirability of the historical condition that leads social institutions to underachieve. Speaking in terms of *pathologies*, scientists have thought, they would be more able to express their dissatisfaction with computers or VHS video systems. It has, therefore, become a true figure in the history of successive metaphors because the placeholder ‘path’, not something else, was the winner of the rhetorical battle.

The story of path dependence, in Rortyeian terms, is ‘[an attempt] to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions’ (Rorty 1980: 360). It is a way of showing how small events (such as Quine’s view on two dogmas of empiricism) can turn big events (such as the end of positivist philosophy of the Vienna Circle) into ironies of history (detachment of a once-leading figure of logical positivism from analytic philosophy to American tradition of pragmatism) (Borradori 1991: 27–39). The story of path dependence offers another perspective upon disappointments in the development of intellectual institutions.

²Compare, for instance, the metaphor of path dependence with Arjo Klammer’s metaphor of ‘conversations’ in his forthcoming book, *Speaking of Economists* (2006). Path dependence asserts that breaking free from the past course of events may be impossible. Klammer, in a similar fashion, but from a different point of view, rightly argues that getting out of the course of the events (that is, ‘conversations’) can be difficult, but getting into it (it being ‘conversations’) can also be as tricky, and even impossible.

What is a small event anyway?

Writing the history of such important events as the Russian Revolution is writing ‘one damn thing after another’. Let us now consider another important event – the Industrial Revolution – in order to reflect on the character of the events that are supposed to have played a significant role in history. History books report the Industrial Revolution by telling stories about population increases (Toynbee 1956), technological advancement in the eighteenth century (Landes 1969), and organisational successes at the end of the nineteenth century (Chandler 1990). Such stories communicate to the student of the Industrial Revolution the problems that Britons and Americans faced and solved at the time. And they do it, as John Hicks once wrote in his *A Theory of Economic History*:

in the way that the great eighteenth-century writers did, as part of a social evolution much more widely considered. I have tried to indicate the lines that connect the economic story with the things we ordinarily regard as falling outside it ... There are threads that run from economics into other social fields, into politics, into religion, into science and into technology; they develop there, and then run back into economics. (Hicks 1969: 167)

Historians have pointed out some events that have changed dramatically the course of happenings in exceptional ways. Such events somehow attract more attention nowadays than ‘the iron laws of history’ and mysterious ‘forces behind the appearance’ that, say, regulate the economic behaviour in global markets. Some events hardly fit the general picture drawn by historians, and their consequences accumulate in a noticeably different fashion. They are *casual* events of history that have *causal* significance for today.

It is no surprise for students of history to hear that the amount of production is closely related to how efficient the inputs are employed by the industry. Therefore, they are not surprised to read that steam engine caused a tremendous increase in the amount of industrial production. True, for the readers to understand the history of the Industrial Revolution, it is necessary to see the ‘causal connections’ in the course of events. It is easy to do: steam engine increased the amount of industrial product *because* machine tools were able to work with metal objects of great size at high speeds, which made technically possible and commercially profitable what workmen once could not perform (Hicks: 145–48). However, there are some events that make a big difference in a surprising fashion; and I, following the writings of Arthur, David and North, will call them historical ‘small events’.

Historical small events are those, the effects of which multiply in an unforeseen and unexpected manner when neglected or overlooked in scientific experiments. Such events are sometimes the errors that researchers overlook. Von Neumann, for instance, who built the first computer with the intention of controlling weather, Gleick reports,

had overlooked the possibility of *chaos*, with instability at every point ... [B]eyond two or three days the world’s best forecasts were [thus]

speculative, and beyond six or seven they were worthless ... [because] the errors will have multiplied to the ten-foot scale, and so on up to the size of the globe. (Gleick 1987: 19)

Robert White, a fellow meteorologist at M.I.T., gave the answer to von Neumann's problem later on. His idea was that 'small modifications, well within human capability, could cause desired large-scale changes' (Gleick 1987: 22).

In effect, the consequences of such events are usually counter-intuitive. They surprise the researcher as multiplication of the consequences of neglected events is never expected. Small events can create a similar effect to the crises that cause 'paradigm shifts' in the Kuhnian sense. James Gleick, once again, writes:

In science as in life, it is well known that a chain of events can have a point of crisis that could magnify small changes. But chaos meant that such points were everywhere. They were pervasive. In systems like the weather, *sensitive dependence on initial conditions* was an inescapable consequence of the way small scales intertwined with large. (Gleick 1987: 23)

Friction, for instance, is a factor, the effect of which is often neglected in physics – as well as in economics, for that matter, in the form of transaction costs where transaction costs are seen as market friction or 'frictional costs' (see, for instance, Jacobides and Winter 2003). Friction is something that depends on speed – and vice versa – and with friction and speed things can become complicated. If one small factor such as friction is neglected, an equation or a system can generate unforeseen or unexpected consequences. This may explain why an economy does not reach equilibrium; and this may also be why we do not reach 'general equilibrium' in the economy, and why, as I argue below more thoroughly, the truth does not reveal itself in philosophy.

We can compare the accumulation of the consequences of some small events to the way the probability of drawing the same coloured balls in the so-called Polya-urn processes increases. The process runs as follows: suppose there are initially equal numbers of red and black balls in an urn. We randomly draw a ball. Then we return the ball to the urn, with another ball of the same colour. That is, if the ball that we draw is red, we return the red ball with another red one. If there were initially one red and one black ball in the urn, there would now be three balls in the urn – two reds and one black. We draw another ball. We repeat the game. The consequence of the process is that, as we make further draws, the probability of drawing the same coloured balls increases. The process, in other words, is reinforced by the small event of drawing a red ball from the urn.³

³For 'Polya-urn processes' in economics, see Arthur (1985) and Arthur *et al.* (1987).

A possible objection to emphasising the role of small events in the evolution of social institutions is that they are not easily detectable. No event, after all, is small or big, wide or narrow, and dry, black or brute. 'Small event', however, is only a naming – just like path dependence is; and the adjective 'small' might metaphorically refer to many things in diverse contexts. This makes it difficult for us to produce a standard definition of the term – just like path dependence does. 'Small events', in the broadest sense, are the events, as demonstrated above, that are usually neglected, sometimes overlooked, and erroneous or contingent. They in most cases are the causes of path dependence in the evolution of human institutions. They occasionally bewilder the researcher – and they do it in such a way that consequences are, in general, ironic and unsatisfactory.

Small events in operation: two examples

Let us take an example in order to make the case more concrete: the 'Coase Theorem' in the history of economic thought. In the third addition of *The Theory of Price*, George Stigler writes that

[t]he Coase theorem thus asserts that under perfect competition private and social costs will be equal. It is a more remarkable proposition to us older economists who have believed the opposite for a generation, than it will appear to the young reader who was never wrong, here. (Stigler 1966: 113)

The quotation may seem bizarre to economists who have carefully read Ronald Coase, Nobel Prize winner in 1991, especially his 'The Nature of the Firm' (1937). His point in the article was that we were *not* living in the best of possible worlds but in a world of transaction costs. In other words, when God created the world, metaphorically speaking, she also created transaction costs, so that there are many problems in the 'real' world today that neither Jesus nor a general equilibrium approach can solve. Contrary to what Adam Smith said, Ronald Coase argued, we are living in a world where markets sometimes do *not* clear off.

The naming of the 'Coase Theorem' was, then, basically wrong.⁴ In fact, Ronald Coase raised the issue in his *The Firm, the Market, and the Law* (1988: 15). He said:

[w]hat my argument does suggest is the need to introduce positive transaction costs explicitly into economic analysis so that we can study the world that exists. This has not been the effect of my article. The extensive discussion in the journals has concentrated almost entirely on the 'Coase Theorem', a proposition about the world of zero transaction costs. This response, although disappointing, is undesirable.

⁴ For further argumentation, see also McCloskey (1997).

The 'Coase Theorem' was introduced by George Stigler in the 1950s, and for economists has since become an important topic to investigate.⁵ A small event, that is Stigler's misreading of the writings of Ronald Coase, has generated a different path in the evolution of economic thought – a path dissimilar to Ronald Coase's argument in the 1930s. Stigler's 'Coase Theorem' was not in Ronald Coase's 'The Nature of the Firm'. Neither was it in 'The Problem of Social Cost' (1960). A chance element – namely, Stigler – that did not belong to the intellectual capacity of Ronald Coase influenced the way his contribution is construed by economists today.

The consequences of certain events in history are such that we cannot easily eliminate their effects. In the case of the 'Coase Theorem', the small event was an error that lasted until today. However, for an error to be counted as important, the error should be reinforced. That is to say, it should persist in the face of correction. Many errors in human ideas and thought, however, are trivial, because they are sometimes corrected. In other words, it is not always the 'errors' that cause undesirable consequences for the future. Consider, for instance, the issue of 'truth' in philosophy, which has so far been one of the most complicated and time-consuming issues for thinkers. The solution to the question 'what is truth?' is as problematic as the origin of the question. Whenever the debate has started, and wherever it goes, Steven Shapin in his *A Social History of Truth* (1994) put his finger on an important small event in its history that has played a 'big' role in the establishment of the concept.

Shapin argued that the establishment of the concept of truth in Europe has much to do with a small event: the emergence of 'gentlemanly society' in England in the seventeenth century. Englishmen in the seventeenth century were looking for reliable knowledge to such questions as 'whom to trust?' and 'who has the right to speak for those who didn't speak for themselves?' A working solution was created by way of transporting the virtues of gentlemanly society into the new practice of empirical science. That is, '[c]ultural practices linking truth to honor in gentle society', wrote Shapin (1942: 42), 'were adapted and transferred to provide substantial practical solutions to problems of credibility'. The truth, therefore, was constructed not by 'discovering the hidden substance of the universe' but by appealing to a concrete event – the emergence of gentility – which worked as a 'massively powerful instrument in the recognition, constitution, and protection of truth' (42). Such a small event thus determined the conception and definition of truth.

The moral economy of pre-modern society located truth within the practical performances of everyday social order. Truth flowed along the same personal channels as civil conversation. Knowledge was secured by trusting people with whom one was familiar, and familiarity could be used to gauge the truth of what they said ... Seventeenth-century commentators felt secure in guaranteeing the truthfulness of narratives by pointing to the integrity of those special sorts of men who preferred them (Shapin 1994: 410).

⁵ See, for instance, Harrison (1995: 56–60) and Cooter and Ulen (1995: 79–84).

Path dependence as *pathologies* in human thought

Such events are abundant in history; and their significance and consequences in the evolution of human ideas and thought have so far attracted the attention of many philosophers and scientists (Vromen and Jolink, 2001; Rizello 2004). The issue is important for economics, and it is important for the history of human ideas, too. For disappointments with ‘the advance of technology’, such arguments maintain, have some common elements with the disappointments with ‘the advance of knowledge’ (David 1990). David writes in regard to economic science,

I am unable to find any compelling reasons why economic analysis should remain ‘locked in’ to an ahistorical conceptual framework, apart from the unfortunate hysteresis effects of ‘intellectual sunk costs’ ... [S]ome injection of further, intellectual ‘energy’ is likely to be necessary in order for our discipline to free itself from the logical region of ‘low potential’ in which it has too long remained trapped. (David 2001)

The circumstances that small events can cause are those that happen – and never ‘un-happen’ (David 2001). One of the undesirable consequences of the names and metaphors belonging to the current path of thought – that is, Samuelsonian equations in economics and the modernist philosophy of Descartes, Hobbes and Spinoza, and many other Baconian thinkers – is that they hinder the attempts to grow beyond what we have inherited from earlier times. We are locked in, so to speak, to a particular rhetoric of science, philosophy and arts. Many of the formulations in sciences such as ‘ $2+2=4$ ’ are necessarily true, and they have proved to be useful, too. Pythagoras’s theorem, for instance, enabled engineers able to build *The Tunnel*. Men navigated around the world by virtue of Ptolemy’s astronomy. Ptolemy’s view, however, was ‘foundationally’ flawed. ‘The Earth [was] at rest’, he thought, ‘[that] it [was] in the centre of the Universe, and that fixed stars move[d] together as a sphere’ (Field 1981: 349). His astronomy nevertheless worked well, and it helped navigators produce land and sea maps using measurement and observatory techniques.

Despite the virtuous pasts of numerous sciences, some of the scientific figures of speech today produce more problems than solutions. Old vocabularies put a stop to ‘playing the new off against the old’, as Richard Rorty says. Since we could not develop better rhetorics, many issues are still taboos – such as homosexuality and transgender or racial, regional and cultural differences. The reason, according to Rorty, is that

we try *not* to want something which stands beyond history and institutions ... [A] belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance. My picture of a liberal utopia [has been] a sketch of a society in which the charge of ‘relativism’ has lost its force, one in which the notion of ‘something that stands beyond history’ has become

unintelligible, but in which a sense of human solidarity remains intact. (Rorty 1999: 189–90)⁶

Rorty thinks that one's aim in philosophy should be to extend the 'repertoire of alternative descriptions' rather than to achieve the 'One Right Description' (Rorty 1999: 39–40). The metaphor of 'depth' of 'insight', for instance, can be useful in better understanding the Bible or Friedrich Nietzsche, but it hardly makes sense while talking on such topics as the football match between England and Germany. Eleven European countries have so far ratified the European Constitution via referenda. The Constitution that the Europeans will vote about is more than 400 pages. Whatever the consequences of such an important event are going to be, it is still a big mystery for those who drafted the text how many people read it in a non-trivial manner. This does not mean there is no depth to the discussion of the European Constitution or football matches, nor that people never read the Bible or Nietzsche superficially. It means rather that 'depth' and 'insight' are only figures of speech that we have long lived by (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

Thomas More's *Utopia*: the small event and the idea of perfection

Path dependence helps us understand why we cannot switch from one set of metaphors to another. The theory of path dependence maintains that we live with, in Nietzsche's words, 'illusions which we have forgotten are illusions ... metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, [and] coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal no longer as coins' (Nietzsche 2005). Path dependence offers a richer and 'gayer' scientific conversation, *à la* Nietzsche, about our dissatisfaction with many social institutions and such metaphors.

One of the metaphors that the thinkers of the twentieth century have utilised, over-utilised, and mis-utilised is the metaphor of Thomas More's *Utopia*. The metaphor implied that it was possible to build perfect structures. It was possible, for instance, to create or discover a 'perfect language', that is, a world of one language, and of one speech. Perfect language means that we name objects in such a way that we unambiguously communicate their inherent properties when we talk about them. It implies there should be one name for a tree, and the name should represent the essentials of the object.

⁶Despite Rorty's elegance in writing philosophy, his attack on 'realism' and 'analytic philosophy' is nevertheless far from being uncontroversial. His 'edifying philosophy', to many philosophers, begs a certain number of questions, and has therefore been heavily criticised (see, for instance, Dworkin 1996). While I take for granted the flows in his broad-brush treatment of analytic philosophy, I, for the present paper, find attractive and relevant Rorty's views of 'irony' and 'solidarity' as well as his critique of 'objective truth' and 'foundationalism'. Rorty, according to my view, is among the group of contemporary thinkers who, in a 'post-Nietzschean' fashion, have succeeded in drawing the intellectuals' attention, especially in epistemology, with an accessible language, to the virtues of pragmatist thinking. His writings, I think, have re-granted the prestige of such philosophers as John Dewey and William James, whose works are now more influential in scientific and philosophical inquiry.

Names in languages would then have definite meanings. As Umberto Eco once said,

The dream of a perfect language ... did not only obsess European culture. The story of the confusion of tongues, and of the attempt to redeem its loss through the rediscovery of invention of a language common to all humanity, can be found in every culture. (Eco 1995: 1)

The *will to perfection* in human ideas and thought is like the desire to erect a tower to reach heaven. The metaphor of *Utopia* had implied that it was possible to discover the ideal thinking systems such as atomic individualism or historical materialism. We were told that we could engineer the most efficient society in which we did not have a problem of scarcity. Yet, designing social institutions was not always like designing tea-pots and Airbus A-380 airplanes. As Eco writes, the story of the quest for a perfect language – and the thinkers' adventure of perfection in general – is the story of a 'dream' and failures (19). In fact, the dream of a perfect language, like the Tower of Babel, has collapsed repeatedly with profound consequences – the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Empire being only two among other examples.

Thomas More provided one of the most significant constitutive metaphors in human thought. More, a 'man for all seasons', has had many admirers, from the Catholic Church, which canonised him as a saint in 1935, to the Politburo of the USSR, where a sculpture of him was erected by the order of Lenin after the revolution of 1917. His *Utopia* has influenced almost every text written on social and philosophical issues as justice, poverty, social order and, of course, truth.

One can read the book in countless ways, underscore a variety of its aspects, and criticise or praise its conclusions and implications.⁷ The book inspired changing the world with a faith in human perfection. 'Despite More's religious feelings', says Scott Gordon,

his *Utopia* is not notably a portrait of a perfect social order built upon religious foundations or governed necessarily by priests. In fact it was the forerunner of the form of social perfectionist writing that rose to dominance in the eighteenth century: the vision of a *secular utopia* ... [S]ocial science and social philosophy underwent a profound transformation from a religious to a secular orientation during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This was also true of that branch of social thought most intimately connected with religion, the concept of a social order: paradise, in effect, was brought down to earth (Gordon 1991: 160).

Many writers, as Gordon also underlines, have read *Utopia* from the view of religious freedom and secularisation in political and intellectual life. In fact, *Utopia* has been influential in such diverse forces and issues as secularisation,

⁷For a reassessment of Thomas More as a public and private figure see, for instance, Guy (2000).

communism and liberalism (see, for instance, Hodgson 1999: 1–14). There are, however, other aspects of More's work, too, especially in regard to the character of the evolution of human thought after its publication, on which I focus more here. Surely, the book has been extremely important in the process of reforming state–church relations – it has perhaps been the first attempt to provide a comprehensive religious freedom (Kessler 2002). However, what is missing in the literature of philosophy and literary studies – as far as I could follow – is that the book has not been seen as the source of a specific type of intellectualism in Europe – namely, as the formulation of the will to perfection.

Thinkers have long been interested in imaginary good places. In fact, there is an obsession among the writers in the modernist era – an obsession of thinking about worldly matters in terms of perfect categories such as perfect concepts, perfect technologies, perfect economies and societies, and so forth. And *Utopia* assumes that answers to such fundamental questions are possible.

The book is rhetorically powerful. It is not a theory connecting the facts, but instead, an expression of an idea – an idea of perfection. I argue, however, that the condition of our age suggests the need to think many things differently: computers, digital technologies, separation of software from hardware, and so forth, have changed the ways in which we do daily work, communicating with others, shopping, or 'fixing' the equipment. More's book assumed that in the long run we could bring resolving answers to such fundamental questions as 'what is the nature of human beings?' or 'what is the reality behind the appearance?' In many cases today, however, such as in the studies of race and gender, we are not interested in such questions anymore, nor do we believe that the answers would make the slightest difference.

'Fundamentals' and 'essentials' of age-old ideas, which were to be used to build such perfect structures, are basically symbolic figures. The problem was, and is, that we use them literally. We have assumed that there were fundamentals that structured human nature. We have assumed that there were essential features to human races. We have assumed that reality was always behind the appearance. Such figures of speech were chosen arbitrarily, mostly with references to religious and transcendental doctrines – such as the theological argument that this world was not 'real' and 'the reality' was behind the appearance. Such metaphors aimed at forming an imaginary, balanced construction in human ideas and thought. 'Beneath the surface of economic theorizing', as Robert Nelson writes it in his *Economics as Religion*, 'economists are engaged in an act of delivering religious messages. Correctly understood, these messages are seen to be promises of *the true path to a salvation* in this world – to a heaven on earth' (Nelson 2001: xx).

'We have flocks of words of respectable appearance', as Dewey and Bentley noted in their last published book in 1949, 'that spring from this source: such words as "substance", "entity", "reality", "actor", "creator", or "cause", and thus, indeed, the major part of the vocabulary of metaphysics' (Dewey and Bentley 1999: 134). Dewey and Bentley especially stressed, we should inquire into the knowns in the way in which

systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to 'elements' or other presumptively detachable or independent 'entities',

‘essences’, or ‘realities’, and without isolation of presumptively detachable ‘relations’ from such detachable ‘elements’. (Dewey and Bentley 1999: 133)

Essences, upon which such truths were ‘founded’, have always been ‘out there’. Thinkers have so long used them, although forms of essences have changed at different times. While Heraclites thought it was fire that was intrinsically stable and certain, Plato thought it was the rational spirit. St Augustine thought it was love of God that was fixed and final in nature, and Spinoza thought it was emotion and affection. Marx thought it was class struggle that determined the course of social and economic history.⁸ Few thinkers have been willing to sacrifice the idea that it is possible to reach the heart of natural phenomena – that is, the essence of human nature or foundations of economic science.

Solutions to the artificial problem have varied, but the *pathological* idea that there *are* essences and foundations lingered. As Dewey said,

Some have sought the good in self-realization ... some in holiness, some in happiness, some in the greatest possible aggregate of pleasures. And yet these schools have agreed in the assumption that there is a single, fixed, and final good. They have been able to dispute with one another only because of their common premise. (Dewey 1950: 132)

Isaiah Berlin wrote that the originality of Machiavelli was his belief in an ideal state of affairs. Berlin observes:

Machiavelli ... undermines one major assumption of Western thought, namely that somewhere in the past or the future, in this world or the next ... there is to be found the final solution to the question of how men should live ... [But] the very search for it becomes not merely *Utopian* in practice but conceptually incoherent. (Berlin 1953: 72–76)

Utopias and *Utopia*

The argument of path dependence in human ideas and thought suggests that reaching at the ideals of *Utopia* may be impossible because some small events might prevent us from achieving perfection. The metaphor should nevertheless not suggest that we give up ideals or motivations for striving for what we may consider the perfect being, the best society or the most efficient technology. The point, on the contrary, is the exclusion of what is not human in form from the world of humans. What we need is more responsible thinking. Obviously, people have ideals in life, and they morally feel better when they

⁸For a detailed account of the attempts in modern philosophy that have been dedicated to unearthing the essentials of nature, see John Dewey (1960), especially the third chapter, ‘Conflict of Authorities’.

preserve in their mind the idea of the perfect being or desire for the just society. People believe in God, and people pray for their beloved, and people think it is important to be virtuous citizens. These are all human needs. That they refer to a world beyond facts and experience is refreshing and progressive, in so far as there is enough space for the others to think through alternate metaphors within various paradigms.

Thinking through utopias, in a similar fashion, is likewise crucially important. They are similar both to sacred texts and to other convincing (secular) stories that tell us that things could have been different. Utopias are, in a sense, free exercises about free worlds where constraints are loose and sometimes non-existent. They are, after all, 'constructed worlds' – the worlds that thinkers make for themselves. That we have already passed the calendar year of 1984 and are coming close to the second half of the first decade in the second millennia should not reduce the significance of Orwell's *1984* or Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.⁹

There is no question that what we can achieve in our daily life and in our intellectual world has much to do with what we can imagine. The images we create are mostly the products of fairy tales, religious theory, folklore and so forth. The intellectual's faith in such fictions, however, is bound up with the responsibility of her actions, which arise from her beliefs. The quality of beliefs is what makes the difference. Knowers, doers and makers of this world are responsible for their actions, no matter what sort of belief precedes or causes them – religious or secular. As William James wrote in his *Pragmatism* (2000: 198–219), beliefs are not there only for the behaviour's sake. Whenever we are to change public life by virtue of our passions – e.g. hope, love and faith – 'the principle concern must be the extent to which the actions of religious believers frustrate the needs of other human beings, rather than the extent to which religion gets something right', says Rorty in his critique of James. He concludes:

[A]lthough your emotions are your own business, your beliefs are everybody's business. There is no way in which the religious person can claim a right to believe as part of an overall right to privacy. For believing is inherently a public project: all we language users are in it together. We all have a responsibility to each other not to believe anything which cannot be justified to the rest of us. To be rational is to submit one's beliefs – all one's beliefs – to the judgment of one's peers. (Rorty 1997)

Belief in the idea of the possibility of a perfect world, as it is argued in *Utopia*, has been one of the tales that have influenced the way we have thought. It has worked so well that there has been considerable scientific and philosophical progress. We now can do open-heart operations, travel around the world in much less than eighty days, and build bridges and dams. Indeed, Boulding posed the correct question (Boulding 1971): after Samuelson, who needs Adam Smith? It is no coincidence that our journey to the

⁹ For further argumentation, see McKenna (2001).

perfect state of things has – although interrupted – meant that many things have improved. The idea of reaching for the perfect state of things, therefore, involves ‘progress’, too, that betters human life in comparison to the preceding stages of development. The argument of path dependence in human ideas and thought suggests, however, that the metaphor of *Utopia*, like all other metaphors, has not been inevitable – and neither has it been sufficient. That is to say, humans could think about the world even if they did not believe in perfection or even if they did not talk through such metaphors as ‘essences’ or ‘depth’. Like the Egyptian artists who created elegant paintings without any conception of depth (see Deleuze 1989: 79–92), we could understand the world in different ways: ‘we can read’, for instance, as Deirdre McCloskey put it, ‘the depth and the surface of the text at the same time’ (McCloskey 1998: 5).

This is also the reason why utopias are the scenarios that one should consult to see what counterfactuals there could be: ‘what if there was no war in Iraq?’ or ‘what if Quine had not changed his mind?’ or ‘what if Kant had not developed the idea of “thing-in-itself”?’ The possibility of changing the actual is the proof that the actual is incomplete and imperfect. We can produce fine art even if we do not have any conception of depth; then, what if we try to make a picture of ‘reality’ as if, say, there were a fifth or eleventh dimension? We forget that no state of perfection has ever been actualised in the world of humans (such as 100 per cent manhood). Yet, mysteriously, in the world of thought (such as general equilibrium in economics), we were told to believe in the ‘perfect ideality in concepts that express the opposite of those things which make life unsatisfactory and troublesome’, as Dewey once argued (Dewey 1950: 141).

More’s *Utopia* is a special utopia, then, in which there is one unalterable world and no alternatives at all. It is a world of perfection – a world in which everything desirable is thought to be attained. It was one of the utopias that demonstrated one of the worlds that many thinkers such as Léon Walras and Karl Marx were inspired by. It was also the world in which many others such as the citizens of the Soviet Republic hoped to be. It was, however, not a factual demonstration – it was a story about a country that had never existed, for ‘utopia’ meant ‘the place that did not exist’. Obviously, after such disappointments as the collapse of the Soviet Russia and the war in Iraq, we have begun to think that we might have started incorrectly and we should reconsider the assumptions and preconditions. This amounts to being concerned with small events in history – events that resulted in path-dependent circumstances in human ideas and thought.

Conclusion: Giving up addictions is hard; overlooking the problem worse

One can certainly ask the question: human ideas have been dependent upon *Utopia*. So what? Isn’t a perfect world good for everybody? John Dewey has a remarkable answer for the question. Dewey says,

It is perhaps dangerous to attempt to follow the inner workings of the processes by which truth is first identified with some superior

type of reality, and then this Truth is taken as the criterion of the truth of ideas. (Dewey 1910: 142)

The reason is simple: the explanation is constructed by the condition that satisfies the requirements of the case. However, explanations are not discovered. They are created and constructed by humans.

Our habits of thought, according to the idealists of perfect clarity – that is, the followers of *Utopia*, analytic philosophers and Samuelsonian economists – could have really taken us to the ideal human society. Within a human outlook, however, this does not seem to be possible in a ‘human, all-too human’ world. The presence of intrinsic excellence (that is, human nature) is non-physical (unlike other human beings) and therefore incapable of being experienced (unlike being hit by a car or becoming sick because of malnutrition). The writings of Dewey and Rorty, among others on the matter, have shown us that the more we are free from this utopian ideal, the more likely we are to free ourselves. The more we are free from ‘tough-minded’ philosophy and economics, in other words, the less we are content with the consequences of path dependence.

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