

Seeking Utopia
2019

Thomas A. Burns, PhD.

Klamath Falls, Oregon

Utopia at the social level is the equivalent of happiness at the individual or psychological level. Unfortunately, most social utopian conceptions concern themselves only with objective reality and describe a whole array of ideal social, material, physical, intellectual, economic, political, judicial, and ecological conditions. The assumption is that if this set of ideal objective conditions are met, the ideal emotional state of happiness will follow. What is missing in these formulations is the inclusion of subjective reality – the domain of the spiritual/sacred, which is accessed through the intuitive human mental capability. Importantly, in this subjective domain, all things are inherently connected and thereby share identity. Art and religion, which are fused in 99% of human cultural history, are the primary social vehicles facilitating access to this subjective/spiritual/sacred dimension of reality. Enlightenment is the condition often attributed to fully mature subjective awareness for individuals, and societies led by this awareness can be said to be enlightened. Recognition of the essential role subjective awareness plays in seeking utopia is missing in most modern utopian “proposals.” I suggest: You cannot get there without it!

Rutger Bregman's Utopia for Realists (2014 -16) is an admirable effort to first describe the objective, social components of a modern version of utopia and then to identify the actions that have to be pursued to achieve it. But Bregman's vision is contained by the objective and marshaled into place by the intellect. Bregman reveals a valid part of the utopian picture, but it is not sufficient. Without including the subjective, there is no “meat” to hold the intellectual bones together, no essential personal, social and emotional experience of reality that confirms/under-girds the otherwise exclusively intellectual commitment to sharing and respecting all things: fundamental to any complete utopian vision.

The dilemma for Bregman is, after detailing the spectacular extent of human economic, political, material, medical, intellectual, technological, and informational progress over the last 200+ years, he is confronted with the question: “Why are modern humans in developed, complex societies so discontent?” Is it because in their mostly “contented,” modern material state they have lost sight of or given up on making it the last leg of the journey to an ideal utopian state? Do they just need a progressive pep talk to get them moving – which Bregman offers in spades?

Surely, there is value in the “pep talk” as it reveals some of the issues in the objective [social, economic, ecological, political, judicial, etc.] that have to be

addressed before a utopian state can even be adequately envisioned. But it is not an adequate answer because it is missing the component that provides the primary motivation to pursue and sustain a utopian state: the subjective experience of universal connectedness to the point where discrete identities for all entities – human and natural – “dissolve” into or merge to become One. Through this experience of universal connectedness, the “separateness” of objective reality, upon which competitive/aggressive behavior depends, disappears and the utopian ideal of a universal, cooperative social orientation is maximally supported. There is no way to get to this level of support for cooperation without the contribution subjective awareness brings to achieving this key social objective in any utopian vision. The strongest possible appeal that reason and intellect can make in the objective will not suffice!

At this point, it is extremely important to note that the experience of the universal self does not require religion. Religion is a social institution that has arisen in the more complex forms of human societies in the modern era – last 10,000 years – to surround, contain and direct the results of the human experience of subjective reality. Religion, with all of its literalistic beliefs, is not necessary to elicit this experience which is present for the vast history of humans in simpler societies of bands and tribes where no “religion” is present – the first 220,000 years. In this lengthy earlier period, connectedness is understood as pervading all of existence and is captured in the paramount principle of sacredness in nature – animism: all things “alive” and inherently related.

It is nothing short of a paradox, that while religion as an institution contains at its core the very important experience of universal connectedness and thereby testimony to the significance of the subjective reality and of the expanded self, in religion's dogmatic form it constitutes one of the major obstacles to modern humans contacting and appreciating the universal importance of the subjective. As religions fight among themselves over the absolute truth of their literal beliefs, their core value of revealing connectedness and consequently advancing respect and cooperation is subverted to support a competitive orientation among human groups! And as modern humans split more and more between the religious fundamentalists and the secular materialists/humanists, the objective – subjective extremes become viewed as irreconcilable antagonists rather than as dynamic and essential commentaries. Moreover, as secularists reject spirituality along with religion, and as they gain in numbers in modern developed societies, more and more modern humans have no awareness of or deep and meaningful experience with the subjective. They do not know themselves or their reality in this respect, and so do not recognize the positive role spirituality can play in addressing the imbalance that exists in modern society, even if they recognize the imbalance itself. Secularists are left

with intellect/reason in the objective as their only pathway to promote the level of cooperation required to achieve and sustain the ideal utopian social condition. With one arm tied behind their backs, the task is virtually impossible!!

Fully credible Utopian conceptions must include the subjective/spiritual/intuitive aspect of reality, but they do not require any religion. All that are needed are vehicles/means/processes for assisting individuals and groups to transition to and experience more fully subjective awareness. Meditation or the vision quest serve as more “passive” “belief free” examples of such vehicles, while – in the appropriate state of mind – dance can be an active example of such means.

A high level of cooperation is paramount in any utopian conception, and sophistication in the subjective provides significant support in this direction. But it is a mistake to characterize utopia in exclusively ideal cooperative terms. Humans are BY NATURE both competitive and cooperative. On the one hand, humans are predators who compete and take what they need from nature and from one another – especially across separate groups across territories – in order to assure biological survival. On the other hand, humans must cooperate and share within at least community groups in order to assure both adequate provisions and security. Both competition and cooperation are equally essential in human societies and must exist in dynamic balance with different tasks calling for different levels of input from one or the other. It is therefore entirely unrealistic to represent any utopia in ideally cooperative terms. What is possible is for humans at all social scales from families to international federations to promote/require respect and negotiation of their needs rather than their wants and to do this without resorting to violence. This is the best that humans can expect in a realistic condition of utopian social relations. If we refer to this condition as peace, fine; but we can never eliminate competition. Indeed, without the competitive “instinct” and the risk and/or reward and recognition that follow, humans would be much less likely to innovate – essential for species survival. Any “legitimate” utopian vision must creatively “manage” and “balance” these two fundamental human proclivities – competition and cooperation. The intuitive capability inclines humans toward cooperation through the experience of connectedness in subjective/spiritual reality, while the rational/analytical capability inclines humans toward competition through the experience of limited good in objective/material reality. All of this is infused with emotions – positive [trending cooperative] and negative [trending competitive].

As human needs in the objective world are met more and more satisfactorily [progress in Bregman's terms], human wants and self interest can easily become focal – especially without the restraint provided by the experience of connectedness in the subjective. This trend toward individualism is particularly

the case in complex societies where social relations are mostly impersonal and where it is relatively easy to lose sight of the “proper” balance between social benefits and individual rewards. When individual values dominate, competition for resources to accommodate the pursuit of individual wants/desires can rapidly become the norm. Wealth accumulation and all the outward display of the trappings of wealth accompany this condition. The focus on shared and relatively equal social benefits [access to resources and shared security] retreats and a market economy arises to feed escalating individual self interest. This feed is potentially endless unless humans intervene to curtail it by reasserting the importance of social benefits [equally shared resources and mutual security – the cooperative side of the human equation].

Every society/culture determines where it will locate itself on this continuum, balancing – more or less – self-interest [competition] and communal benefit [cooperation]. Presently, with weakened experience from the subjective, the combination of rapidly advancing technology [always something new and exciting emerging] and a market driven economy [always something “else” to buy or possess] greatly favor the competitive/individualistic/self-interested/wealth acquisitive orientation. And wealth itself, when possessed by the few individuals or corporations, becomes a means for the few to control the decisions for the many [oligarchy] in order to further promote the self-interest of the few. The result: ever greater imbalance; greater and greater pursuit of self interest by individuals, privileged groups and corporations.

Ironically, urbanization that is bringing humans physically more and more together, and modern information and entertainment technology that is more and more connecting us electronically are at the same time isolating us from one another. This situation is making the effort to achieve greater balance between our competitive and cooperative orientations that much more difficult. Our cities are ever more vast as they trend toward megalopoli, and yet social relations are studiously impersonal and the sense of community is extraordinarily weak. When it comes to communication technology, first the telephone, then the radio, then television, then the internet, then cell phones with seemingly infinite search capacity, and finally the option to “dwell” in virtual realities have conspired to more and more connect us electronically while separating us in terms of face to face social interaction. Modern humans now sit in their offices/homes or walk their city streets conversing or searching the internet on their phones/computers with their heads and eyes all absorbed on one screen or another. But, humans are face to face interactive social animals; we communicate in much more than two dimensional visual pathways. When we reduce communication to a screen, we limit who we are and how we interact with the world, even the objective world! The result is that as modern humans

we isolate ourselves more and more while we think we are connecting more expansively. The forces that isolate us emphasize our individuality and promote our support for an exclusively objective/material/individualistic/competitive view of reality, society, and ourselves. The very tools of modern humans' supposed greater connectivity are contributing to our ever greater retreat from our truly connected, cooperative selves. The utopian balance between the competitive and the cooperative that we are seeking recedes before us as we "imagine" we are moving in its direction.

Conclusion

Utopian visions have to address the nexus that currently supports the imbalance between competitive and cooperative, material and spiritual, rational and intuitive, objective and subjective views of reality and of society at all social levels from families to international federations. In this quest, reason/analysis can contribute awareness of the areas of objective society that need adjustment to support greater balance [economic inequality, excessive market driven materialism, unrealistic expectations to see wants/desires rather than needs fulfilled, exceeding the limits of ecology, technology that promotes social isolation, religion that promotes conflict and obscures spirituality, insufficient critical thinking skills, only nascent intuitive skills, etc.]. But reason/intellect alone is not sufficient to carry modern humans to this greater balance, unless reason itself recognizes the need to promote the augmentation of its complementary mental state – intuition. Reason/intellect can do this – recognizing the valuable input that the intuitive has to offer by supporting cooperation as a result of the access it provides to subjective awareness and the key experience of universal connectedness/identity: unification.

The complete map to Utopia is presently just a sketch of which few are even aware. Bregman is an eager, young scholar/journalist. He may yet penetrate to the big picture. And if he does, he may become someone who can help lead the global charge toward the balance between the forces of the objective and the subjective and reveal the state that emerges when this balanced condition manifests for individuals and social groups at all scales: UTOPIA.

On the other hand, if humanity continues on its present grossly imbalanced course, our future in the civilized condition is likely to be grim indeed. Do we want to be blown back to a few bands and tribes struggling to survive on an ecologically inhospitable planet? That is where we were before when as homo sapiens we slowly climbed out of east-central Africa. Are we doomed to recycle ourselves because we cannot figure out how to behave socially and ecologically as real grown ups in modern, complex, international society? In the present, such stupidity prevails despite our astonishing potential to populate the galaxy!