UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

THE UTOPIAN PARADOX

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines a paradox in utopian thinking, namely, that an analysis of the 'best' features of human nature can result in the construction of oppressive institutions. The exploration of this paradox takes the form of a discussion of the conflict between freedom and perfection in the works of Plato and Marx.

Parallel to the discussion of the utopian paradox is an examination of the liberal paradox, namely, that a rejection of the notion of absolute perfection is juxtaposed with the conviction that freedom of choice is an absolute good. This can be observed to have led to a type of society in which there is greater freedom for some and lesser freedom for others.

It is contended that, although liberalism is opposed to utopianism, the two philosophies nevertheless have something in common, that is, a selective analysis of human nature, and therefore, of human needs. Consequently, both utopianism and liberalism can be defined as repressive in that both impose, on society, an exclusive definition of human needs, which is hostile to other definitions, and is to that extent inflexible.

SECTION ONE

THE CONCEPT OF UTOPIA

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines certain aspects of utopian thought. It is therefore appropriate to begin with a description of those ways of thinking which can be defined as 'utopian', and which are of particular relevance to this discussion.

1 Utopia means 'good place'. It also means 'no place'. This automatically suggests two of the major features of utopian thinking: (a) it concerns 'the good' (b) it concerns a 'good' which has not, as yet, been realized. In this context, utopia can be described as unrealistic, in as much as it cannot be perceived to exist in actuality, and whether or not it will come to do so is a matter for speculation.

2 Utopia is prescriptive, that is, it is disposed to think in terms of how things ought to be.

3 Utopia is also normative: it is prone to making statements which are based on value judgements, and have an oblique or obscure relationship with empirical evidence.

4 Utopia is ethically absolutist: it believes in the existence of a realm of absolute values, unaffected by the vicissitudes of history, or of experience, or of the differences between societies and individuals. It is therefore the antithesis of relativism, which maintains that there is no objectively valid way of justifying one ethical belief against another.

5 Following on from this, utopia is universalist: it describes a type of good which is valid for all people, in all societies, at all times.

6 Utopia is antinomianist. It claims absolute right of action on the grounds of the absolute truth of its doctrine. (1) Anything that stands in the way of the realization of a utopian vision is bad; anything that promotes it, is good. The realization of the utopian ideal is considered to be of paramount importance.

7 Utopia is 'transcendent'. It raises itself beyond an awareness of how things are to a consciousness of how things might (and ought) be. It transcends everyday experience, projecting itself into an imagined future. As a result, it is critical of existing society, viewing it as wrong or inadequate by comparison with what it might (and should) become.

8 Finally, utopia is based on a particular idea of human nature. This idea is generally considered to be optimistic - an assessment which I propose to question in later chapters.

Can Plato and Marx be regarded as utopian thinkers?

It is not suggested that the above characteristics are in any way representative of utopian thinking **in toto**. Nevertheless, they are the features with which this thesis is largely concerned. My discussion will include case studies in the form of chapters on elements of utopian thinking to be found in the works of Plato and Marx. I have selected these two philosophers because I consider

(1) Scruton R, **A Dictionary of Political Thought**, p 19

certain aspects of their thinking to be particularly relevant to an analysis of the decline in utopian belief which has taken place (in the western democracies) over the past half-century or so. Before going on to discuss the decline in utopian faith, my selection of Plato and Marx as case studies requires some substantiation in terms of the extent to which they fit into general categories of utopian thought.

1(a) and (b) apply to both Plato and Marx. Both philosophers made it clear that their preferred societies encapsulated the 'good life'; in neither instance has the society been translated into actuality. Marx maintained that communist society was, objectively speaking, inevitable; nevertheless, even assuming that he was correct, it has yet to materialise.

Where (2) and (3) are concerned: Plato is commonly acknowledged to have been both prescriptive and normative in his approach. But in this context an assessment of Marx is rather more problematic: there is no such common agreement on the extent to which Marx was normative or prescriptive, and he, of course, insisted that he was neither, claiming instead to have based his vision of future society on an objective analysis of actual conditions. Furthermore he criticized the utopian socialists on the basis of their subjective and unscientific beliefs. Nevertheless, it has been argued that Marx did, in fact, employ an approach which was both normative and prescriptive, and, in a subsequent chapter on Marx, I have discussed this argument. It is certainly true that, despite their differences in approach, Marx shared with the utopian socialists a vision of a future society which would be based on harmonious cooperation between people. This, in itself, implies a type of prescription.

With regard (4) and (5): Plato's theory of forms, perfect, enduring and unaffected by changes in the world of appearance, is sufficient evidence of the absolutist and universalist aspects of his thinking. Again, the extent to which these features are incorporated in Marxian theory is open to debate. Marx was one of the forerunners of the sociology of knowledge which emphasises the relative nature of values and beliefs. His belief in the subjective and relative nature of morality is particularly evident in his later works; nevertheless the existence of an ethical commitment is confirmed in his earlier writings, and it has been suggested that in both his earlier and later works there is evidence of a belief in the moral superiority of socialism over all preceding systems.(1) Again, this is an issue which is discussed more fully in the chapter on Marx.

(6) applies equally to both philosophers. A specific example, in Plato's **Republic**, is the 'noble lie'. The lie was justified because it promoted stability and harmony in the good society. Marx sanctioned revolution on the grounds that it was necessary for the attainment of communist society.

With reference to (7): both Platonic and Marxian theory is transcendent in the sense given above, and both philosophers constructed critiques of existing society.

With regard (8): Plato's notion of human nature was instrumental in the formation of the structures which safeguarded his utopia, as I have tried to show in a subsequent chapter.
The main thrust of my chapter on Marx is an attempt to highlight the anomalies between his theory of human nature and the materialist means which he considered would ultimately lead to the fulfilling of that nature.

(1) Kamenka E, **Marxism and Ethics**, p 5

The Decline in Utopian Faith

There are two ways of viewing utopia: as an idea, and as an institution. Utopian novels deal with utopia as institution: the novel sets out the various requirements of a perfect society, and describes the types of institutions most likely to fulfil these requirements. Dystopian novels, on the other hand, set out to show how perceptions of perfection are distorted when translated into reality. Some dystopias, like Zamyatin's **We**, for instance, are written as protests again the state of affairs in existing societies. Others, like Huxley's **Brave New World**, are a description of what the author thinks is the logical conclusion of observable trends in existing societies. Both utopian and dystopian novels are concerned with utopia as institution, albeit from different perspectives.

Utopia as idea is something rather different, although the two cannot by any means be completely separated. Attempts have been made to concretize ideas in the form of institutions. The idea can be regarded as the forerunner of the institution, but cannot necessarily be equated with the institution: many utopian ideas have never been institutionalized; others have been institutionalized in such a way as to render the original idea quite unrecognizable. The idea is invariably prescriptive in that it concerns something which is inherently good or valuable, something which **ought** to be, irrespective of whether or not it currently exists. The institution, however, can be dealt with descriptively: it can be observed and categorised. Hence both the utopian and the dystopian novel involve a description of institutions: but the institution itself is based on an idea: on a norm, a belief, a precription about the way in which society ought to be organised.

In the final analysis, the dystopia deals with the way in which the idea has been distorted by the institution. The dystopian suggests that the lesson of history teaches us that the implementation of utopia is likely to lead in the opposite direction to that which was originally envisaged.

It seems that utopia as idea is at variance with utopia as institution. Berdyaev remarked that it is a condition of bringing utopias to pass that they shall be deformed in the process.

"Utopia is always totalitarian, and totalitarianism, in the conditions of our world, is always utopian."(1)

This discrepancy between idea and institution is not simply the concern of dystopian fiction. It is an issue which has also been discussed in non-fictional works concerning utopian thought: an issue which seems to have attained its greatest significance in the post-World War Two period: a problem (if it can be described that way) of decreasing optimism.

Shklar describes the Enlightenment as the high point of social optimism. Two of the main components of Enlightenment thinking were rationalism and humanism. Reason was believed to be the guiding principle and defining property of the human condition, and the concept 'human' was seen as the sufficient source of all values. Rationalism, however, was succeeded by (classical) Romanticism: there was an emphasis on the glamour of being an outcast rather than a social being, and on the power of the creative imagination. Modern Romanticism, however, is the romanticism of defeat: a result of disillusionment with all previous solutions to the dilemma of the

(1) Quoted in Elliot R, **The Shape of Utopia,** p 89

human condition. This is illustrated by the philosophies of the absurd, and by existentialism: suicide is the only effective way of asserting individual authenticity in the face of the overpowering constraints imposed by society. In conclusion, Shklar remarks that we know too much: utopianism has become impossible.

"The lessons of psychology, the masses of data accumulated about the workings of political institutions, and the self-consciousness that theories such as the sociology of knowledge have bred in us, prevent the renewal of radical hopes."(1)

One of the best known proponents of the sociology of knowledge is Karl Mannheim. Briefly, his basic propositions are as follows: in stable, traditional societies a particular world view is accepted as dominant; consequently conflicting norms and irreconcilable values are reduced to a minimum. However, with the increase in social mobility, world views come into conflict, precipitating the breakdown of social stability. The Middle Ages witnessed a time of stability largely because of the intellectual domination of the Church which spread its own world view throughout society. With the breakdown of the monopolistic control of the Church, the intellectual dominance of the clergy was partially replaced by the rationalist philosophy of the Enlightenment; however it was restricted to a small group of intellectuals, and did not succeed in restoring faith or unity of purpose to the rest of society. In an attempt to fill the gap, and to legitimise their own world views, political parties adopted, where possible, scientific arguments in support of their contentions. This led, in some cases, to the creation of the absolute state which imposed its own interpretation of the world on society at large.(2)

(1) Shklar J, **After Utopia**, p 271

(2) Mannheim K, **Ideology and Utopia**, p 5-35

Mannheim concludes that all thought can be traced back to its social-situational roots: this includes utopian thinking. Thus utopia cannot, practically speaking, be universal. It is a socially conditioned manifestation, appropriate to particular places and times.(1)

Brecht points out that prior to the twentieth century the questions posed in political theory were answered in the form of a number of 'first principles', that is, justice, security, order, the general welfare, and so forth. With the development and expansion of scientific knowledge, however, there was increasing consciousness in the field of political theory of the need for scientific respectability. Anything that could not be verified with the tools of science should be presented as personal opinion, tentative assumption and so forth. In essence, says Brecht, this meant a withdrawal from making, or endorsing, value judgements.(2)

The classic expression of this view is logical positivism, according to which whatever is neither empirically verifiable nor a proposition of logic or mathematics (that is, a tautology) is meaningless. Hence religious, moral and aesthetic claims are nonsensical. (Popper, however, rejected this position. He argued that logical positivists were mistaken in supposing that all non-scientific and non-tautological claims were meaningless. In his view all scientific statements were empirically **falsifiable**, not verifiable; but he did not regard this principle as demarcating sense from nonsense).*

(1) Mannheim K, op cit, p 73

(2) Brecht A, **Political Theory**, p 9

* Both views are discussed in greater detail in a subsequent chapter

Ulam writes of the disillusionment with the dreams of human perfectibility, and attributes this to the failure of socialist systems. He notes that the final stage of Marxian socialism is frankly utopian, and that this has been responsible for much of its appeal. But the experience of the Soviet Union has marked, among other things, a descent from the realms of theoretical perfection to the mundanities of such matters as five-year plans and accelerated economic production. Ulam claims that communism has substituted the cult of the perfect party for the dream of a perfect society.(1)

Goodwin refers to a conference on Utopia and Politics, held in 1957. The fundamental charge against utopian thought was that it depended on an authoritarian political outlook, destructive of both freedom and tolerance. More specifically, utopianism is preoccupied with ends, and indifferent to means. it involves an absolutist conception of truth: the imposition of such a concept would be effectively totalitarian.(2)

Manuel distinguishes three ages of utopia: 1) the utopias of calm felicity, 2) the open-ended utopias of the nineteenth century, 3) the psychological and philosophical utopias of today.

The first two ages had at least one factor in common, namely the recognition of the necessity to eliminate conflict from utopia. The utopias of calm felicity assumed that the establishment of appropriate social arrangements would virtually eliminate expressions of psychological and physical aggression. This could be easily done because general human needs could be easily satisfied; there were no powerful drives which might upset utopian equilibrium. During the second age, new theories were evolved about the needs of men in terms

(1) Ulam A, in Manuel F, **Utopias and Utopian thought**, p 118
(2) Goodwin B and Taylor K, **The Politics of Utopia**, p 93

of the cult of personality and self-expression. In this case, aggression was to be eliminated by the satisfaction of individual uniqueness. It was assumed that once the human desire for love and creative self-expression had been fulfilled, there would be no reason for relationships of domination and conflict.

The third age was initially the age of disillusionment with utopia. This was partly due to the influence of Freud who emphasised a contradiction between civilization and happiness. Civilization requires the repression of fundamental instincts, such as the sexual drive (Eros) and the death instinct (Thanatos), but this in turn leads to a potentially explosive accumulation of unconscious forces. Aggression, according to Freud, is virtually innate and only partially transmutable. One of the results of his hypotheses about the nature of man was to make the attainment of utopia seem impossible.

Manuel cites, among others, Fromm and Marcuse as examples of philosophers who have attempted to reconcile Freud with utopianism. Drawing on Marx, they have concluded that the elimination of aggression is to be found in emancipation from economic and sexual repressions.(1)

It is interesting to note the solution which Huxley's Mustapha Mond offers to the problem of aggression:

"Violent passion surrogate. Regularly once a month. We flood the whole system with adrenalin. It's the complete physiological equivalent of fear and rage. All the tonic effects of murdering Desdemona and being murdered by Othello without any of the inconveniences."
"But (said the Savage) I like the inconveniences."(2)

(1) Manuel F, **op cit**, pp 69-100

(2) Huxley A, **Brave New World**, p 187

All the authors mentioned (texts dating from 1936 to 1982) are agreed on one point irrespective of their other differences, namely, that there has been a significant decline in utopian thinking in the West. Extrapolating from the above discussion, it seems that some of the factors which have contributed to this decline are as follows:

1 Hypotheses concerning human nature which emphasise qualities opposite to those espoused by the utopianists.

2 The development, in philosophy, of schools of thought which attempted to adhere to the methods of the natural sciences. This involved the rejection of all value judgements on the basis of their unscientific nature.

3 The sociology of knowledge, which suggests that all ethical beliefs are relative to the situation in which they were produced.

4 The failure of utopian experiments, and, following on from this, the development of totalitarian systems based on notions of absolute truth.

Concluding remarks

Just as there are two ways of viewing utopia, that is, as idea or as institution, so there are two major problems affecting utopia:

Firstly there is the problem of trying to ground utopia in something other than personal preference: this concerns the idea. Secondly, even assuming we have a well-grounded utopian vision, we would nevertheless have been disillusioned by the way in which this vision has been distorted when put into practice: this concerns the institution.

We are left with the question of whether the institution distorts the idea, or whether the idea distorts the institution, that is, to what extent can a 'vision' be translated into reality without a process of distortion taking place?

It is my contention that the decline in utopian thinking can be attributed to both the idea, and the institution, and to the process of interaction between them. One of the features of the idea is that it is absolute: it involves a concept of perfection which leaves little or no room for manoevre. Absolute truth allows no possibility for the existence of differing perceptions of truth. Hence the institutions which represent, in finite form, an absolute concept of perfection, must also be constructed on the assumption that varying visions of what is right and just must be subordinated to the one true vision. Yet, as Dr Johnson remarked,

"The caprices of human behaviour laugh at calculation".(1)

The utopianist has (a) a specific idea about what man needs, based on a particular analysis of human nature, and (b) a specific set of institutions guaranteed to fulfil those needs. But in order to translate the idea into the reality of the institution, he has first to deal with the 'caprices' of human behaviour, which must be structured in a way that ensures the survival of institutionalized perfection. Ultimately, the freedom in which to exercise 'caprice' must be subordinated to the survival of perfection. It is this conflict between freedom and perfection which is described in the dystopias of Dostoevski, Zamyatin and Huxley.

(1) quoted in Williams B, **Morality. An Introduction to Ethics**, p35

In **The Brothers Karamazov**

"The grand Inquisitor accuses Christ of a ghastly failure; he foolishly imposed upon man the intolerable burden of freedom, instead of taking freedom from man and giving him in its place bread and happiness ... Man longs for unity in one unanimous and harmonious ant hill; the Church, out of its love for feeble humanity ... will be in a position to plan the universal happiness of man."(1)

In **We**, R3 says

"Those two in Paradise were offered a choice: of happiness without freedom or freedom without happiness. They were not offered a third. They, the fools, chose freedom. Naturally, for ages thereafter, they longed for shackles ...
And only we found a way to regain happiness ...
No more meddling with good and evil."(2)

In **Brave New World** the Savage lays claim to the inconveniences of imperfection:

'But I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness, I want sin'.
'In fact,' said Mustapha Mond, 'you're claiming the right to be unhappy.'
'All right then' said the Savage defiantly "I'm claiming the right to be unhappy."(3)

It is the conflict between freedom and perfection (or rather, a particular perception of perfection) which concerns many of the authors who have charted the decline in utopian thinking. One hesitates to describe Fascism as 'utopian'; yet Fascist ideology

(1) Elliott R, op cit, p 91

(2) Zamyatin Y, **We**, p 72

(3) Huxley A, **op cit**, p 187

incorporated a set of absolute beliefs which did not allow for the existence of differing beliefs. The ideology of the Soviet Union incorporates the Marxian notion of the final stage in human development, and has proved hostile to freedom of thought and expression. This is also the case with a number of other countries.

Tillich acknowledges that the power of a utopian movement depends on its ability to command an unconditional faith: without such faith it would be unable to actualize itself. Nevertheless he suggests that it is possible to support a utopian belief even though conceding that it is provisional rather than absolute. If, he says, our commitment is unconditional, we will not undermine utopia. But at the same time we must recognise that our commitment is not to something absolute, but to something preliminary and ambiguous. Tillich admits that this solution is less than perfect.(1)

I think that the above solution is not only imperfect: it is impossible. It constitutes a contradiction in terms. How can I unconditionally commit myself to a conditional belief? My commitment must, by definition, be conditional, because my belief is provisional. I am ready to withdraw my commitment in the event that my belief is revealed to be erroneous. In this case, my commitment cannot legitimately be described as unconditional.

In the final analysis, utopia requires from its adherents an absolute commitment to an absolute belief. Even if we maintain that this does not **necessarily** place us on the road to totalitarianism, the development of particular schools of thought such as logical positivism, which maintains that **a priori** knowledge is meaningless, and the sociology of knowledge, which claims that all knowledge is situation-bound, have also led to an erosion of the faith in absolutes.

(1) Tillich P, in Manuel F, op cit, pp 306,307

In sum: the decline in utopian thinking can be attributed to an erosion in the faith in absolutes: absolute truth, absolute values, absolute perfection. The fear of utopia can be attributed to the manner in which utopian ideas have been institutionalized, and the loss of freedom and of human lives which has resulted. This has led to a paradoxical situation in which the corruption of the best becomes the worst: **corruptio optimi pessima.**(1)

It is not my intention to examine institutions, or the societies in which these institutions have evolved. My examination, in the following chapters, will be confined to utopian ideas in order to discover the extent to which distortion, and therefore disillusionment, is inherent in the ideas themselves.

(1) Elliot R, op cit, p 99

CHAPTER 2

ABSOLUTE TRUTH AND THE UTOPIAN IDEAL

Literally translated, 'utopia' means 'good place' (and 'no place'). As it has been applied, however, it means 'best place'. But if there is no such thing as absolute truth, then we cannot make a definitive judgement with regard the nature of a 'best place'. In this case, utopian vision is based, not on truth, but on a set of transient beliefs arising from equally transient cicumstance. We would have to say either of two things:

With Bertrand Russell 'I am inclined to think that under present circumstances this opinion is probably true', and not 'this is true', or, with the Sophists: 'I am using my current idea of what is right as a weapon of persuasion in order to gain my particular political ends'.

Utopia becomes either a tentative hypothesis,or a political tool, and as such, ceases to be utopia.

A J Ayer says philosophy cannot know or describe a transcendent reality. As did Hume, he maintains that it is impossible to derive 'ought' from 'is'. Any philosopher who superimposes his vision of the future on to present reality is not describing a fact, but is simply describing the workings of his intuitive imagination: his vision of the future has no literal significance. Ayer uses, as an example of what he means, Descartes and **cogitio ergo sum.**

Literally translated, cogito means 'I am thinking now'. Are we to assume that on those occasions when we are not actually thinking, we have ceased to exist? Consequently, the statement **cogito ergo sum** has no literal significance.(1) The function of philosophy cannot be speculative: it cannot derive knowledge from first principles because first principles have no literal meaning. (The concept of utopia is therefore literally senseless because it cannot be deduced from present circumstances.) Nor can the function of philosophy be critical, because almost any belief can be justified by the appropriate experience. Instead the function of philosophy, as Ayer sees it, is one of clarification and analysis.(2)

Ayer goes on to say that although general propositions cannot be logically certain, this does not mean that it is irrational to believe in them. But it would be irrational to demand certainties instead of probabilities. It is not irrational to believe that something is true. But it is irrational to believe that it is entirely and forever true. A sentence which expresses a moral judgement is merely an expression of feeling and not a statement of truth.(3) (From what Ayer says it follows that an ethical system, like utopia, is based on emotion and cannot be judged in terms of true or false; the criteria simply do not apply. A given utopia may be interesting from a psychological point of view, that is, why did this philosopher have these particular emotions at that particular time, but it is neither true nor false: it is simply an expression of emotion.)

Even statements of fact, according to Ayer, are not certain, because they are based on sense experience, and it is not inconceivable that subsequent sense experiences will contradict earlier ones. In

(1) Ayer A J, **Language, Truth and Logic**, p 47

(2) Ibid, p 51

(3) Ibid, p 148

conclusion, no statement, whether based on thought (intuition) or sense experience, is certain, except for tautologies, and these are certain only because they ascribe to a thing a property which belongs to it by definition.(1)

Taking Ayer's point of view, a study of utopian thought cannot attempt to verify the truth or falsity of the utopia in question. Nor can it come to any general conclusions as to the nature of the ethical system on which the utopia is based. For, in the final analysis, utopian thinking is based on unverifiable emotions. The most such a study can hope to do is to describe and analyse the meanings of words and definitions.

Leo Strauss criticizes this type of approach. If ethical principles are based solely on emotion, and we cannot judge them to be right or wrong because they have no support other than arbitrary preference, then we are condemning ourselves to a state of blind ignorance about some of the most important areas of our lives. He asks how it is that, while we are allowed a reasonable degree of certainty in secondary matters, we are allowed no certainty at all in matters of primary importance.(2) Here we should note that Ayer does not even allow certainty with regard empirical statements (as opposed to ethical ones) because they are based on sense experience, which is not always constant. Furthermore, Strauss refers to ultimate principles, and according to Ayer principles cannot be ultimate because they are subject to change.(3) In effect, and using Ayer's terminology, Strauss' criticism is an emotional one, and thus without literal significance. But there are other criticisms.

(1) Ayer A J, op cit, p47

(2) Strauss L, **Natural Rights and History**, p 4

(3) Ayer A, op cit, p 71

It seems to me that if the role of philosophy is simply to examine the meaning of words, then this is not philosophy, but something else, perhaps semantics. Secondly, it could be said that Ayer in a way defeats himself, in as much if nothing is certain, then everything is certain, and nothing has really been changed. Berlin refers to this sort of position as a **reductio ad absurdum** in that in the absence of a super-standard, nothing on the topic can be said at all.(1) On this view, Ayer devoted several hundred pages to saying that nothing could be said.

What does Berlin mean by a 'super-standard'? Does he suggest that there is such a thing as philosophical truth, and is he then subject to Ayer's contention that such statements have no literal meaning? Strictly speaking, this is not Berlin's position. Unlike Strauss, his aim is not to discover a natural (permanent) horizon as opposed to the changing horizons to be found in Plato's cave allegory. Strauss wishes to establish the existence of natural rights in order that the fundamental problem of political philosophy may be solved in a final manner.(2) Berlin does not believe that there are, or should be, final solutions which lead to what he describes as the artifical stilling of doubts.(3) But he is nonetheless concerned to defend the notion of moral responsibility. In order to do so, he has to make a stand against those writers who deny the existence of universally applicable moral standards. It seems to me that he is not entirely happy with the opposite of this standpoint, either. He does not want people to be relieved of moral responsibility, but nor does he wish to back the claims of those who judge actions and beliefs against a backdrop of absolute morality. He talks instead of common values(4)

(1)Berlin I, **Four Essays on Liberty**, p 87

(2) Strauss L, op cit, p 35

(3) Berlin I, op cit, p 36

(4) Ibid, p xxxi

which suggests the existence of some universally held moral beliefs, and consequently may be used as a criterion for judgement. He does not give examples of these common values and indeed skates round the question, preferring to concentrate on the issue of freedom: in this case, freedom of thought.

Bernard Williams explains this point more fully. He points out that we cannot discuss moral questions in a vacuum. The fact that there are moral arguments suggests the existence of a moral background of agreed views.(1) However, the obvious criticism of this approach is that 'agreed views' are not necessarily right or true.

Popper maintains that morality is artifical; certainly it is not natural, in the sense that 'natural' means 'of nature', and nature is morally neutral. Morality is represented by a series of conventions through which men impose their own standards on nature. Thus far, Popper could be described as being in agreement with the Sophists: morals are simply human conventions. But his next statement is a contradiction of the Sophist position: the fact that morals are conventional does not mean that they are random or arbitrary. On the contrary, they are the result of human choice, and therefore represent personal responsibility and freedom of conscience.(2) Popper's reply to the Sophists would presumably be that they were afraid of admitting personal responsibility for making moral decisions: to say that morals are random and based on shifting social circumstance is a way of avoiding responsibility.

(1) Williams B, op cit, p 32

(2) Popper K, **The Open Society and Its Enemies**, Vol 1, p 5

Unlike Ayer, Popper does not apply the criterion of verifiability in order to test the scientific nature of a statement because, he says we can never verify general statements. We should instead turn our attention to falsifying them. If there is no conceivable way in which a statement can be falsified, then it is not a scientific statement. This does not, however, suggest that it is meaningless. Theories which cannot be empirically tested may still be critically examined, as a result of which preferences may be established(1) Consequently, our knowledge is provisional, and permanently so. To attempt to prove the truth of a theory is to attempt the logically impossible.(2)

In sum: whereas for Ayer morality is a matter of emotion, for Popper it is a matter of individual decision and responsibility. Like Berlin, he rejects notions of central principles and final solutions. Hence he also rejects utopian thinking which depends on belief in an absolute and unchanging ideal.(3)

The works under review reveal two particular problems with regard the arguments for and against utopian thought. One, which Popper and Berlin approach directly, is the problem of dogmatism:
To believe that a perfect society is possible involves a concomitant belief in the existence of a final and uniform solution to the infinite complexities of human society, and this in turn suggests that such a solution would be, in one way or another, an imposed one.

The second problem is revealed by a process of omission: there are certain logical conclusions to be drawn from the opposite poles of thought with regard the question of absolute morality, and Popper and Berlin are reluctant to commit themselves to either pole. The matter could be expressed as follows:

(1) Magee B, **Popper**, pp 42 - 48
(2) Ibid, p 27
(3) Popper K, op cit, p 161

On the one hand is the conviction that absolute truth does exist, and is represented by finite and universally applicable moral standards, on the basis of which correct judgements may be made regarding ideas and actions. In this way a situation of perfect morality may be arrived at: utopia.

On the other hand is the conviction that there is no such thing as absolute truth; morality is transient and relative to given situations. There is no way, or at most a very limited way, of judging the morality or otherwise of ideas and actions. Everything is in a constant state of flux; there is no perfection and hence, no solution.

If one does not wish to espouse, **in toto**, either of these extremes, the alternative position represents, in my opinion, a rather uneasy compromise: an insistence on the value of moral judgement and at the same time, a rejection of the notion of absolute morality. This is essentially the liberal position.* John Dewey's "new morality of situation ethics"[(1)] perhaps best illustrates the potential shakiness of this position. If every moral judgement is entirely dependent on the sort of situation in which the need for a judgement arises, and if our judgement in one particular situation may be quite different to that in another situation, then we are back with the notion that morality is relative, albeit in different guise.

We have arrived at a position in which humanist considerations and utopian considerations are apparently irreconcilable. The liberal thinker believes that utopian ideas are a distraction from the real and immediate objective, namely, to improve our society in the present

*Discussed at greater length in a subsequent chapter

(1) Binkley L, **Conflict of Ideals. Values in Changing Society**, p 21

as best we can; the destruction of the illusion of absolute knowledge is a humanist aim. Yet, Elliot declares that Utopia is the condition of all progress.(1) We should not immerse ourselves in our current situation to the extent that we are unable to visualize something better.

Where does utopian thought go from this point? Should it be dropped from the philosophical repertoire? Or should it be conceded that one of humanity's distinguishing and more positive characteristics is the ability to project thoughts and needs into the future, to rise above the limitations of immediate existence, and it is this characteristic which is nurtured by utopian concepts?

In this context it is interesting to note one of the basic differences between Socrates and Plato. Socrates believed that it is the business of the philosopher-teacher to seek for the truth by means of constant examination of all the things we would ordinarily take for granted. He described himself as a seeker after truth, and freedom is an essential condition of this quest. Plato, however, believed that he had found the truth, in which case there is no need for freedom. Once truth has been arrived at, the search is over, and freedom is no longer necessary

In conclusion: the obvious answer seems to be to accept the value of utopian thought while rejecting utopia itself. This is more-or-less the same as accepting the value of morality while rejecting the existence of absolute moral standards. Hence, beneath its superficial clarity, the answer is an ambiguous one. In the following chapter I therefore propose to examine the conflict betwen freedom and perfection which is one of the sources of this ambiguity.

(1) Elliot R, op cit, p 87

CHAPTER 3

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN FREEDOM AND PERFECTION

At first glance there is no apparent conflict of interests between freedom and perfection. But if being free means not being in bondage to someone else, and freedom means autonomy, then the most important aspect of freedom is the ability to determine one's own thoughts and actions (within reasonable limits) without necessary reference to anyone or anything else. It is at this point that freedom and perfection may clash. To enlarge: both concepts are associated with the third concept of rationality, viz, human beings should be free because they are rational, **and**, human beings can achieve perfection because they are rational. (Although rationality is not the only basis for either freedom or perfection, it is the one that is most consistently referred to).

It should be noted that definitions of freedom and reason contain no necessary moral content. Morality however is associated with notions of perfection. So it seems that moral judgement is implicit in the way in which the word 'perfection' has been used.

One of the ways the concept of perfection has been used is in connection with utopia. The word utopia means 'good place' (and 'no place') and thus morality, contained in the word 'good' is an essential component of utopian thought. 'Perfection' as it has been associated with utopia, suggests that at least part of utopian perfection is moral perfection.

To return to freedom. It has most commonly been assumed that human beings are entitled to freedom because they are rational and therefore have the capacity to work out their own destinies without undue interference from others. But rationality, as noted above, has no necessary connection with morality. On this point, Haksar notes two different sorts of rationality. There is instrumental rationality which concerns the ability to discover the best (or most efficient) means to obtain one's chosen ends. This type of rationality has no connection with morality. If I choose to become a criminal, I can prove that I am a rational being by conducting myself in a manner most likely to ensure success in my chosen occupation. Secondly, there is expressive rationality which is the ability to select the best means to the right end. Here rationality concerns the capacity to distinguish right from wrong.(1) It is in the context of the latter definition of rationality that human beings are assumed to have a right to freedom. If a distinguishing human characteristic is rationality, and if this rationality hinges on the ability to make independent decisions concerning right and wrong, then human beings have a right, based on ability, to make their own decisions. (As the first type of rationality is non-moral, there can be no question of rights).

This brings us back to the conflict between freedom and perfection in the utopian context. All utopias contain at least one aspect in common:

Utopia represents a final solution to the question of moral choice. Once moral perfection has been achieved, the search is over, and freedom, an essential part of that search, is no longer necessary. This is the problem of ends.

(1) Haksar V, **Equality, Liberty and Perfectionism**, p 3

A number of utopias, and certainly the ones which I have selected for the purposes of this thesis, have a second aspect in common: perfection has been achieved through the auspices of an external agency - 'external' in the sense that it is set apart from the bulk of the human race. For example, in the case of Plato: the Guardians, who represent a distinct minority among the citizens whom they lead. In the case of Marx: the **deus ex machina** is represented by the laws of history.
This is the problem of means.

The problem of ends, that is, the problem of whether or not there is such a thing as an absolute or perfect morality, was discussed in the previous chapter. But I would like to add that if perfection does exist, then the freedom to choose is not actually taken from us; freedom simply ceases to exist because the final choice has been made. The achievement of full rationality makes freedom obsolete.

The problem of means, however, hinges on the way in which that choice has been made, and who has made it. If human beings, owing to their characteristic of rationality, have the right to conduct their lives as they see fit without undue reference to anyone or anything else, then it is possible to take the argument one step further, viz, the greater the rationality, the greater the right, and the less the need to consult others. If we are to achieve perfection, we must fully utilize our resources of rationality.

According to Marx, rationality should be used in understanding certain historical laws, which he has revealed to us. These laws are immutable: there is nothing we can do to change them, we can only hope to take advantage of them in order to accelerate processes which are in any case inevitable. Choice has therefore been limited to

manoevering within clearly defined and inflexible boundaries, and a loss of freedom is the result. Although rationality does exist as a human quality, it must be subservient to the super-rational laws of historical change. In other words, these laws are more rational than we are, and therefore must take precendence.

Plato combines a reliance on human reason with that type of perfectionism which asserts that some people are better than other people, that is, more rational. Consequently they enjoy greater rights in the area of decision making than do others. For the vast majority of citizens, this results in an absolute loss of freedom. But if they retained their right to choose, perfection would never be achieved. (In the Platonic context, the word 'conflict' is no longer an appropriate description of the relationship between freedom and perfection. 'Conflict' suggests that there is some hope of reconciliation, whereas in **The Republic**, freedom and perfection are in a state of permanent and irreconcilable opposition.)

In sum: in the context of the utopian thought of Plato and Marx, the path to perfection requires either the considerable reduction of freedom, or its absolute loss. A degree of bondage - to the Guardians, or the laws of history, is a necessary condition for the achievement of perfection.

What if the freedom is voluntarily abdicated?

This variation on the theme of freedom vs. perfection was introduced, according to Passmore, by Locke who contended that each human being is, at birth, morally neutral. This was later developed by Behavioural scientists, for example Skinner, into a theory which maintained that while there may be a difference in intelligence, there is no such difference in moral tendencies. On the one hand

this theory questioned the notion that some people have an intrinsically greater moral capacity than others by suggesting that morality is an environmental product: hence no one person is of greater intrinsic moral worth than anyone else. On the other hand it had the effect of relieving people of moral responsibility, because thoughts and actions were the result, not of will, but of circumstance.(1)

The achievement of utopia, on this view, depends on moulding human nature through the manipulation of the human environment. In the process, people can be persuaded to enjoy what they are required to do: this is deterministic freedom.

It is this concept of freedom which is attacked in the dystopias of Huxley, Zamyatin and Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky describes happiness as: having my mind made up for me, having decisions made on my behalf.(2) In Zamyatin's **We**, the choice between freedom and happiness is clear: you cannot have both at once. Happiness involves "no more meddling with good and evil", that is, no more concern with moral questions.(3) And the inhabitants of **Brave New World** were forbidden the knowledge of good and evil.(4)

What is the connection between freedom and happiness? According to Cornford, Socrates was the first philosopher to examine this question. His concern was with the spiritual nature of man, and his proper spiritual end. His examination of the ends towards which men strive led Socrates to the conclusion that happiness was the common

(1) Passmore J, **The Perfectibility of Man**, pp 163-169

(2) Elliot R, Ibid

(3) Zamyatin E, Ibid

(4) Huxley A, Ibid

denominator among the diffusion of aims, and this in turn led to the question: what is happiness? He believed that happiness is to be found in spiritual perfection, and that the means to that happiness is spiritual aspiration. The search for spiritual perfection must be conducted on an individual basis because beliefs are not worthwhile unless substantiated by personal experience. So the means to happiness is moral autonomy.(1)

It should be noted at this point that in spite of his individualist and responsible approach to the pursuit of happiness/perfection, Socrates seems to have tacitly assumed a uniform end: our individual search will lead us to a conclusion which we will hold in common with all other seekers. However, Socrates avoided the pitfalls of a final solution by saying that he himself was in the position of seeker, not discoverer.

Conversely, the determinist view of happiness seems to be that of contentment or satisfaction. (The difference between the two types of happiness is illustrated by J S Mill's remark 'better Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied'. There is a qualitative similarity between the happiness of the determinists and that of the utilitarians.) Happiness/contentment will be threatened if people have to make their own decisions with regard the rightness or wrongness of thoughts and actions. Hence, in the interests of the pursuit of perfection, responsibility for decision making must be taken over by somebody or something other than the majority of human beings. This is also true, to greater and lesser degrees, of Plato and Marx.

In sum: in addition to the conflict between freedom and perfection, a second conflict emerges, which is also part of the first - that is, the conflict between happiness as a sort of passive contentment, and happiness as spiritual aspiration.

(1) Cornford F, **Before and After Socrates**, pp 34-35

Passmore notes that any analysis of human perfection depends first on an analysis of human nature.(1) Berlin remarks that any theory which removes the responsibility of choice from individuals rests on a profoundly mistaken view of the deepest human needs. The deepest human need is the need for choice; determinism effectively eliminates choice because it assumes that beliefs and actions are determined by causal antecedents.(2) Popper urges us not to succumb to the temptation to rely on others and so be happy.(3) He writes of the importance of having faith in men, and faith in human reason and freedom.(4) The use of the word 'faith' in this context is significant. Morality is not a science and is therefore, like the existence of God, not falsifiable. If we are to believe in the moral capacity of ourselves and our fellow men, it involves, as does belief in God, an act of faith, which is not based on positive knowledge, because we are dealing with the unknowable.

I would like to briefly detail the position as follows: the type of belief in the nature of man decides the type of perfection which can be achieved, and how that perfection is to be achieved. According to the utopianists cited above, and also according to those authors who adhere to the determinist view, the rational and moral ability of the average person is limited. Hence he or she requires an accordingly limited amount of freedom in which to exercise this inconsiderable moral capacity. The good life for such people, therefore, is a type of life which, among other things, requires a minimum of decision making and personal responsibility (this is not, however, true of Marx's utopia), and the method of achieving the good life must be left to those people, who for one reason or another, assume positions of leadership. (Again, this is not entirely true of the Marxian means to the communist utopia, although certainly it is true of Lenin).

(1) Passmore J, op cit, p 280
(2) Berlin I, op cit, p 1xii
(3) Popper K, op cit, p 201
(4) Ibid, p 188

According to, for instance, Popper and Berlin, the nature of man is unknowable. Hence we cannot come to any final conclusions about his abilities or his needs, and nor can we construct a perfect society because we do not know what perfection is. Nevertheless, the above authors add a very important rider, involving an act of faith: we must believe that people have sufficient rational/moral ability to give them the right to make their own decisions with regard significant areas of their lives, and consequently that they have a corresponding right to the conditions of freedom which will allow them to make these decisions.

In conclusion: because perfection is unknowable, any system of perceived perfection involves eliminating or ignoring other perceptions; hence utopia is by definition totalitarian. However, the fact that human nature cannot be proved to be one thing or another does not mean that we cannot, by an act of faith, believe that human beings are moral, rational and responsible, and that they deserve to be treated as such. At this point, the utopian paradox seems to be that a belief in perfection involves a concomitant pessimism about the abilities of the average human being.

Before exploring the utopian paradox in the works of Plato and Marx, I would like to look at its opposite: the liberal paradox.

SECTION TWO

CASE STUDIES

CHAPTER 4

THE LIBERAL PARADOX

The liberal paradox can be defined, **mutatis mutandis**, as the opposite of the utopian paradox, namely, that a lack of belief in the existence of absolute perfection is associated with a conviction that it is important to believe in the rational and moral ability of the individual. Both paradoxes are founded on the conflict between freedom and perfection. In the utopian version, human beings have to be traduced, in one way or another, towards perfection, and hence there is a loss of freedom. In the liberal version, there is no such thing as finite perfection, and therefore human beings should have as much freedom to follow their own inclinations as is compatible with living in society. In the former version, a belief in perfection coexists with a pessimistic view of human abilities. In the latter version, a lack of belief in any ultimate perfection coexists with an optimistic view of human abilities. In both versions, these contradictions result in some logical inconsistencies.

I propose to briefly examine some of the inconsistencies in liberalism before going on to the utopian paradox. These can be divided into two categories:

1 The implications of moral relativity (as derived from the rejection of absolute standards).

2 The manner in which this relativity is applied in public policy.

On the matter of morality, the liberal position is found in the conviction that there is no absolute moral truth. J S Mill remarks of those people who believe in absolutes that,

"To refuse a hearing to an opinion because they are sure that it is false is to assume that their certainty is the same thing as absolute certainty."(1)

From what Mill says it seems that the fallibility of human beings makes absolute truth elusive. If there is an absolute truth, we are too fallible to perceive it, and hence we do not have the right to inflict our flawed judgements on other people. (It is interesting to note that, on the subject of revealed religious truth, Mill suggests that God's intention was not to present us with a moral blueprint, but merely to give us some guidelines through the teachings of Christ. In this way he refutes the claim that Christian morality is absolute).(2)

If there is no such thing as finite moral truth, then moral decisions are based on present circumstance and feeling, and have no long term significance. Effectively, this means that morality is relative. But the liberal does not wish to accept the implications of moral relativism, that is, that morality **per se** is not valuable. If morality is relative, moral decision making has no absolute value either. It is a means to an end, but, as there is no discernable moral end, a moral decision is the means to another sort of end: wellbeing, perhaps, or happiness. But the liberal wishes to maintain the value of moral decision making because one of the most fundamental liberal convictions is that the individual is an end in himself, and not just the means to some end exterior to himself. If the individual is valuable in himself, then his capacities are valuable in as much as they are exercised for his benefit.

(1) Mill J S, **On Liberty**, p 77

(2) Ibid, p 114

Here we have two different concepts: on the one hand, the capacity to make decisions regarding morality, and on the other hand, morality itself. If morality is not valuable **per se**, the significance of having moral capacity is accordingly reduced. There is no intrinsic merit in the individual's capacity for moral choice: he is left with instrumental merit in that he may be able to make moral decisions of some benefit to himself (for instance, as mentioned above, decisions which lead to an increase in well-being, or happiness.)

In opposition to this, it could be said that an individual's moral capacity benefits him in the sense that he becomes a better person through the process of choice. But it could then be asked: what is meant by 'better'? One idea of what is better may be quite different to another idea, and there is no final standard against which different ideas may be judged. If 'better' as a quality does not exist (and it is difficult to see how, if 'best' does not exist, either 'good' or 'better' can exist), then not only morality, but also the capacity for moral choice, are lacking in value.

Consequently, lacking the moral end, liberty becomes an end in itself. This has been remarked of both Mill and Rawls. Himmelfarb in her introduction to **On Liberty**, notes that the immediate and direct effect of Mill's doctrine was to make liberty rather than truth paramount.(1) Haksar claims that, to Rawls, autonomy is valuable in itself.

"Rawls brings in perfectionism through the back door; the view that an autonomous life is an essential part of human well-being is a kind of perfectionism."(2)

(1) Mill J S, op cit, p 31

(2) Haksar V, op cit, p 161

It seems, therefore, that in his efforts to deny the existence of absolute morality, the liberal has to some extent defeated himself. He has removed the notion of an intrinsically valuable morality, only to substitute that of an intrinsically valuable liberty. It could be argued that liberty only has substantive value when accompanied by a belief that absolute morality **may** exist, and if it is to be discovered, will only be discovered under conditions of liberty. This is illustrated in **On Liberty** when Mill writes that:

"If the lists are kept open, we may hope that, if there be a better truth, it will be found when the human mind is capable of receiving it; and in the meantime we may rely on having attained such approach to truth as is possible in our own day.(1)

It could be concluded that liberalism is not, in fact compatible with the rejection of absolute perfection, because such a rejection leads to a dismissal of the value of moral decision making. It may,however, be compatible with the tentative pursuit of an elusive perfection which is possible only under conditions of liberty.

The above suggestion may apply to the theory of J S Mill, but is less easily applied to more recent exponents of liberalism; Popper, for instance, says that to talk of perfection, or of absolute moral standards, is as unscientific as it is to talk of fixed or immutable scientific laws. The only certainty, as far as one can be certain of anything, is change.(2) Bearing in mind Popper's rejection of historicism, it seems likely that rejection of absolute morality or absolute perfection would be for similar reasons. Absolute moral standards suggest that these standards have been created by somebody or something exterior to, and more powerful than, ourselves; thus we

(1) Mill J S, op cit, p 81

(2) Magee B **Popper**, p 90

are unable to alter them. According to Popper, morality is valuable, not because it is absolute, but because we,as human beings, have created it. When it undergoes change, it continues to be valuable, because we have changed it. Morality is thus relative to human beings and, by implication, to their ever-changing circumstances. Popper denies that this means that morals are aribitrary. On the contrary they are the result of human creativity.(1) The question which arises from this explanation of what makes morality valuable is: if morality is valuable simply because it is the result of human creativity, then surely anything which is the result of human creativity must be equally valuable? This brings us back to the liberal paradox outlined above. It is evident that Popper places greater value on some activities than he does on others. For instance, he places an extremely high value on the critical activity.(2) This leads to the conclusion that the best sort of person is that person who fully exercises his or her critical faculties; but, a close adherence to Popper's moral theory would prevent us from using the word 'best' in anything but a limited and short-term way. Yet is is unlikely that Popper thinks criticism, as an activity, to be of limited, short-term value only.

To conclude: if liberty is the means to the development of the critical faculties, then either the development of such faculties is an end in itself, which suggests that some sort of judgement with regard ultimate values has been made, or it is a means to another end, in which case we may justifiably ask what that end is.

In sum: the liberal, while wishing to stipulate the means, is reluctant to define the end. This is also reflected in the formulation of public policy with regard competing lifestyles.

(1) Popper, op cit, p 65

(2) Popper K, **The Open Society and Its Enemies**, Vol 2, p 376

One of the prime tasks of any liberal government is to treat its individual citizens as ends in themselves, and not as means to other ends, for example, policy objectives. Consequently, a liberal government must, according to Connolly, treat all its citizens with equal concern and respect. The government is supposed to be neutral on what might be called the question of the good life.(1) Political policy should not be guided by any particular conception of the good life. This is because conceptions vary between citizens, and to prefer a particular conception would be to neglect to treat them all with equal respect. Hence one of the principles of liberalism is support of the contention that all lifestyles have an equal right to exist, and that no one lifestyle should be promoted at the expense of another. Tolerance is therefore a primary component of liberalism. It also provides an area of contradiction.

Williams points to what he calls a logically unhappy connection between a non-relative morality of toleration, and a view of morality as relative.(2) In the context of this discussion, this means that within the confines of each lifestyle exists a morality which is relative to that lifestyle, but the relationship between one lifestyle and another must be guided by a non-relative or absolute morality of tolerance. We are then justified in asking what criterion is being used when it is declared that tolerance is better than intolerance. After all, we are not permitted to say that one lifestyle is better than another, yet one of those lifestyles could conceivably be less tolerant in its internal workings than the others.

(1) Connolly W, **Appearance and Reality in Politics**, pp 95,96

(2) Williams B, op cit, p 35

Haksar, in an attempt to solve this problem, maintains that discriminating between lifestyles is not the same as discriminating between persons. To do so is not incompatible with egalitarianism, because preferring one lifestyle to another is not the same as believing that the person who practises an inferior form of life is in himself inferior, or worthy of less consideration than others.

He suggests we adopt a system of toleration but not of equal liberties for different forms of life.(1) This is not, however, an altogether satisfactory solution. By curtailing the liberties of the person practising an 'inferior' lifestyle, we are not treating him or her with equal consideration. For instance, if we were to relieve a man of his job on account of his homosexual proclivities, and at the same time were to assure him that not he, but his lifestyle had been judged and found wanting, would he feel that this was a meaningful distinction? It seems unlikely. To distinguish between the person and the lifestyle is, in reality, more difficult than acknowledged by Haksar.

This brings me to another matter: it is evident that the homosexual lifestyle poses no major threat to the security of the state, but this is not true of all lifestyles. The liberal state is confronted with a major dilemma in the form of those persons whose lifestyles and accompanying beliefs involve them in activities aimed at overthrowing the government by force. In this case, survival is in direct conflict with tolerance. If the state is to survive it must employ illiberal methods, that is, methods which directly curtail the freedom of activity of such organisations (and thus, in parenthesis, 'proving' the anarchist contention that all government is, in the final analysis, totalitarian). In this case, the liberal state has three options:

(1) Haksar V, op cit, p 291

1 It opts for tolerance rather than survival, and consequently ceases to exist.
2 It survives for the sake of survival.
3 It declares that it is better than those organizaitons which seek to overthrow it, and survives on the grounds of superiority.

This brings me to the matter of whether liberalism is, or is not, selective where ways of life are concerned:

1 If liberalism is non-selective, upholds a relative morality, and maintains its neutrality between competing lifestyles, then it comprises a set of beliefs which are without moral foundation, and the survival of liberalism itself becomes a matter of ethical indifference.

2 If however the liberal wishes to maintain that his system is better than other systems, he must produce a moral standard which allows him to make this judgement. And in order to do so, he must have some idea of what he thinks is the best kind of system, that is to say, not only must he admit the possibility of a best system, he must also claim that, of all current systems, liberalism is the closest to that best system.

If the latter is cited as a justification of liberalism, then, effectively, liberal ideas, like utopian ideas, incorporate a belief in the attainability of perfection. The utopian says 'perfection exists and we can find it.' The liberal says 'perfection exists and perhaps we can find it'. He adds the rider that the only way it can be found is under conditions of freedom. In this case, freedom does not exist simply as a value in itself: it is a way of improving and enhancing the human condition and, as such, can be morally validated. But we are still left with the problem of the extent to which freedom of choice can be validated in the case of wrong (in the moral sense) choices. How do morally wrong choices serve to enhance the human condition? This is discussed in my concluding chapter.

CHAPTER 5

THE PARADOX IN PLATO'S REPUBLIC

There are two major elements in this survey: the utopian paradox in the **Republic**, and the contradictions contained in some of the liberal criticism of Plato's **Republic**

The Liberal Criticisms of Plato's Republic

As mentioned in the chapter immediately preceding this one, the liberal attitude is that there is no such thing as moral knowledge, and that therefore nothing can be judged as substantively good or bad. This attitude coexists uneasily with the liberal conviction that tolerance, that is, of other people's opinions and lifestyles, is an absolute good. This is reflected in criticism of Plato's **Republic**, which has been attacked on two main grounds:

1 There is no such thing as moral knowledge, and Plato is wrong, both to postulate its existence and also to erect a utopia on an inaccurate assumption.

2 Totalitarianism (elements of which are to be found in Plato's **Republic**) is wrong.

Bamborough refers obliquely to this dilemma when he notes that the liberal attack on Plato is based on moral grounds, that is, anti-authoritarianism. But a little later he mentions that Plato's critics wrongly conclude that there is no such thing as moral knowledge.(1) The thrust of his argument is directed against what he perceives to be the incorrect assumption that if moral knowledge does exist it will weigh heavily on the side of authoritarianism, and that therefore both concepts have to be dismissed together.

At this point I would like to briefly examine what Plato means by moral knowledge. Cornford remarks that

"For the saviour of society, the one thing needful is a certain and immediate knowledge of values, the ends which all life, private or public, should realise."(2)

But later he notes that

"Socrates refuses to define this supreme good. The apprehension of it is rather to be thought of as a revelation which can only follow upon a long intellectual training".(3)

'Revealed' knowledge is knowledge disclosed to man by divine or supernatural agency. It seems that in the final analysis true knowledge of the good is arrived at independently of reason.

Annas notes that the type of person who can achieve true knowledge must have, not only intelligence, but also moral sensitivity.(4) It is, I assume, the latter quality which is primarily important in the matter of receptiveness to revelation. Knowledge, therefore, is

(1) Bambrough R, "Plato's Modern Friends and Enemies" **Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy** (July 1971)

(2) Cornford F M, **The Republic of Plato**, p 206

(3) Ibid, p 206

(4) Annas J, **An Introduction to Plato's Republic**, p 284

ultimately based on a sort of moral intuition, and so it is not surprising that Socrates refused to describe it. Knowledge is deductive; it is based on intuition backed up by abstract reasoning. Annas remarks that to Plato the truths of philosophical thinking do not depend on experience and are known a priori without reference to experience.(1) Nevertheless, according to Annas, Plato does not deny the existence, nor, within appropriate limits, the validity of particular truths. In an imperfect world, which is in a constant state of change, particular truths are relative to changing circumstances. Commitment to a particular truth is a matter of belief, and belief itself concerns changing, impermanent things. It is not the function of the person who has true knowledge to dismiss particular beliefs: it is his function to understand them, and to see them in context, and this is possible because he is operating on a meta-level. Relative truths vary according to person and circumstance; absolute truth, on the other hand, applies impartially and without distinction to everyone. It cannot be changed to fit individual requirements. It is at this point that Annas makes what is effectively a moral judgement of the Platonic idea of absolute truth. She says that this reveals Plato's lack of interest in individual worth or self-development.(2) But as I see it, the question is not the extent to which Plato considers, or does not consider, the individual: the complete impartiality of good is simply a logical extention of the notion that good is absolute. The question is whether or not absolute good exists. By making moral knowledge a matter of intuition, Plato has dispensed with the necessity for objective proof of its existence. Certain results follow from this.

(1) Annas J, op cit, p 279

(2) Ibid, p 279

Firstly, it can be said that if, in the final analysis, truth is arrived at intuitively, rather than through a process of reasoning, this means that the truth can never be fully described, and therefore any statement concerning truth is, in this sense, incoherent. Consquently, utopian institutions, no matter how clearly or precisely described, rest on a foundation which cannot itself be described with any clarity. This is not to say that absolute truth does not exist; but, until it can be described, nothing can be constructed, with any certainty, on its presumed existence. Like J S Mill, we must ask that the lists be kept open - perhaps until such time as the truth is revealed to everyone, and not just to a few people who are incapable of describing it, because it is indescribable.

Secondly, it can be said, with Popper, that there never have been, and never will be, any absolute standards. And we cannot objectively prove the existence of something that does not exist. Magee remarks that, according to Popper, our knowledge is of its nature provisional, and permanently so; further, to attempt to prove the truth of a theory is to attempt the logically impossible.(1)

According to Magee, Popper's attitude towards moral standards can be summed up in the following way: in the history of the development of human ideas, expectation is prior to observational experience. The primal expectation is survival: we are born with an expectation of survival, and this pre-exists our observations. Survival presents a problem, and therefore Popper sees evolution as the history of problem solving. Man is born into a world which contains institutions which are the result of attempts at problem solving. They are not a result of conscious planning but are an unintended consequence of need. These institutions constitute world 3 which is to be distinguished from the objective world of material things and the subjective world of minds. Because world 3 is an unintended consequence of need it is a non-moral world, and hence arguments about the morality, or otherwise of institutions, are unproductive.

(1) Magee B, op cit, pp 26,27

The only criterion which can be used is the extent to which any given institution is successful in its task of problem solving. For this reason Popper wants societies which are conducive to problem solving, that is, critical societies.

"Regardless of any moral considerations (and it is of the highest importance to grasp this) he believes that a society organised on such lines will be more effective at solving problems".(1)

Popper, it seems, thinks that a free society is more efficient, not more moral, than a dictatorship. but later on Magee says Popper has shown

"that the heart has reason on its side."(2)

Considering what has gone before, this is a controversial statement. Magee has claimed that Popper prefers a free society to a totalitarian one on purely utilitarian grounds: a free society is more efficient in the matter of problem solving. Consequently, the sentence quoted above seems inappropriate. It suggests that Popper is making two incompatible claims: he is dispensing with moral judgement, relying instead on utility, but he at the same time claims that what is more efficient is also morally preferrable. Hence his criticism of the Platonic utopia would be that it was not only inefficient, because uncritical, but also morally inferior to a free society. Considering his insistence on the non-moral nature of world 3, that is of problem solving institutions, the introduction of moral judgement could be taken to suggest either of two things.

First, in a general sense, it may simply not be possible to present a credible political argument which is based on utility alone. An essay by Taylor is enlightening in an examination of this matter.

(1) Magee B, op cit, p 74

(2) Ibid, p 77

Taylor looks at the claim that findings about facts are neutral, and that facts do not support any given values. He aims to question this relationship between fact and value:

"In particular my aim is to call into question the view that the findings of political science leave us, as it were, as free as before, that they do not go some way to establishing particular sets of values and undermining others."(1)

Taylor goes on, by way of a number of case studies, to examine the relationship between the theoretical framework of a given text and the conclusion, or set of conclusions, which emerge from this framework. For example, he notes of Almond, in his book **Politics of the Developing Areas**, that in characterizing different institutions by the way they articulate or aggregate interests, Almond is also evaluating them.(2) Almond comes to the conclusion that a society with free circulation produces a more efficient system of interest articulation than its opposite number. As a result of his examination of selected texts, Taylor maintains that there is a connection between a given framework of explanation and a certain schedule of needs, wants and purposes.(3)

If Taylor's thesis is true of Almond's structural functionalism, then it is true of Popper's emphasis on instrumental rationality. Popper characterizes different institutions according to the way in which they cope with problem solving, and comes to the conclusion that a society in which ideas circulate freely is more efficient at solving problems. While it would be difficult to quarrel with the claim that survival constitutes a major social preoccupation, Popper's solution

(1) Taylor C, in Laslett P & Runciman W, **Philosophy, Politics and Society**, p 27

(2) Ibid, p 43

(3) Ibid, p 41

to the quesiton of survival, that is, the application of instrumental rationality, is, in fact, one among a number of alternative views of what society is for, or how it should best conduct itself. In so far as we endorse Popper's view, we exclude others, and hence a judgement of value has been made. Even Popper's initial and apparently most utilitarian premise involves the selection of certain values and the rejection of others.

Secondly, in a more specific sense, it seems possible that the matter of freedom **vs** authoritarianism involves an issue which is ultimately a moral issue, and which cannot be adequately judged on utilitarian grounds. This issue is, I think, represented by Popper's concern for the individual. For example, Popper concentrates on individuals and their right to make their own choices and decisions, in contrast to Plato's discussion of the good society as a whole without reference to particular individuals. Popper describes Plato's producer class as "Human cattle".(1) Annas does not agree that the producers are human cattle because, as long as they do not try to take power for themselves, they can do more or less as they like. But she does add that their lives contain "no basis for self respect."(2) She concludes that Plato does not place any value in notions of shared humanity which uphold most theories of rights. Similarly Popper refers, with obvious approval, to the belief that there is nothing more important in our life than other individual men, and the belief that we should respect others and ourselves.(3)

The liberal attitude towards the individual is that he/she is an end in himself/herself. It is hard to see how this fundamental liberal principle fits in with utilitarian notions. (For instance, in the light of the importance of rational solutions to the problem of human survival, it may be useful to eliminate a number of unproductive individuals.) At this point it is possible to draw together some

(1) Popper K, op cit, p 47
(2) Annas J, op cit, p 174
(3) Popper K, op cit, p 190

threads of liberal thinking and its critique of totalitarianism. As noted earlier, liberalism tends to think of tolerance as an absolute good; lacking absolute moral standards, tolerance of other people and their lifestyles, and the freedom attendant upon this, becomes a good in itself. This apparently contradictory (bearing in mind the rejection of absolute notions of good) insistence on the fundamental correctness of tolerance can be linked with the conviction that the individual is an end in himself/herself, and can therefore not be treated as a means to an exterior end, for instance, social survival.

So liberalism, despite its definition of absolute standards as ultimately totalitarian, has retained for itself the right to make an absolute judgement with regard the manner in which the individual should be treated. And this, in my opinion, is one of the fundamental inconsistencies of liberalism: you cannot dismiss the objective validity of all absolute judgements except one. On this matter, Plato, unlike his liberal critics, is at least consistent.

To sum up: Plato claims that absolute standards do exist, but that it is possible to comprehend these standards on a deductive basis only. They cannot be known inductively; furthermore, they cannot be described to the uninitiated because, in the final analysis, they are a matter of revelation. This is unsatisfactory because it means that Plato's notion of absolute truth is incoherent. Consquently his utopia is based on standards which he is unable to describe. This is bound to undermine the credibility of any utopia, no matter how carefully or clearly presented.

Nevertheless, assuming that we are prepared to admit the possibility that absolute truth does exist, there is nothing logically wrong with Plato's insistence that it is impartial, and cannot be adjusted to

suit individual cases. But there is something wrong, bearing in mind the liberal rejection of absolute good, with the conviction that the individual is an end in himself/herself, and has absolute rights based on this conviction. This is inconsistent.

I would therefore like to examine some other areas of contradiction in Plato's utopian theory where he can be criticized without inconsistency. To do this I must return to my definition of a utopian paradox, that is, that a belief in the possibility of perfection involves a concomitant pessimism about the abilities of the average human being. The totalitarian element in the Platonic utopia is not so much a product of the belief in absolute standards (absolute convictions are not in themselves totalitarian) but rather a product of the imposition (or proposed imposition) of the beliefs of a small group of individuals on the rest of society. At this point it could be asked: what are the reasons for criticizing Plato's intention to impose perfection on those people who have been judged to be incapable of grasping it for themselves, unless the critic is going to condemn coercion as morally wrong? In reply, I think that is is possible to criticize Plato here without necessarily adopting a particular set of moral attitudes. There are two reasons for this: firstly, what are the grounds of Plato's pessimism concerning the abilities of the average individual? And secondly, setting his pessimism aside, will the element of coercion not change the nature of utopia?

The Paradox in Plato's Republic

The uneasy coexistence of two beliefs in utopian thought has been noted in previous chapters, that is, the conviction that the rational and moral abilities of the average person are limited, and a conviction that it would not be impossible to achieve the perfect society on earth. This latter belief is grounded in the existence of absolute standpoints against which progress towards perfection may be measured. Further, there are in society a number of people who are capable of comprehending the nature of these absolute criteria, and consequently it is their task to begin and maintain the momentum of general social progress towards perfection. However, as the mass of people are incapable of understanding absolute truth, a certain amount of coercion will be necessary if utopia is to be achieved. As a result both the journey to utopia, and utopia itself, are characterized by a loss of freedom for the majority of people. As they are judged to be incapable of making the right decisions, they are not allowed to take any life-affecting action of their own accord: such activity is the prerogative of those who possess superior rational ability. In effect this means that one man's utopia may may be another man's nightmare, and this is one of the problems which Plato tries to resolve in the **Republic**. It is in the process of trying to establish a utopia in which everyone is happy, but in which the power to control society is restricted to a few, that some major contradictions emerge.

What are the grounds of Plato's pessimism? To examine this we must look at the content of his views. Plato believes that the majority of people are weak in two major areas, namely, in the areas of moral and rational capacity. These weaknesses make it impossible for them to reach a situation of perfection of their own volition. He gives, in the **Republic**, a number of illustrations of what he thinks.

(1) Cornford F M, op cit, p 226
(2) Ibid, pp 222-226
(3) Annas J, op cit, p 253

"If they could lay hands on the man who was trying to set them free and lead them up, they would kill him."(1)

This is taken from the Allegory of the Cave, in which ordinary human life is compared to existence in a cave, in which the only light is artificial (fire as opposed to sun) and perceptions are restricted to observing the shadows of puppets on a wall. The man who wishes to view reality has to make the painful journey from the cave to the outside world, where he is initially blinded and dismayed by the light of the sun. Should he survive this ordeal, he will find that his fellows not only do not wish to follow him out of the cave, but are also prepared to kill him for disturbing their superficial and unthinking existence.(2)

Annas notes that the Cave presents us with

"Plato's darkest and most pessimistic picture of the state of those not enlightened by philosophy. They are helpless and passive, manipulated by others. Worse, they are used to their state and like it, resisting efforts to free them from it."(3)

Plato's description of the people in the Cave is echoed by his description of democratic man:

"He spends his days indulging the pleasures of the moment ... Every now and then he takes a part in politics, leaping to his feet to say or do whatever comes into his head ... His life is subject to no order or restraint, and he has no wish to exchange an existence which he calls pleasant, free and happy."(4)

(1) Cornford F M, op cit, p 226

(2) Ibid,pp 222-226

(3) Annas J, op cit, p 253

(4) Cornford F M, op cit, p 280

Considering that these examples present us with a rather extreme view of the character and abilities of the average person, we are entitled to ask why Plato thinks this way. In reply, he explains that the individual soul is divided into three parts: reason, temperance and desire; desire, which concerns a self-interested need to fulfil immediate requirements, forms the largest component in the souls of most people. Only those whose souls are composed largely of reason - the Guardians - are capable of seeing beyond self-interest, and therefore only they are capable of ruling in the long-term interests of society as a whole. This tripartite division of the soul is Plato's basis for an analysis of individual capacities, and as such, constitutes a fanciful illustration of his prejudices, rather than a reasoned account of why he holds these views. Annas' comment is that

"He commits himself without argument to the anti-democratic thesis that the citizens with the wisdom that will make it well-governed will be the smallest class in the city."(1)

The extent to which his thesis is anti-democratic is not, I think, the point. The point is that Plato is either unwilling or unable to prove his thesis; he simply takes its validity for granted, and asks us to commit ourselves to a society in which the powerlessness of the majority is officially sanctioned, on the basis of an unproved assumption.

(1) Annas J, op cit, p 113

This assumption that most people are not only limited but are also attached to their limitations, and would not voluntarily give them up, leads quite naturally to the need for coercion in achieving a perfect society. In the section on the luxurious state Plato announces that the Guardians will not allow the producers to enter other professions.(1) This is the first note of overt authoritarianism in the **Republic**, and Annas points out that it is worth noting that one of the most controversial features of Plato's moral philosophy rests entirely on unargued assumption.(2) In fact, Plato's introduction does not appear, as it were, out of the blue. It is the logical extension of his analysis described above. If his analysis is correct then it is quite possible, if not probable, that authoritarian techniques would provide the only workable solution. The question, then, does not so much concern the introduction of coercion **per se**, but instead should concentrate on Plato's reason for introducing it, namely, his 'analysis' of human nature.

Finally, how does Plato solve the problem of the mutual incompatability of utopia and coercion?

To begin with, he is, as Annas points out, unclear on the extent to which coercion will be employed. She notes that Plato presents a contradictory view of the producers: at times he appears to see them as naturally deferential, in which case social harmony is unforced, and at other times he sees them as naturally hostile, thus requiring that the Guardians resort to forceful methods. Annas says that Plato never seems to make up his mind between the two: hence it is difficult to know exactly what degree of force will be used in order to achieve the perfect state.(3)

(1) Cornford F M, op cit, p61

(2) Annas J, op cit, p 79

(3) Ibid, p 117

Having noted that Plato is unclear about the extent of coercion to be used, there are two main ways in which he proposes to reconcile the producers to their lot in life, and to ensure that utopia does represent the good life as far as they are concerned.

The first is the system of education which introduces behaviourist techniques to utopia.

"And the beginning, as you know,is always the most important part in dealing with anything young and tender. This is the time when the character is being moulded, and easily takes any impress one may wish to stamp on it."(1)

The happiness of the citizens of the Platonic utopia is not, therefore, spontaneous, but is a matter of careful and sustained conditioning. Effectively this means that the characteristic of amorality, that is, the inability to distinguish between right and wrong actions, will be deliberately fostered through the use of educational techniques. This seems a strange fate for the majority of the inhabitants of an explicitly moral utopia.

The second method for the maintenance of happiness and harmony is the 'Noble Lie', that is, the metal myth. This myth, foreshadowing Plato's division of the soul into three parts, traces the origin of the human race to a combination of minerals mixed by the gods. The men of gold are fitted to rule, the men of silver to fight, and the men of brass to work. Plato suggests that the Guardians should

"appeal to a prophecy that ruin will come upon the state when it passes into the keeping of a man of iron or brass."(2)

(1) Cornford F M, op cit, p 67

(2) Ibid, p 104

Annas describes the Noble Lie as a myth of identity, which, she says, all states have.(1) However, the Noble Lie is rather more than this: it is a myth which legitimizes inequality in the minds of the citizens of the state, and which, like a behaviourist education, is aimed at creating internal sanctions against disobedience, thus reducing the need for external sanctions.

A particularly puzzling element of the myth is Plato's suggestion that the Guardians should be encouraged to believe it as well. A functionally convenient lie, inserted in the course of a search for truth, would surely have the effect of at least partially negating the validity of that process? Annas skates lightly over this problem, remarking that

"the rulers are thought of as believing the myth on a rather different level from the others."(2)

This does nothing to clear up a substantial anomaly in Plato's attitude towards the search for true knowledge. If utopia is divorced from its moral basis, and presented simply as a utilitarian answer to social problems, using a Noble Lie to enhance its popular acceptability is appropriate. But if utopia is presented, as indeed Plato does present it, as an ethical solution, then the Noble Lie assumes the proportions of a major inconsistency.

In conclusion: as a result of Plato's pessimistic attitude with regard human abilities, he attempted to 'eliminate caprice' among a small section of preferred citizenry. This enabled him to construct a blueprint in which the majority of his citizens were supervised into utopia by an elite group of Guardians, whose 'sheep dog' position in

(1) Annas J, op cit, p 108

(2) Ibid, p 108

society was the result of superior, potential combined with an education calculated to determine their thinking and behaviour. The Guardians were as determined, in their own way, as the rest of society, because they were also to believe in the Noble Lie, that is, the myth on which utopia was based. The Platonic utopia was one in which happiness was of the deterministic variety. This was the result of moulding human nature through the manipulation of the human environment. In the process, people can be persuaded to enjoy what they are required to do, this is deterministic freedom.

The success of the system therefore depends on the extent to which the human environment is successfully manipulated. Should Plato's blueprint prove unable to completely eliminate the possibility of the emergence of human error among his Guardian class, should there be a breakdown in the process of persuading people to enjoy what they are required to do, then his utopia would cease to exist as such, and would become just another system controlled by a ruling elite in which the majority of the citizens were deprived of all political power. Hence the essential frailty of the Platonic utopa **per se.**

CHAPTER 6

THE MARXIAN PARADOX

Before going on to an examination of the contradictions in Marx's thinking, I will give a brief description of the main aspects of his analysis of the way in which change and progress take place in human history. Marx is variously described as a historical materialist and as a dialectical materialist. As a historical materialist he believed in a science of history, that is, as treating history as understandable in a systematic way. As a dialectical materialist he believed that understanding history in a systematic way involved the use of the dialectic. Marx inherited the dialectic from Hegel, but adapted it to suit the way in which he believed that change occurred: he claimed to have turned the dialectic the right way up.

The dialectic consists of a continuing cycle of three stages, representing progress: thesis, that is, proposition; antithesis, that is denial of proposition; and synthesis which contains elements of both.

To Hegel, the dialectic consisted of ideas, because he believed that ideas alter circumstance. Marx, however, was a materialist. In his dialectic, therefore, thesis, antithesis, and synthesis represent changing conditions of material existence. Marx analysed history in terms of changing material conditions, and the way in which this brought about social and political change. Individuals express themselves through what they produce; therefore, what individuals are, depends on the material conditions of their existence.

Marx looks at production in two ways: what men produce, and how they produce it. What men produce depends on the productive forces, that is, raw material, skills and implements. How they produce depends on the production relations, that is, the way in which they organise their labour. Change takes place when, as a result of some new invention or discovery, the productive forces come into conflict with the production relations. Productive forces and production relations comprise the economic substructure, that is, the material basis of life. The superstructure consists of law, ideology, culture and religion. The composition of the superstructure is derivative: it does not lead an independent existence, and cannot be studied in isolation from material conditions. But the extent of the dependence of the superstructure on the substructure is not entirely clear, and is a source of debate among commentators on Marx. It seems that there is a dialectical relationship between ideas and material reality in that ideas are produced as a result of interaction with material circumstances, and are not directly dependent on them. Further, ideology influences the individual and imposes ideas on him, but this has to be taken in conjunction with man's capacity for divining his real situation as opposed to the rationalizations of ideology. There is therefore a tension between the ideas a man has, largely derived from society, and his awareness of the reality of his position in society. This is all part of the dialectical process.

The question is: to what extent is man capable of transcending ideology? In the **Communist Manifesto** Marx refers to

"the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole."(1)

(1)Feuer L, **Marx & Engels. Basic Writings**, p 59

It seems that the bourgeois ideologists are capable of transcending ideology, but what of other people? To what extent are they determined by ideology, which, is, in its turn, derived from material conditions? Are we justified in describing Marx as a determinist?

It has been suggested that a complete denial of determinism can be only an academic indulgence. Whether or not a philosopher may legitimately be described as a determinist depends on the **degree** to which he considers that human beliefs and actions are dependent on external factors. Social determinism is described as including all theories which seek to explain the structure and development of culture in terms of man's social environment. Marx is cited as an example of social determinism, because the mode of economic production is the key factor to cultural change. (1) It has also been noted that there have been relatively few defenders of hard determinism, most philosophers preferring instead to try reconciling determinism with morals. Marx is again cited as an example of a determinist in that, in extreme forms of the theory at least, a one-way causal relation is asserted to hold at any time between economic and non-economic factors.(2)

What is the connection between determinism and materialism? Determinism has been cited as one of the principles of materialism, and is described as the subjection of chance to law. Historical materialism is the doctrine that the mode of production determines the character of the social, political and intellectual life generally.

(1) Seligman R & Johnson A,**Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences,** pp 111-113

(2) Edwards P, **The Encyclopedia of Philosophy,** pp 368-375

Materialism therefore incorporates determinist thinking.But activism is given as one of the principles of dialectical materialism. (1) Hence dialectical materialism, unlike materialism **per se**, includes an activist aspect, and is correspondingly less determinist. The degree to which Marx is a determinist will surely depend on the nature and extent of the limitations on human activity.

In sum: in the context of this thesis, three elements of Marx's thinking are particularly significant, that is, the determinist dimension, the humanist dimension, and the dialectic.

Determinism and Humanism

Unlike Plato, Marx did not include, as an intrinsic part of his philosophy, an explicitly negative attitude concerning the abilities of the average man.

Berlin notes the effect on Marx of the 1848 revolutions in Germany.

"his conception of the intelligence and reliability of the masses and their leaders changed violently: he declared their own incurable stupidity to be a greater obstacle to their progress than capitalism itself ... In his subsequent analysis he attributed the disastrous results of the revolution ... principally to the political blindness of the infinitely gullible masses." (2)

Marx's disappointment, however, did not lead him down the Platonic path. Instead he decided that the role of the revolutionary leaders was to spread, among the masses, consciousness of their revolutionary role. He decided that the party could not act effectively if it lacked the conscious and intelligent support of the workers.

(1) Seligman R, & Johnson A, op cit, p 215

(2)Berlin I, **Karl Marx**, p 167

It seems, then, that Marx and Plato differ so widely in their assessment of the role of the average person in the achievement of utopia that there is no point in trying to discover a common theme in the form of the utopian paradox. Are there any points of similarity?

Marx, unlike Plato, did not believe in absolute moral standards. There was no such thing as an objectively true ethic. Morality, to Marx, was the subjective reflection of objective material conditions. And yet Marx was committed to the moral superiority of socialism.

Kamenka has noted that Marx attempted to give his moral distinctions the weight of logical distinctions and to claim scientific observation as back-up for his moral beliefs.(1) Another way of describing this is to say that by observing what **is**, we can discover not only what **will be**, but also what **ought** to be - because what will be and what ought to be are the same. Why did Marx contrive this uneasy combination? Why did he not simply describe socialism as the inevitable result of the laws of development? Why did socialism have to be the best possible end as well? Marx was not content with describing objective conditions, and with prophesying the future on the basis of his observations. He wanted the future to be a good one, in which people would be happy and fulfilled.

Despite the apparent lack of pessimism in Marx's thinking, there is at least one point of similarity betwen his theory and Plato's, and that is the conflict between means and ends, or more specifically, the conflict between freedom and happiness. In both theories, means which are essentially unfree are presumed to lead to a happy and perfect ending. Plato's means were discussed in the previous chapter, namely, the use of a combination of coercion and brainwashing. Marx's means, in the form of the laws of history, could also be considered to be unfree.

(1) Kamenka E, op cit, p 24

Gandhi said that the means create the end: he was referring to the use of violence as a way of achieving a desired objective. The end product of a violent revolution is a violent society because people have become habituated to the use of violence as a method of problem solving. What is the end product of determinism?

If we are the creatures of circumstance, our beliefs will reflect our circumstances. Hence we will be unable to envisage anything 'better' because we will be unable to transcend our current environment. The only way out of this condition of determinist paralysis is to allow an exception to the rule: in Marx's case 'the bourgeois ideologists' But why? And how? If consciousness is determined by life, what is it about the consciousness of the bourgeois ideologist which frees him from the determinism of life? Marx does not explain.

Even if we assume, with Marx, that there are exceptions to the determinist rule, we are still left with a problem. Change and progress, according to Marx, are the result of alterations in the economic substructure. All man can do is to take advantage of these alterations; but he cannot in any way be responsible for the alterations themselves. However, it seems that the only people capable, **on their own initiative**, of taking advantage of substructural alterations, are the bourgeois ideologists. If the rest of humanity takes advantage of historical laws, it does so at second hand, via the mediation of the bourgeois ideologists. The role of the revolutionary leaders is to be primarily that of education, or rather, re-education.

"The communists have not invented the intervention of society in education; they do but seek to alter the character of that intervention".(1)

(1) Feuer L, op cit, p 66

Marx, because of his belief in the inevitability of progress, can afford to be patient. The process of re-education will be a lengthy and laborious process,[1] but this does not matter as progress is not, in the final analysis, dependent on men.

Or is it? What role did Marx assign to man in the working out of the historical process? Two quotations, one taken from the **Theses on Feuerbach**, and the other taken from the **Communist Manifesto**, give some indication of the difficulties in trying to reconcile Marxian humanism with Marxian determinism.

"The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstance and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men that change circumstance, and that the educator himself needs educating."[2]

"Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man's ideas, views, and conceptions, in one word, man's consciousness, change with every change in the conditions of his material existence ...? What else does the history of ideas prove than that intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production is changed?"[3]

According to the first quotation, men change circumstances. According to the second quotation, circumstances change men. To what extent does man interact with his circumstances, and, in the final analysis, which plays the definitive part? Commentators on Marx's work are at odds on this question.

(1) Berlin I, op cit, p 141

(2) Feuer L, op cit, p 284

(3) Ibid, p 63

C Wright Mills maintains that Marxism is based on the humanist tradition.(1) An examination of aspects of Marx's theory of alienation substantiates this claim. Meszaros distinguishes between productive activity and alienated activity. The former is the way in which man, as subject, interacts with nature, as object. Man's relationship with nature is creative and satisfying, and allows him to be truly human. Alienated activity, on the other hand, involves the reification of man: man's products dominate, rather than serve, him. Marx objects to the nature of activity in capitalist society on the grounds that it turns man into an object, enslaved by capital which has attained the status of subject. Man, and all his human relationships, are dominated by the cash nexus; he operates in a world of atomistic individuals. As a result of his fragmentation, man looks for wholeness outside himself - at first to religion, and later, with the decline of religion, to the state. Religion and the state take over the universality which properly belongs to man. Although Marx recognises the dehumanizing effects of alienation, the terms of reference of his theory are not the categories of ought, but those of necessity. We are back with Marx's identification of fact with value. Alienation ought not to be, because it is dehumanizing. Nor, in terms of 'necessity', will it be. Which is most important? According to Meszaros, Marx's unique contribution lies in his discovery of objective processes - although his recognition of the dehumanizing effects of alienation played a very important part in the formation of his thought.(2) Yet Meszaros does not say how Marx reconciled his 'subjective' humanism with his 'objective' determinism.

According to Berlin's reading of Marx's ethical theory the only sense in which it is possible to show that something is right or wrong, is by demonstrating that it accords or discords with the historical process.(3)

(1) Wright Mills C, **The Marxists**, p 21

(2) Meszaros I, **Marx' Theory of Alienation**, pp 63-81

(3) Berlin I, op cit, p 148

On this view there is nothing **wrong** with alienated activity, because it accords with the process of capitalism. It would only be wrong if implemented in a society in which the relations of production were those of cooperation rather than those of competition. 'Wrong' in this sense seems to mean 'inappropriate', that is, out of economic context.

Berlin remarks that Marx detested romanticism, emotionalism and humanitarianism of every kind.(1) Yet he also says that Marx was a rationalist and a perfectibilian. However, he claims that Marx was a rationalist in that

"he believed that society is inevitably progressive, ... each successive stage represents development, is nearer the rational ideal than its precursors."(2)

The rationality in which Marx believed was that of the laws of history, and not that of men. Men are only rational in so far as they are able to comprehend, and work with, the laws of history. Marx, according to Berlin, did not believe in the power of rational argument to influence action.(3)

Hook claims that Marx believed in the dignity, rationality and courage of man. His reason for this claim is that Marx required the proletariat to be educated into revolution rather than forced into it by a coup d'etat.(4) This is not, I think, adequate ground for postulating Marx's belief in the dignity and rationality of man. For, as noted above, Marx could afford to be patient, bearing in mind his belief in the inevitable progress of society. Hook defined the Marxian conception of dignity as striving to master one's own fate.

(1) Berlin I, op cit, p 10

(2) Ibid, p 30

(3) Ibid

(4) Hook S, **Marx and the Marxists**, p 57

This is a complete contradiction of the determinist position. Hook acknowledges Marx's determinism when he notes that socialism cannot exist if the correct objective conditions do not emerge.(1)

On this reading of Hook, it is difficult to see the relevance of the presumed rationality and courage of man if he has no control over the emergence of objective conditions. These are laudable qualities, but functionally useless. Why, then, does Marx bother to attribute such qualities to man if they have no useful part to play in the achievement of utopia? Hook, although he remarks that Marx's moral assumptions cannot be plausibly interpreted in terms of the theory of historical materialism (2) does not examine the function of these moral assumptions. Perhaps their function was primarily negative, that is, they served to highlight a picture of capitalism as a moral desert, and thus helped in the formation of a sense of revolutionary outrage. It is difficult to be passionate about determinism. It would be difficult to encourage the workers to man the barricades with cries of 'It doesn't matter anyway, because you are the helpless creatures of circumstances beyond your control'. Any sense of revolutionary fervour is predicated on the belief that one can do something to change society, that one is active, not acted upon, in the historical process. Perhaps Marx's subjective humanism, described by Meszaros as playing an important part in the formation of his thought (3) later became, with the development of Marxist determinism, no more than a strategy - a way of whipping up a type of emotion not normally associated with determinist beliefs. It seems to me that the emotion most appropriately associated with determinism would be apathy. Yet the **Communist Manifesto**, one of Marx's later works, and therefore technically part of his determinist period, is a highly emotive document - a clarion call to arms.

(1) Hook S, **Marx and the Marxists**, pp 16 -18

(2) Ibid, p 57

(3) Meszaros I, op cit, p 64

Popper claims that

"Marx's condemnation of capitalism is fundamentally a moral condemnation. **The system is condemned** because by forcing the exploiter to enslave the exploited it robs both of their freedom."(1)

But how can one apply moral condemnation to a system, which, acording to Marx, is the result of irresistable historical laws? Popper himself describes Marx as an adherent of the false belief that a rigidly scientific method must be based on a rigid determinism.(2) Determinism, especially rigid determinism, is the converse of free will. Can one condemn, as morally wrong, a system which is the result, not of will, but of circumstance? Subsequently, Popper describes Marx as having a partly determinist and partly libertarian view of human activities.(3) How can an adherent of rigid determinism be at the same time partly determinist?

It is interesting to note that Popper's criticism of Marx is considerably less trenchant than his criticism of Plato. At times it almost seems that Marx is on the side of the Angels. Marx, he says, was essentially a lover of freedom.(4) Marx is rapped over the knuckles for his determinist tendencies, but congratulated for his feeling of social responsibility.(5)

I return to my question, stated above: to what extent does man interact with his circumstances, and, in the final analysis, which plays the definitive part?

(1) Popper K, op cit, p 199
(2) Ibid, pp 34,35
(3) Ibid, p 105
(4) Popper K, op cit, p 103
(5) Ibid, p 21

Popper describes a contradictory position (Marx's) without examining the extent to which determinism and libertarianism are compatible. If Marx is rigidly determinist, then his apparent humanism is merely cosmetic: a concession to delicate liberal sensibilities.

One way of attempting to clarify the position is to examine Marx's ideas with regard the nature of man.

Marx's Concept of Human Nature

Marx dismissed the analysis of the 'true socialists', namely that one of man's characteristics was a fundamental sense of justice and that therefore he was susceptible to rational argument. On the other hand Marx did not say that man was unjust and irrational: any analysis which claimed the existence of universal human qualities, whether good or bad, was a subjective analysis. There is no such thing as an original human nature.[1] While it is true that man has certain fixed biological drives (survival, reproduction), his behaviour and beliefs vary according to the nature of the society in which he lives.

Is man therefore a **tabula rasa**? Marx's opinion on this is unclear. It seems that man has limitless potential. But is this potentiality, in effect, a set of formless drives which are only given direction by society? Society is the product of the combination of the forces of production and the relations of production, which are in turn the product of historical laws over which man has no control. We are back with determinism.

(1) Berlin I, op cit, p 144

Is man a rational creature? Berlin notes that for Marx, man is potentially wise, creative and free.(1) It seems that man is not a **tabula rasa.** His potential is for good, not evil. He is not amoral in the sense described by the behavioural scientists. He is the victim of material circumstance. Given the chance, freed from the 'Kingdom of necessity', he will fulfil his essentially wise and creative potential.

Is this an accurate representation of Marx's position? It seems that the one fixed idea which Marx has with regard the nature of man, and on which his commentators are agreed, is that man is a 'species-being'.

According to Kamenka

"Society becomes truly human when man ceases to be an abstract individual confronted by other abstract and therefore hostile individuals, when each man recognises himself as a universal social being".(2)

Writing of Marx's analysis of the nature of man Berlin refers to the harmonous cooperation with one another for which their nature craves.(3)

Meszaros says that Marx condemned the cult of privacy and the idealization of the abstract individual.(4)

McLellan says that Marx believed that man should see in other men the realization, and not the limitation of his freedom.(5)

(1) Berlin I, op cit, p 144

(2) Kamenka E, op cit, p 14

(3) Berlin I, Ibid,

(4) Meszaros I, op cit, p 81

(5) McLellan D in Burke J, Cocker L, Legters L, **Marxism and the Good Society**, p 112

The problem with capitalism is that it destroys the wholeness of man by turning him into an isolated individual whose 'rights' are predicated on the notion that he has to be defended from the encroachments and exploitation of his fellow men. Although conflict and contradiction are necessary components of change, they also reveal imperfection - they are indicators of incompleteness.

According to Maguire when man has become a true species-being the contradiction between individual and species will disappear.(1)

Kamenka remarks

"As long as men face moral uncertainties, dilemmas of choice, they are facing situations that are inherently evil, situations in which interests conflict, in which one satisfaction can only be gained at the expense of another. Man's dignity requires the **overcoming** of those situations in which interest conflict, the creation of a society in which men have common purposes and agree naturally and spontaneously ..."(2)

We are back with our original question. Who or what will overcome those situations in which interests conflict? Man or circumstance? It seems that, in Marx's thinking, determinism is the result of contradiction, competition, struggle and alienation. As long as material conditions are those of conflict and exploitation, man's ethical standards are determined. Maguire claims that Marxist materialism is aimed at freeing man from economic materialism through the development of material forces and the decrease in the kingdom of necessity which would result:

"In the future there would be a smaller **degree** of determination than in all previous societies."(3)

(1) Maguire J, **Marx's Paris Writings**, p 12

(2) Kamenka E, op cit, p 24

(3) Maguire J, op cit, p 120

On this analysis, man will be freed from determinism by determinism. In other words, the laws of material production dictate a gradual reduction in the kingdom of necessity. It is this kingdom which determines man's behaviour and beliefs because he is unable to transcend his objective conditions. The development of the economic substructure of capitalism will create conditions in which society rejoices in an abundance of material wealth and technological conveniences. Man will be freed from the need to work to stay alive. Economic conditions will be such that he will be able to work for creative enjoyment. Hence the (determined) laws of material production will themselves liberate man from economic determinism. The beginning and the end are the wisdom and goodness of man. But between the end and the beginning, social development is determined by the laws of history. These laws, working through successive stages, will ultimately propel man into a condition in which he is freed from economic determinism and hence can fulfil his human potential.

Does man play an active part in this process, other than by using his rationality to recognise his objective conditions and to work with, rather than against them. At this point it is useful to examine man's role in the dialectical process.

The Dialectic

Does Marx's use of the dialectic seriously inhibit the claim that man is freed from determinism by determinism?
Several authors have argued that Marx's materialism, is not necessarily deterministic in that it allows some scope for the impact of human consciousness on history. Cohen's distinction between form and content, and his development of that distinction, is illustrative of this argument.

According to Cohen, people and productive forces constitute the (material) content; production relations make up the (social) form. Content, when entering production relations, receives the imprint of form. But form cannot be deduced from content (although we can **infer** form from content by the use of general or common knowledge.) It is content which ensures development in history, that is, productive forces and people, and, presumably (although Cohen does not explicitly state this) the interaction between them.

In the event of revolution, the material development prevails and the social form is discarded.(1) This means that in any given revolution, the forces of production (content) have outstripped the production relations (form) and the latter are replaced by a more appropriate set of production relations, or form. The aim of communism, according to Cohen, is to liberate content from form, so that in communism individuals reclaim the power that is properly their own. However, Cohen adds that form cannot completely disappear: this would be a utopian requirement. But in communist society the **scope** of the form will be reduced.(2)

Maguire describes a similar phenomenon. Marxist materialism is aimed at freeing man from economic determinism, so that in the future there would be a smaller **degree** of determination than in all previous societies.

It is automation, Maguire suggests, which will be instrumental in reducing the degree of determination.(3) It is possible to assume that Cohen is also thinking of automation when he talks of content in communist society, although, again, this is not explicitly stated.

(1) Cohen D, **Karl Marx's Theory of History. A Defence**, pp 107,108

(2) Cohen D, op cit, p 129

(3) Maguire J, op cit, p 120

Hence the combination of people, acting in accordance with the requirements of other productive forces, results in automation, which in turn frees people from the necessity to labour and thus from the necessity to order the relations of labour. Form cannot completely disappear: there will still be a need to order relationships between people, because people will still work. But, presumably, the rigid, hierarchical nature of the form will be dissolved as people work for creative enjoyment, and not out of necessity.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the dialectical principle, as applied to the science of history, involves a method of understanding the way that change takes place. It takes place dialectically: thesis - antithesis - synthesis. Every system (thesis) contains the seeds of its own destruction (antithesis). In the case of capitalism, thesis is represented by the current relationship between the forces of production (including people) and the production relations. Antithesis is contained in the changes taking place in productive forces, that is, the movement towards automation. Changes in the forces of production will eventually modify production relations, resulting in synthesis: socialism. Marx's materialism is dialectical materialism, so it seems fair to suggest that it is the dialectic which is instrumental in reducing the degree of determination, or the conquest of form by matter.

If it is the dialectical relationship between the forces of production and production relations which is instrumental in freeing men from the constraints of social form, then my earlier conclusion would have to be altered. Hence: man is rescued from material determinism by the dialectical principle which, among other things, assumes an interaction between man and his environment.

If we include people among the productive forces, this could be taken to mean people as raw material for labour, or it could be taken to mean people as 'consciousness', or both. It is therefore necessary to examine the **extent** to which man's conscious activity can produce change, as opposed to the extent to which he is determined by his environment.

Cohen has this to say on the matter of determinism:

"One remark bearing on that issue: in so far as the course of history, and, more particularly, the future socialist revolution are, for Marx, inevitable, they are inevitable, not despite what men may do, but because of what men, being rational are bound, predictably, to do."(1)

What does Cohen mean by rational? He means, it transpires, somewhat rational.(2) This analysis is predicated on man's ability to improve his environment - a contention supported by the fact that outgoing productive forces are usually replaced by better ones. We may then ask: is the progressive tendency in productive forces the result of the fact that men are 'somewhat rational' or is it inherent in the nature of the productive forces themselves? Cohen's reply is that while regression is an option, it is often technically unfeasible.(3)

We are left with the question: in the dialectical relationship between man and his environment, which is primary? Man's 'somewhat rational' nature, or the nature of the productive forces themselves?

(1) Cohen D, op cit, p 147

(2) Ibid

(3) Ibid, p 155

Cohen subsequently remarks that:

"Expansion of freedom is **dictated** by the productive forces when their further development is impossible without it but the expansion can be no greater than what their current level **permits**"(1)

Developing the theme of freedom, Cohen notes that human beings on the whole prefer freedom to it opposite, but subsequently suggests that class inequality and oppression are necessary for the ultimate development of socialism.(2) It seems, therefore, that people, in spite of preferring freedom to its opposite, have no choice but to oppress, and be oppressed by, one another.

On this reading of Cohen, man's role as a conscious being in the development of socialism cannot be regarded as an equal one in the dialectical process, and is in fact characterized by his subordination to the productive forces.

Fischer is more explicit than Cohen in his description of man's role in the dialectical process:

"The belief in the necessity of development contains within it the belief that an ever-increasing number of human beings will effect the necessary development by free decision. This is not, as Marx's critics often claim, the fundamental contradiction of Marxism. **It is the fundamental idea of Marxist dialectics.**"(3)

We are back with the idea that the dialectic ultimately frees man from necessity. How does Fischer defend this claim? He maintains that intellectual production does not follow material production but occurs simultaneously and in constant interaction with it.(4)

(1) Cohen D, op cit, p 205

(2) Ibid, p 204

(3) Fischer E, **Marx In His Own Words**, p 87

(4) Ibid, p 96

This is directly contradicted in the **Preface to a Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy.**

"The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life processes in general."(1)

Fischer also maintains that Marx never overlooked the fact that it is men themselves who make their history.(2) This claim is qualified by a passage from the **Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.**

"Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living."(3)

The dead hand of the past represents the general framework of constraint within which men operate. The framework is made up of both material conditions and ideology; the latter, although not purely attributable to material conditions, cannot be studied in isolation from them. This is representative of the dialectical approach. But it does **not** suggest that it is men themselves who make their own history. Fischer himself refers to Marx' and Engels' insistence that economic conditions and demands are in the last instance primary.(4) It is difficult to reconcile the primacy of economic conditions with the claim that people are the most important part of the productive forces.

(1) Feuer L, op cit, p 84

(2) Fischer E, op cit, p 85

(3) Feuer L, op cit, p 360

(4) Fischer E, op cit, pp 90,91

It has to be conceded that Marx's use of the dialectic modifies the suggestion that man is freed from determinism by determinism. Nevertheless, it can be suggested that the importance of man's active and conscious role in the dialectical, or interactive, process is, at best, ambiguous, and at worst, minimal.

The Conflict Between Determinism and Humanism

Discussions of this conflict are generally based on comparisons between Marx's earlier and later works: the former are considered to reveal a more specifically humanist trend than the latter. Commentators, in this particular area of Marxian thought, are divided into two groups: the 'Marxist humanists', and the 'Althusserian Marxists'*

The Althusserian Marxist maintains that human nature is in a constant state of flux, depending on environmental factors. Hence nothing can be said about human nature **per se.**

The Marxist humanist suggests that without the existence of some common and unchanging aspects of human nature we would have no way of charting the progress of human development, and hence no way of describing one system as preferable to another. If Marx had no fixed conception of human nature, then he would have been unable to explain why communist society was desirable as well as inevitable.(1)

This latter theme is developed by Geras, who maintains that, firstly, evidence of humanism is to be found in both Marx's earlier **and** later works. On this basis Geras rejects claims that notions of human nature are of no real significance in the theory of historical materialism. And secondly, not only did Marx posit a theory of human nature, he was right to do so.(2)

* Following Louis Althusser's interpretation of Marx

(1) Hunt E, "Was Marx a Utopian Socialist?" **Science and Society** (Spring 1984)

(2) Geras N, **Marx and Human Nature,** p 100

Geras distinguishes between, a) human nature, which contains some constant characteristics, and b) the nature of man, which is the character of man in some given context. Marx, according to Geras, employs both concepts. Man has some fundamental, unchanging characteristics. But other, mutable, facets of his nature are dependent on his environment. Given the existence of a), man may be conditioned by changing social facts, but he is not determined.(1)

Geras does not, however, examine the question of primacy, that is, the extent to which man's unchanging characteristics are influential in the moulding of his environment. He insists that historical materialism rests on the idea of human nature: One cannot explain, he says, the transformation of the material environment without taking into consideration the existence of universal needs and capacities.(2) There is, I think, a difference between taking something into consideration, and examining the extent to which it is influential. Human nature plays a part in the unfolding of history, but how large, according to Marx, is that part? Geras does not say.

With reference to Marx's theory of human nature: Geras lists Marx's schedule of universal human needs: sex, physical sustenance, companionship. It is, he says, a plain fact that people have physical needs, and that they have rational and productive capacities. This is clear enough. But he adds to the list of needs the need for a breadth and diversity of pursuit and hence of personal development.(3)

It seems to me that Geras has jumped from the realm of the descriptive to the realm of the normative. The former is compatible with materialism, the latter is not.

(1) Geras N, op cit, p 39-42
(2) Ibid, pp 62,63
(3) Ibid, p 72

Three points can be made on this issue:

1 If we assume, with Marx that capitalism represents a 'higher' stage of development than say, feudalism - 'higher' because it is one step further along the road to a communist society - then, according to Geras' reasoning, there should also be a greater degree of individual development, which is a basic human need and helps to shape the environment. Yet, according to Marx, alienation and exploitation have reached their peak in capitalist society: this is an objective condition which will facilitate revolution.

2 Even if we question the extent to which 'higher' has any normative connotations, and see it simply as a description of objective material conditions, there is still a contradiction between humanism and materialism. Recalling Cohen's remark that human beings on the whole prefer freedom to its opposite, this preference, apparently, has no bearing on the emergence of objective conditions. Human beings are constrained, by their material environment, to exploit and enslave one another in a capitalist system. It is therefore legitimate to ask what impact, if any, normative human needs have on the environment.

3 Geras maintains that it is possible to have a materialist concept of human nature because other species are not denied to possess an intrinsic nature.(3) But other species are not generally regarded as having a fundamental need for personal development.

(1) Geras N, op cit, p 97

With reference to the extent to which Marx was right to posit a theory of human nature, Geras says that socialist beliefs are committed to a hypothesis of human nature. Without such a hypothesis, a commitment to a radically different kind of society would be incoherent.(1) I do not dispute this. But I do dispute the compatibility of such a commitment (which requires a normative assessment) with historical materialism. If it is true, as Geras claims, that there are elements of humanism throughout Marx's writings, this does not resolve the problem of the contradiction in Marx's thought with which this chapter is concerned. Geras' vindication of Marx's theory of human nature appears to be based on a belief in the need for a positive normative assessment of man's needs. This may well be a condition for progress. But it is a condition based on an act of faith, and cannot be discovered in the objective requirements of historical materialism.

To briefly review the two main themes of the literature under discussion:

1 Humanist notions are irrelevant; they represent a bourgeois, or petty-bourgeois, phase in Marx's thinking, and can accordingly be dismissed. On this view, communist society cannot be described as 'best' in any normative sense; it is simply inevitable, and its attainment should be supported because it is **inevitable**, and not because it is **better** than other systems.

2 Marx's normative idea of human nature is of importance because it gives to Marxism a profoundly **moral** appeal. Without this (subjective) vision there would be no way of making a moral distinction between communist society and other types of society.

(1) Geras N, op cit, p 109

Concluding Remarks

There is an ongoing debate concerning a) the extent to which Marx was a humanist and b) the extent to which humanism is a necessary part of socialist or Marxist beliefs.

I do not believe that it is possible to be a committed humanist and a committed materialist at one and the same time, although it is possible, from the vantage of one standpoint, to make some concessions to the other. But it seems to me that it is a matter of **concessions:** that a materialist must always consider humanism to be of lesser importance, and vice-versa. It seems that Marx was predominantly a materialist who made some concessions to humanism, and that these concessions were more obvious in his earlier works than in his later ones. The contradiction does not lie here. It is contained in the fact that a materialist made humanist considerations of paramount importance in the final stage of historical development: that instead of concentrating on materialist requirements, he constructed communist society around normative needs. These needs cannot be proved, or for that matter disproved, to have contributed to material development. The Soviet Union and the United States have rather different concepts of human needs, but they enjoy approximately equal status as world powers, based on their economic, technological and military strength and influence.

One way of looking at what Engels described as Marx's discovery of the law of development of human history is to see this law as Marx's version of Plato's Guardians, that is, as his way of guarding against the caprices of human behaviour. Both Plato and Marx take the point of view that utopia will not be achieved simply as the result of spontaneous human needs and actions. Both assume that some other force, external to the ordinary human being, is a **sine qua non** for the attainment of utopia.

SECTION THREE

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER 7

THE UTOPIAN AND LIBERAL PARADOXES REVISTED

The Utopian Paradox revisited

A belief in the possibility of utopia involves, logically speaking, a concomitant belief in the perfectibility of man: if man is to achieve perfection, he must first of all be perfectible.

I have tried to show,in previous chapters, that it is possible to question the extent to which Plato and Marx believed that human beings, in general, are perfectible. There are two types of perfectibility:

(a) particularist: only a few (comparatively speaking) human beings are perfectible.

(b) universalist: all human beings are perfectible.[1]

If one believes in the first type of perfectibility, then utopia is possible, but only under certain circumstances, namely, that the perfectibile elite are in a position to ensure that the non-perfectible masses move into utopia, and stay there. Hence a type of coercion, overt or covert, is required. In the case of Plato, coercion is built in to the institutions, (mythology, education, social structure and so forth) which comprise his Republic.

(1) Passmore J, op cit, p 24

It is true that Marx insisted that consciousness must come from within, that is, from individual experience of the contradictions and alienation inherent in the capitalist system. It is also true that Lenin's conversion of consciousness into 'spontaneity' or 'trade-union consciousness', and his conviction that the vanguard party had a monopoly on 'true' consciousness, constitutes a distortion of the Marxian position. The overwhelming power of the Communist Party in Soviet Society represents an institutionalized distortion of the original idea. But it seems to me that the idea, in order to be distortable, must contain the seeds of distortion within it. These seeds, as I see it, are to be found in Marxian determinism. Human beings do not move spontaneously into utopia: they are, to a significant extent, pushed into Communist society by the objective laws of material development. Marx is therefore a particularist in that he believes that material conditions are perfectible. The human contribution to the evolution of perfection is less immediately evident.

It seems that the extent to which freedom and utopia are compatible exists in inverse proportion to the extent to which the author of utopia believes in particularist perfectibility.

Assuming that particularist perfectibility can be described as 'pessimistic' in as much as it doubts the ability of the average human being to attain utopia of his or her own volition, then the utopian paradox applies, **mutatis mutandis**, to both Plato and Marx.

In my introductory chapter I suggested that the decline of utopian faith could be attributed to the interaction between utopia as idea and utopia as institution. The institution is the idea 'writ large'.

If the institution creates conditions unfavourable to freedom, this suggests that an analysis of the idea will reveal elements which are hostile to freedom. I believe that the fear of utopia, and the decline of utopian thought, can, at least partially, be attributed to the ways in which utopian philosophers have analysed human nature, and, following on from this, have described human needs. Utopia is based in the nature of man, that is, on an intuitive belief about what it means to be human. This applies to both particularist and universalist perfectibilians. Any perfectionist belief implies an idea of what human nature ought to be, and therefore a belief that some forms of life are intrinsically superior to other forms of life.(1)

The question is: to what extent can an intuition about human nature be legitimately used as the basis for the construction of a set of institutions designed to fulfil that nature? To what extent is 'man' a concept which by itself provides standards of excellence and assessment?(2)

The Concept of Human Nature

Two sorts of perspective can be discerned in utopian thought with regard human nature:

(a) the cognitive perspective: by nature humans beings are X

(b) the normative perspective: human beings should live in X type of society because it will perfectly fulfil their requirements.

(1) Haksar V, op cit, p 1

(2) Williams B, op cit, p 67

Both involve non-scientific, that is, non-verifiable (or, in Popper's terms, non-falsifiable) statements. Both therefore involve judgements of value. To my mind the combination of the two perspectives implies a juxtoposition of, not only different, but also potentially antagonistic value judgements. It is one thing to say that human beings are X; it is quite another thing to delineate the type of society best suited to fulfil X. The first is general, the second specific. The leap from (a) to (b) involves a leap from the general to the specific which is made possible by an assessment of some of the qualities associated with human beings, namely, those which are considered to be normatively desirable.

For example, Tillich describes the positive and the negative aspects of utopia. With regard the positive aspects, he notes that utopia is based in the nature of man. Utopia is therefore truth because it expresses man's essence and the aim of his existence, that is, his fulfilment as a person. Utopia is fruitful because it anticipates possibilities which might have otherwise remained hidden; finally utopia is powerful because it can transform the future. On the negative side, utopia is false because it forgets that man, under the conditions of his existence, is estranged from his true nature. Utopia is unfruitful to the extent that it underestimates the difficulties of dealing with deep-rooted estrangement. This leads to disillusionment which in turn makes utopia impotent.(1)

Tillich does not debate the matter of whether or not the utopian is justified in his assessment of the nature of man, and of what he needs to be fulfilled as a person. He simply assumes that the utopian has made a true assessment: the problem lies, therefore, not in the truth or falsity of the analysis but in the extent to which man is estranged from his true nature.

(1) Tillich P, in Manuel F, op cit, pp 296-302

What, according to Plato and Marx, is man's 'true' nature? In this context, some marked similarities can be discovered in the perspectives of the two philosophers.

In the **Republic** Socrates says

"The just man does not allow the several elements in his soul to usurp one another's functions; he is indeed one who sets his house in order by self-mastery and discipline ...
Only when he has linked these parts together in well-tempered harmony and has made himself one man instead of many, will he be ready to go about whatever he may have to do ..."(1)

Justice in the soul is 'writ large' in the state; consequently the harmonious functioning of the three classes in the state, keeping within the bounds of their natural order, will lead to a sense of unity and purpose.

According to Marx, man's dignity requires the overcoming of those situations in which interests conflict. This in turn requires the creation of a society in which men have common purposes and agree naturally and spontaneously. Conflict and contradiction are signs of one-sidedness and incompleteness.(2)

What the two philosophers have in common is the intuitive belief that it is bad for the individual to feel divided within himself or herself. By extension, then, it is bad for a society to be divided along unnatural lines. Plato believes in 'natural' social divisions, Marx does not, but both are agreed in assuming that man has a natural capacity for harmony and unity, both within himself and in his relations to the rest of society.

(1) Cornford M, op cit, pp 138,139

(2) Kamenka E, op cit, pp 12-24

What about man's other capacities, for instance, his capacity to be creative? Marx refused to draw up a detailed blueprint of future society (on the grounds that to do so would be 'utopian') but he thought that man, freed from the constraints of the kingdom of necessity, would be truly creative, that is, his creativity would be the product of harmony and unity, not of conflict and division. Plato disapproved of representations of life, and believed that true creativity was to be discovered in the experience of life itself - life, that is, as it ought to be lived. However, the "frictionless medium"[1] of utopia might not be conducive to the production of valuable art, or literature. It could equally well be argued that conflict, both internal and external, constitutes the condition most productive of creativity.

If it is true that man has both a 'natural' capacity for harmony, and a 'natural' capacity for creativity, how do we decide which is most important? Should we discover that they are mutually incompatible, are we justified in creating institutions which promote one at the expense of the other?

Man is not only naturally cooperative, he is also naturally competitive; not only naturally creative, but also naturally destructive. If we assume that man is human because he is not animal, we are confonted with a whole range of qualities which separate man from the beasts. Cruelty and envy, for instance, are peculiarly human forms of behaviour. To select, from the spectrum of human qualities, only those which we perceive as desirable, and to construct a plan for the future based on a selective analysis, involves an act of faith which, as I see it, inevitably leads to disillusionment of one kind or another.

(1) Berlin I, op cit, pl ii

In sum: we cannot A) decide what constitutes a good man **via** a consideration of man's distinguishing features, and therefore we cannot B) base a moral code on such a distinction.

The fact that force (whether direct or indirect, whether the product of an elite or of laws of material development) is needed to create utopia, suggests an inadaquate analysis of human nature. For if all man's deepest needs had been fully assessed, he would surely move voluntarily in to a situation which catered for those needs.

Is disillusionment with utopia inevitable?

Utopia, and the fear of utopia, are inseparable. The concept of human nature in which utopia is based is, if not wrong, at least inadequate. Assuming that utopian ideas are the forerunners of utopian institutions, then an idea which excludes many aspects of human nature will result in a certain type of institution: namely, one that will be unable to ignore those human qualities which, although excluded from consideration, are nevertheless present. Hence the use of force, and the designation of utopia as totalitarian.

Mannheim distinguished between 'absolute' utopias, that is, those ideas which in principle can never be realized, and 'relative' utopias, that is, a utopia which seems to be unrealizable only from the point of view of a given social order. 'Relative' utopias contain situationally transcendent ideas which are valuable in as much as they are a force for social change; Without such ideas, society would be in a condition of stasis.(1)

(1) Mannheim K, op cit, p 236

Thus utopia is justified in terms of its 'transcendence', and the fact that it is a necessary part of progress: the relative utopianist considers that it is judicious, in the interests of progress, to retain some degree of utopian vision. 'Utopia' has lost one of its primary features, that is, its ethical absolutism, and in the process has been translated into 'transcendence'. Although there are similarities, they are not the same thing, and it is not my aim to argue the merits or demerits of transcendence.

I do think that utopia is logically 'impossible' because I think that it is logically 'impossible' to be selective in an analysis of human nature: it leads to a paradoxical situation in which the end result of exclusive concentration on the 'best' features of human nature is the construction of repressive institutions.

Nevertheless, utopia can be defended in a negative way, that is, in a way which illustrates that a set of beliefs opposed to utopianism also incorporates a paradox which has also, in practice, led to distortion.

The Liberal Paradox Revisited

The liberal paradox was defined, in an earlier chapter, as a lack of belief in the existence of absolute perfection juxtaposed with a conviction that it is important to believe in the rational and moral ability of the individual. I noted that this contradiction resulted in some logical inconsistencies.

In this context the liberal position may be briefly summarised as follows:

1 Liberalism is a good thing because it enshrines the principle of consent.
2 Consent is a good thing because it exercises freedom of choice.
3 Freedom of choice is a good thing because it means that no one person, or group of people can inflict their ideas on the rest of society on an indefinite basis.
4 The long-term imposition of the ideas of other people is a bad thing because it restricts the autonomy of the individual.

Berlin suggests that our most human characteristic is our capacity for choice, and that therefore we are entitled to make, not only the right choices but also the wrong ones. It is a bad thing to have a concept of perfection because this diminishes the area of human choice and does harm to man in an intrinsic sense.(1)

Berlin, like the utopians, assumes that there are some values inherent in the concept 'human' - in this case, the capacity for choice. In his argument, described above, he makes the assumption that the human capacity for choice is a good thing, and should be nurtured by institutionalizing choice in society. Is this a justifiable assumption?

To enlarge: if one applies this assumption to specific circumstances it means that, for example, if A is a member of the National Front, B may privately consider this to be a sign of moral inferiority, but in the public sphere B is unable to press his opinion on A because to do so would curtail A's freedom of choice. This suggests that freedom of choice is regarded as inherently valuable, irrespective of any moral criteria. When A is exercising his right to choose to belong to the National Front is he becoming more moral in the process, or is he simply exercising his right to espouse immoral beliefs? In other

(1) Berlin I, op cit, p 201

words, what is the normative validation for allowing a person to hold beliefs (racism, violence etc) which, by common agreement, are immoral. What is the connection between freedom of choice and a 'good' society, or at any rate a society which is considered to be preferable to totalitarianism?

The liberal has made a leap from a cognitive perspective (human beings have X capacity) to a normative perspective (X capacity should be entrenched in social institutions.) As noted earlier, this leap is made possible by a selective analysis of those qualities which constitute human nature; an analysis which, by definition, ignores or underemphasises a whole range of other qualities.

One might equally well ask the question: why should I believe that human beings have a right to make their own choices? Their choices are frequently irrational and ill-informed. To believe that the individual has the right to choose because he has the capacity to do so, means, in effect, 'this is good because it is mine'. Questions of right and wrong become irrelevant.

Again, if we are to make the assumption that man is human because he is not animal, and that one of the qualities which separates man from the beasts is his rationality, we are underplaying other qualities which separate man from the animals: for example, his capacity to kill for pleasure rather than for survival. Man is not only rational, he is also irrational; not only capable of making considered, thoughtful choices, but also capable of making haphazard ill-informed choices.

Popper urges us to have faith in men, and faith in human reason and freedom.[1] It does indeed require an act of faith to believe in human rationality, and hence in the right of individual human beings to exercise their capacity for choice. It is an act of faith which can result in disillusionment as great as the disillusionment which stems from an act of faith in utopian belief. Furthermore it is an act of faith which, when institutionalized can be observed to be subject to distortion. For what percentage of people in a liberal society is freedom of choice a real option, as opposed to a meaningless principle? Freedom of choice and equality of choice are two very different concepts. The notion of freedom, as institutionalized in liberal-democratic societies, in practice means greater freedom for some and lesser freedom for others. In reply to the liberal claim that his society is, although not perfect, at least free, the utopian could point out that power is in fact concentrated in the hands of those who derive their status from wealth and social class. This makes nonsense of the claim that individuals enjoy equal opportunities for the exercise of initiative and choice.

Just as utopianism presents an illusion of perfection, so liberalism presents an illusion of freedom.

In sum: liberalism can be criticized on the grounds that it involves a paradox: a contradiction between the cognitive and normative perspectives, based on the selective application of particular features of human nature: rationality and the capacity for choice. In practice this can be observed to lead to inequality and injustice, and hence to disillusionment with the liberal idea, and the liberal system. Loss of faith in liberalism involves both the idea, and the institution, and the interaction between them.

(1) Popper K, op cit, p 201

The Conversion of Belief Into Ideology

Berger argues that all societies are based on violence. In the final resort, institutions of social control may use legitimized forms of force. Violence is therefore the ultimate foundation of any political order, although this is obscured in western democracies with their emphasis on voluntary obedience to respresentative government. It is therefore important to look at the methods of covert coercion used in non-totalitarian societies, the most obvious being economic sanctions (loss of income) and social sanctions (persuasion, ridicule, opprobrium). "Such", says Berger, "are the wonders of pacifism".(1)

C Wright Mills has made the point that both liberalism and utopianism (in this case, Marxism) have been revolutionary creeds in their time, but, in due course have become conservative creeds: that is, the ideology of consolidated political and economic systems.(2)

Ultimately the institutionalization of an idea produces ideology, that is, the rationalization and maintenance of the **status quo**. This process is facilitated by an inherent contradiction in the idea itself; by its selective analysis of human nature, and its normative notion of what man **really** wants. Both liberal and utopian ideologies can be defined as totalitarian in the sense that they impose on society an exclusive definition of human needs, which is hostile to other definitions, and is to that extent inflexible.

'Transcendence' or a type of 'relative' utopianism, enables us to look beyond ideological constraints to a preferred type of society. But, once transcendental ideas have been transformed into reality, 'relative' utopia becomes ideology, and the process of distortion begins again.

(1) Berger P, **Invitation to Sociology**, p 88

(2) Wright Mills C, op cit, p 21

Utopian and liberal ideologies differ widely in content, but they have some functions in common: they both apply sanctions against those people who stray from the group; they engender a feeling of security and group identity, and they bestow a feeling of 'rightness' on their adherents. The Soviet citizen who operates within the mores of his ideology feels just as 'good' as the British citizen who does likewise.

I think that the assumption that the human being **qua** human being has certain desirable qualities, and that societies should be constructed on the basis of those qualities, leads to an inevitable distortion, and to the conversion of belief into ideology.

However, I believe that the fact of **being** human, that is of possessing an intellect which sets humans apart from animals, involves a challenge. Animals are born, procreate and die without ever questioning the limitations of their existence. Even if we allow for a considerable degree of social conditioning, it is still possible to believe that human beings have the ability to step outside the perceived requirements of ideology. Perhaps part of the challenge of being human is to have the courage to leave the safe haven of ideology, be it utopian or liberal, and to venture into unchartered seas.

Concluding Remarks

1 The canonization of perfection, both as a human **ability** and a human **need**, involves the elimination of a number of other human abilities and needs, such as the ability and need for freedom and variety. Therefore the institutionalization of perfection as a human goal leads to oppression.
This is the utopian paradox.

2 The canonization of freedom as a value **in itself** can lead to a situation in which other human needs are devalued, for example, the need to enjoy equal status with other human beings. Therefore the institutionalization of freedom as a human goal leads to oppression.
This is the liberal paradox.

I have found during the course of this thesis, that I was unable to defend utopia on positive grounds. Instead I have tried to show that if one is justified in describing utopianism as ultimately oppressive, one is also justified, **mutatis mutandis**, in describing liberalism as ultimately oppressive.

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