

The 'Authoritarian' Nature of Utopia

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In recent years there have been a number of famous denigrators of utopianism whose views are formed by liberal-democratic culture: among them, Popper, Oakeshott, Talmon and Hayek. From the standpoint of liberalism, the main objection to the utopian way of thinking is that it precludes *free rational choice* by individuals - an exclusion that can ultimately be traced to its ultra-rationalistic nature. Hence it is called authoritarian by liberals. I want first to offer a brief definition of utopianism, then to examine some of the preoccupations underlying the critique of utopianism, and to show this critique to be mistaken. Finally, I want to argue that the so-called 'rationalistic' (alias 'authoritarian') approach to political theorising is desirable and philosophically respectable and is, in the circumstances which prevail at present, the only *rational* route to social reform.

Many commentators have tried to provide definitional accounts of the necessary characteristics of utopian thought: situation-transcending ideas (Mannheim), politically impotent, systematising rationalism (Marx and Engels), the attempt to create a new man by means of institutions (Freund), 'Das Prinzip Hoffnung' (Bloch), projections of the ever-present 'myth of the ideal city' (Mucchielli), the search for the 'lost female principle' (Servier, after Jung) and the dreams of schizoid types doomed to ineffectiveness (Ruyer) [1]. Such definitions underline the mythical, dreamlike, fictional, speculative and essentially *inadequate* nature of utopian thought. I prefer to conceptualise utopia here as a rational attempt to resolve the 'human predicament' (as perceived by the author at the time of writing) whose imaginary elements facilitate the escape from the constraints of empirical reality and are therefore methodologically important. But to define utopias as rational is perhaps to beg the question, for this is in part what I wish to prove. It is this rational and rationalistic approach which makes utopian theory questionable for many liberals. I therefore turn briefly to the conception of rationality used in social theory today.

Liberal theorists have established their own definition of rationality as a value in social and political theory. Purposive rationality, the matching of means to ends and the maximisation of utilities, entails acts of *choice* which are expressions of individual freedom. The exercise of free choice is stipulated to be rational: one such stipulation is the convention in economics that so-called 'revealed preferences' are taken to represent optimal consumer choices, no matter how strong an element of determination, ignorance or *faute de mieux* there may have been

in the formation of such 'choices'. The scope for exercising rational choice is defined as *freedom*, on which liberals lay a special value. The condition for choice, a multiplicity of alternatives, is therefore to be promoted as the precondition for a free society. All this assumes implicitly that people have a constant ability to exercise their rationality; e.g., the voting system assumes knowledge and capacity on the part of the voter, in blatant defiance of the facts [2]. According to this account, individual, self-interested, purposive rationality thus provides the dynamic motive force for political and economic activity in the theoretical model of a liberal-democratic society. The aggregation of individual actions, whether by a benign invisible hand or by some formal aggregative process, such as democracy, is held to represent the best available outcome for a population of free, differentiated individuals.

The perverse connection made by liberals between freedom and rationality and the mode of thinking condemned by them as 'rationalist' can now be made clear. Oakeshott shows the intimate connection between the two: the rationalist stands for independence of mind and 'thought free from obligation to any authority save the authority of reason' [3]. The rationalist's personal experience is reduced to principles, to self-formulated rules which make no acknowledgement of the 'cumulation of principles' through tradition and history. S/he is disposed to destroy and create, not to reform. Oakeshott also distinguishes technical and practical knowledge, arguing that the rationalist ignores the latter and seeks to provide a rule-book of the former. His definition of the rationalist is equally and explicitly a definition of the utopian: '... the "rational" solution of any problem is, in its nature, the perfect solution. There is no place in his scheme for a "best in the circumstances", only a place for "the best"' [4]. Oakeshott cites Godwin and Owen (also usually considered utopians) as rationalists par excellence. Hayek, undoubtedly a political soul-mate of Oakeshott, offers some comments which clarify the 'voluntaristic' aspect of rationalism and utopianism:

Rationalism in this sense is the doctrine which assumes that all institutions which benefit humanity have in the past and ought in the future to be invented in clear awareness of the desirable effects that they produce ... that we have it in our power so to shape our institutions that of all possible sets of results that which we prefer to all others will be realised. [5]

The criticisms of the utopian socialists offered by Marx and Engels make it clear that they too saw rationalism, by contrast with materialism, as an

idealist, deductive, over-systematised mode of thought. 'Society presented nothing but wrongs; to remove these was the task of reason'... 'the solution of the social problems ... the utopians attempted to evolve out of the human brain'. These writers viewed socialism as absolute truth, mistakenly thinking that 'absolute truth is independent of time and space' [6]. Marx's critique has something in common with Oakeshott's when he writes derisively that 'historical action is to yield to their [the utopians'] personal inventive action' [7]. But Marx, unlike Oakeshott, does believe that scientific knowledge of society is possible and that it can form the basis for effective action to change society. The utopians' problem was that their knowledge, by his standards, was not scientific.

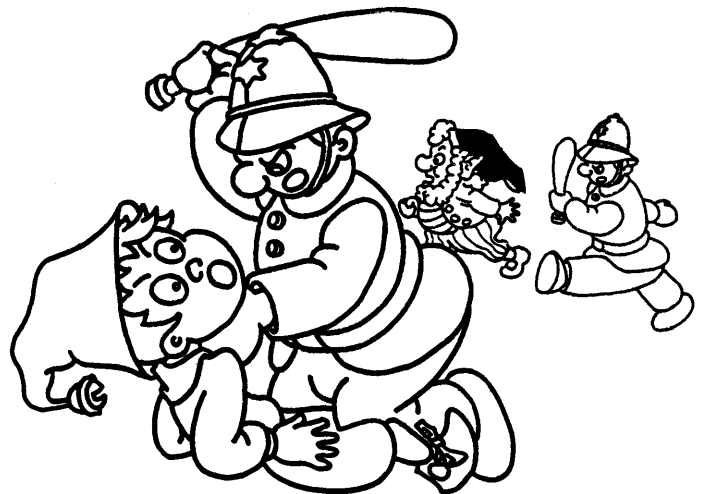
Above all, rationalism emphasises the capacity of the brain, using techniques of deductive logic, to analyse the world: 'constructive rationalism' (Hayek's term) proclaims the brain's power to *change* the world. Rationalism is thus seen as the imposition of a brain-spun system which over-emphasises consistency and the processes of formal logic, on the material world: because it is self-enclosed and the invention of one individual, such a system departs from the criterion of rationality proposed by empiricists - that it should be publicly, inter-subjectively testable. But it also departs from the approved brand of rationality by not being strictly self-interested and calculating: rationalism is deductive reason carried too far, and how could a system be purposive which is not conceived in proper relation to material reality? Utopia is the attempt of one individual to impose *his/her* world-view and his/her own rationality on others. Clearly, then, in the controversies surrounding utopianism, rationalism is understood to represent a non-empirical way of arguing, a theory-based thought system with inherently authoritarian tendencies, and is condemned for these reasons.

The linking of utopianism with authoritarianism needs some explanation at this point. The fiercest critics of utopianism have sought to associate it with the totalitarian way of thinking, whose characteristics are defined as exclusivism and authoritarianism: utopianism is found guilty by association. For Popper, 'utopian social engineering' is based on an a priori idea of rationality and a Platonic notion of ideal ends and means. The need for a clean canvas which this dogmatic rationalist approach demands requires the utopian to 'purge, expel, banish and kill'. Utopianism, a sub-species of totalitarianism, is antithetical to the thought processes of the 'open society' which proceed by trial and error, empirical observation and induction. A careful reading of Popper makes it clear that, while much of his argument is devoted to deploring the political consequences of utopianism, his quarrel with it is epistemological and methodological [8]. These attacks are reinforced in the political economy of the liberal-conservative Hayek, whose 'catallaxy' or free-market society could be seen as a more dogmatic portrait of Popper's Open Society. He argues that the self-generating 'spontaneous order' (which he thinks we once had, or almost had, in the West) is more subtle, complex and beneficial than any 'planned arrangement', and condemns constructive rationalism for detracting from these advantages and encroaching on individual freedom. Hayek's admiration for spontaneous structures seems to be based on an aesthetic value-judgement - there is also perhaps a hint of divine purpose in his characterisation of the 'natural' spontaneous order. In fact, even Oakeshott argues that Hayek's anti-planning tirade becomes so doctrinaire that it is itself an example of rationalism [9].

A number of complex issues are raised by the criticism of utopianism *qua* rationalism. First, can it properly be asserted that utopias are purely rational-

ist? Certainly, most utopians deliberately aim at logical coherence and a completeness of vision (called 'totalist' by their enemies). Some, like Plato, base their systems on a metaphysic which can be called idealist but by far the greatest number proceed to construct an ideal system on the basis of observing human life and its present deficiencies: that is, their basis is empirical and 'materialist', even if their deductions escape from the realm of verifiability, as must all speculation about social alternatives. This is particularly noticeable in the post-Enlightenment utopians who strove to erect a genuine social science on the basis of observed human nature, beginning with rudimentary psychology. Furthermore, most utopians try to relate their constructs to empirically known existing society because only thus can it gain credibility with their audience.

An article by Horsburgh emphasises the close connection of the utopian to political reality, showing how utopianism grows from the identification of social problems: 'the political relevance of their problems ... enables them to make an important contribution to the life of the community' [10]. It is not true that utopias, even that of Plato, are rationalist in the sense of trying to force the world to conform to baseless theoretical fantasies, for these 'fantasies' grow out of, and act as correctives for, given social problems. However, the *consequences* of such utopian thinking may be rationalist in the sense which critics denigrate. The utopian certainly views society as an artefact and seeks to change it, and human behaviour, according to his/her theory - a 'constructivism' which for Hayek and others is hubristic. By comparison with a thoroughgoing empiricism which entails no interference at all (in that values or prescriptions cannot be entailed by facts within such an epistemology), utopian analysis of society and social evils has a strongly prescriptive element which would, if enacted, cause people to change their tastes and behaviour.



The opponents who brand utopianism as rationalist also brand it, for similar reasons, as a *coercive* mode of thought, citing the maxim 'he who wills the end wills the means'. It is feared that the utopian's own ideas, formalised and rigidified in a rationalistic system, will be imposed on others to whom it is anathema, a fear subtended by a premise about the irreducible differences between people. Such arguments are forcefully presented by Popper. Peculiar to liberal thinking is the fear that 'single-mindedness', absolute belief or any kind of self-validating system of thought must entail dogmatism and be inimical to tolerance because it asserts its own primacy and exclusive truth. Such forms of thought are therefore conducive to coercion: this might be called 'the liberal view of theory and practice'. But a convic-

tion of the exclusive truth of one's views, while no doubt a *necessary* condition for totalitarianism or despotism, is not a *sufficient* one. Many utopians convinced of their own rightness nevertheless sought to persuade by reason (Godwin), example (Owen, the Saint-Simonians) or by presenting utopia as a readable fiction (More, Morris, Bellamy *et al.*). Whatever liberals may fear, the philosophy of belief does not bear out the view that strong conviction entails coercion: at most, belief entails not acting against one's belief, rather than imposing it on others.

Evidently, 'rationalist' utopian theory differs significantly from empirical political theory and does not hesitate to prescribe changes in society, on the basis of rational deductions from its basic premises about human nature: hence the hostility from Popper and other liberal 'piecemeal' reformers.

Reason dominates both the rationalist and the empiricist method; but human beings also have the faculty of fantasy: they can imagine or project that which does not exist. The empiricist chooses not to use this faculty and confines him/herself to observations of what is (which often become the justifications of the status quo), while the utopian deliberately employs it in constructing alternative possibilities. To do so, s/he necessarily selects a theory-based or rationalist method, since empiricism would carry him/her no further than the existent. Empiricism and rationalism are different epistemological standpoints, mutually challengeable, but neither can be said to have a monopoly of reason or rightness. Since current accounts of scientific method acknowledge the interpenetration of theory and fact in empiricism, the rigid methodological distinction which enabled utopians to be branded as rationalists, and hence dismissed, has in part collapsed, bringing, perhaps, a new lease of tolerance for the utopian method.

Another reason for considering utopianism necessarily authoritarian is the stigmatisation of utopians as enemies of free choice. Liberal-democratic critics, who believe in the existence of a multiplicity of political truths, alias opinions, contend that the utopian, following his/her own reason, will impose 'real' interests on people which contradict their felt, expressed or apparent interests - interests which under a democratic system are systematically expressed. Thus the utopian's doctrinaire rationalism deprives individuals of free, rational choice. (This conclusion stems from the political scientist's interpretation of preferences expressed by voting as acts of free choice and indicators of political 'rightness'.) Clearly, the utopian's pursuit of an 'objective' political truth militates against this expressive, pluralist view of the political process and seems to require a dictatorial form of government. Twentieth-century political theory has reaffirmed the importance of *interests*, and largely neglected the idea of political *truth*; pluralists hold that there is a plurality of incompatible political interests which must be reconciled through democratic procedure. The utopian's insistence on defining people's 'real' interests a priori threatens to override this heterogeneity and to impose a uniform solution autocratically, denying them the free choice and opportunities for self-differentiation which are vital to self-fulfilment. Another reason for distrusting the idea of real interests is that departure from expressed preferences leaves no safeguard against a state which invents 'real' interests for individuals which suit its own purposes (e.g. as the military argues the need for ever-increasing defence expenditure to protect the people). This is often seen as the major danger in Rousseau's theory of the General Will [11]. The lack of free choice and the risk of authoritarianism are therefore seen as necessary and deplorable results of the utopian's departure from

expressions of individual rationality and expressed preferences.

Liberals uphold the sanctity of revealed preferences as expressions of rational choice and as manifestations of the freedom which a liberal society strives to foster. Even wrong choices presumably embody this virtue, although the paradigmatically free act is also the perfectly rational (right) act. But the association of choice with rationality and freedom in the liberal-democratic context must be called into question. The objective and subjective constraints are well-known: distortions are caused by the representative and party systems, while individuals suffer from lack of information and lack of time to participate fully in politics. The myths of rationality and freedom which have been constructed round the act of voting are well known. So the utopian could defend his/her procedure by arguing that the so-called free rationality which flourishes in a liberal-democratic system is no more than ideology and conditioning mixed with ignorance, and is never an expression of pure, rational desire. At least the interests which s/he would instil in utopian citizens would embody reason and truth.

Fresh light can be thrown on the good sense of the utopian's way of proceeding by a suggestive use of Arrow's General Possibility Theorem for the construction of social-welfare functions. Arrow shows that the aggregation of individual interests cannot usually lead to a collective interest or 'social' choice emerging (under certain postulated conditions) because of the problems of intransitivity of choice and the difficulty of comparing utilities interpersonally. He concludes '... the only method of passing from individual tastes to social preferences which will be satisfactory ... are either imposed or dictatorial'. He also adds 'if consumers' values can be represented by a wide range of individual orderings, the doctrine of voters' sovereignty is incompatible with that of collective rationality' [12]. In this connection one can also invoke the arguments of Olson concerning the need to induce, oblige or coerce would-be free-riders into contributing their proper shares for the provision of public or collective goods. [13].

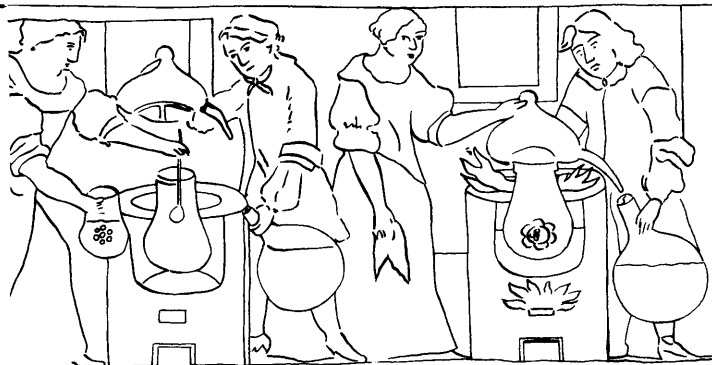
While Arrow and Olson set out to demonstrate the practical shortcomings of laissez-faire principles in the political and economic organisation of a liberal society, and to suggest corrective devices, their arguments can also be used to defend the conviction implicit in the utopian approach, to show that a willingness to override individual preferences (at a given time) is necessary for the achievement of social improvement for all.

In Arrow's terms, the utopian can be regarded as the spokesperson for collective rationality who imposes the social-welfare function and, in Olson's terms, as someone trying to organise the provision of the greatest public good - an ideal society. In the circumstances, it would be counterproductive and irrational for him/her to attempt to consult and aggregate the interests of potential inhabitants of utopia in drawing up his/her plans, particularly if s/he follows Rousseau, Marx and others in believing that corrupt social institutions pervert people's desires (and preference orderings). Even if s/he 'took people's present interests as proper and permanent, intransitivity, conflict of interests and other problems would make aggregation impossible. Therefore, the rational method for devising a utopia is the elaboration of collective rationality as analysed by the utopian. The rational method for realising a collective good, objectively and benignly conceived, such as utopia, must be its imposition irrespective of expressed personal preferences, if necessary by coercion. Coercion need not be physical or violent: it may, as Olson suggests, consist of fines or the

threatened loss of privileges of those disinclined to cooperate. Admittedly, a transition to utopia involving such methods would violate Pareto optimality, but this constraint of liberal economic and social theory is inherently inimical to any social change and cannot be accepted as the major criterion for judging any change. A privileged section of the population in existing society cannot be granted the right to veto utopia for others in perpetuity merely because its own vested interests would be threatened. If such a conviction is authoritarian, then authoritarianism is a justifiable part of the process of inventing and realising utopias.

Those who find frightening shades of totalitarianism in this tentative justification of the utopian's role must nevertheless concede that large sections of modern society, particularly in a welfare state, operate on just such principles, without intolerable intrusions into individual freedom. The justification of interventionist or welfare politics is that collective or community rationality is being substituted for the aggregation of subjective, personal interests in important policy areas: this takes place, for example, in the provision of a health service or of motorways paid for by taxes. In fact, given that there *are* supra-individual goals in any society, a utopian approach is the most rational approach. The utopian attempts to create a rationality of the whole community, superseding that of the egocentric individual, to whose partiality liberal-democratic politics is a constant prey. I would argue that it is *the only possible approach* to thoroughgoing social change since the dominance of expressed interests and ideology would prevent radical change coming about in a democratic fashion. The operation of individual rational choice in a given community could never achieve utopia. My remarks here apply to utopian theorising primarily, since there has been so little utopian practice, and do not apply to utopian communities set up as enclaves in existing societies, since their membership is voluntary and so such problems do not arise. The argument drawn from Arrow's theorem would apply both to the transition to utopia, where it would justify an imposed solution, and also to the operation of utopia in the first instance, where social-welfare functions would have to be imposed until the inhabitants of the new-born state had been re-educated sufficiently to see their reasonableness. It remains to convince those who deny the existence of a collective interest, or who argue 'better spontaneous misery than contrived, artificial happiness'. The latter is a precarious value-judgement, the former is based on a view of politics which is contradicted daily by political practice, even in the most laissez-faire of countries.

Even the champions of utopia cannot deny that the realisation of *any* utopia would impose unwelcome changes on at least some people, however gently it did so. Critics such as Popper find this so distasteful that they immediately object to utopian theory as a genre. I have suggested some reasons why the utopian mode is the one which must be adopted in attempting any radical social improvement; I would now like to offer a further positive defence of the use of the so-called authoritarian utopian mode of thinking in contemporary society. The special virtue of utopianism is that it takes a 'global' or holistic view of the reorganisation of society. In our current state of permanent economic crisis, the adoption of a 'utopian' approach is urgent for theorists and practitioners of politics who wish to improve on the existing free-for-all-but-freer-for-some-than-others. Undoubtedly, on practical grounds alone, the 'authoritarian' or imposed method of the utopian can be justified. Where there are scarce resources with no imminent likelihood of abundance, people *must* accept



an authoritative allocation of resources by criteria agreed to be fair, or which they would agree to be fair in the absence of vested interests. This imperative becomes compelling in the face of threatened scarcities and even the most libertarian of liberals now countenance some such control because refusal would constitute mass suicide. Authoritative allocation can arguably be justified in all cases where one person's appropriation of an extra portion detracts from another's chance of enjoying an adequate portion, as in any zero-sum game. Property is the paradigm case, but the formula might apply equally to the right to have a large family and other matters which many would consider to lie in the sphere of private choice. Even where an abundance of material and other goods could be attained, the ultimate limitations of space and human mortality justify some degree of directed allocation.

The zero-sum formula suggested is reminiscent of Mill's enabling criterion for individual liberty (which forbade interference except when direct material harm was threatened) but has the opposite *disabling* emphasis, and rests on the un-Milliean supposition that all individuals and activities in society are indissolubly interconnected, so that 'private' or 'economic' decisions cannot be taken in isolation. Given that the problem is primarily that of scarce resources, it would also be logical to extend the principle of authoritative allocation from distribution to the process of production so that a social contribution could be required from everyone. The formula leaves many problems unsolved, of course: questions of which goods count as scarce, and which distributive criteria and values should apply, must still be answered painstakingly. Such allocative formulae might be imposed, but they need be neither arbitrary nor unjust.

In a shrinking world there are cogent reasons exogenous to political ideology for accepting social planning on the basis of such a formula. Planning is not utopia: nevertheless, the arguments for planning may be the thin end of the wedge in persuading liberals to abate their hostility to the utopian approach. Also, the extending scope and predictive power of the social sciences now make future-thinking a more respectable and less hubristic enterprise than it seemed previously. It is feasible, using economic projections, to devise a Good, in terms of resource-use and social organisation, for the next generation, and perhaps to manufacture a utopia - not in the sense of 'a perfect society', but a utopia which is the best of all possible worlds in the circumstances. These arguments from expediency for a greater degree of state intervention are merely arguments for the adoption of a utopian approach in its narrow sense, which aim to counteract the liberal antipathy to anything which smacks of systematic planning. However, my intention in this article has also been to justify utopianism in its widest sense as an overall schema imposed in the interests of a better, and more just, life for all.

The persuasive force of the foregoing arguments

rested on the practical problems which the world now faces, but the totalistic and sometimes *dirigiste* approach of utopianism has better justifications than those of expediency: it represents a method of attaining social justice which does not rest on the precarious basis of individual choice. Fourier, for example, solved most problems of distributive justice by predicting abundance (other utopians, conversely, have postulated the absence of greed), but this failed to solve the problem of permanently scarce resources, which he was obliged to solve by authoritative allocation. So, regarding sex, he decreed that the sexually talented lovers of the 'Angelicate' group should sometimes bestow their favours on the less well-endowed, who under a laissez-faire system of allocation would have gone without. Liberals would find such an intrusion of authority into the most private area of sexual choice offensive and perhaps bizarre. But Fourier's treatment of sex epitomises the central preoccupation

of utopianism, namely, the contention that people owe the Good Life to their fellows, individually and collectively, and are owed it likewise; they ought therefore willingly to sacrifice a measure of personal freedom and convenience to realise it. Beneath this assertion lies the conviction that we are by nature sociable creatures in the same small boat. This utopian conception of altruism radically opposes the egoistic premises of the dominant liberal ideology and makes the liberal fear that utopianism equals coercion and the loss of individual identity. But if this notion of collective mutual responsibility and the wholeness of society which is at the basis of utopianism can be justified, then utopianism as theory and practice can also be defended. Whether it is branded authoritarian or not is a matter of ideological terminology, but the necessity for a utopian rather than a liberal approach is clear.

Footnotes

- 1 See K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (English trans., 1936); K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848); F. Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880); J. Freund, *Utopie et violence* (1978); E. Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1917) and *Der Geist der Utopie* (1918); R. Muchielli, *Le Mythe de la cité idéale* (1961); J. Servier, *L'Histoire de l'utopie* (1967) and R. Ruyer, *L'Utopie et les utopies* (1951). This is only a selection of commentaries, needless to say.
- 2 See, e.g., B. Berelson et al., *Voting*, Chicago UP, 1954, esp. Ch.14.
- 3 M. Oakshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, Methuen, 1962, Part I.
- 4 *ibid.*, p.5.
- 5 F.A. Hayek, *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, Routledge and

- Kegan Paul, 1967, p.85.
- 6 *Communist Manifesto, Selected Works*, Moscow, 1970, Vol.I, p.134; *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Vol.III, pp.119 and 126.
- 7 *Selected Works*, Vol.I, p.134
- 8 K. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1945.
- 9 M. Oakshott, *op.cit.*, p.21.
- 10 H.J.N. Horsburgh, 'The Relevance of the Utopian', *Ethics*, Vol.67, p.134.
- 11 See, e.g., A. Cobban, *Rousseau and the Modern State*, Allen & Unwin, 1964, 2nd edition.
- 12 K. Arrow, *Social Choice and Individual Values*, 2nd edition, Yale UP, 1963, pp.59-60.
- 13 M. Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, Harvard UP, 1971.

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