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Eli Kramer
Department of Philosophy
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Utopia as the Gift of Ethical Genius:¹ Ernst Cassirer's Theory of Utopia

Abstract:

In this essay, I explore Cassirer's brief discussion of utopia in *An Essay on Man*, as likely built upon Kant's theory of genius as from the *Critique of Judgment*. This exploration of Cassirer's theory of utopia lays the groundwork to argue that a utopia is the dynamic product (work) of the "ethical genius," a work that advances culture by luring it, via ideal imaginaries, to new realms of possibility for ethical advancement. Utopias have their dangers and limits, but nevertheless have a critical role to play in improving our ethical life.

Keywords:

utopia, *eutopia*, genius, cosmopolitan, culture, history, ethics, imaginaries, ideal theory, non-ideal theory, Kant

Introduction

Sir Thomas More would probably be pleased to know that his term "utopia" has kept much of its original meaning. Utopias are to us today, as they were for More, both *ou-topos* (no-place/where), and *eu-topos* (good-place). They are visions of the good life, and ironically, because of that, they are supposed to be impossible to actualize on earth. They cannot be located at any point in actualized space and cannot be found in any moment of actual-

1) I am indebted to Dr. Laura Mueller for ongoing discussions, and for her insight into the nature of the "moral/ethical genius," without which, this essay would not have been possible.

ized time, because they are “too good” for a non-ideal world. What would it mean to suggest, as the philosopher Ernst Cassirer did, that utopias have fundamental import on our lives? In *An Essay on Man*, Cassirer said that: “The great mission of the utopia is to make room for the possible as opposed to a passive acquiescence in the present actual state of affairs. It is symbolic thought which overcomes the natural inertia of man and endows him with a new ability, the ability constantly to reshape his human universe.”² What can this statement possibly mean in a world where utopia is supposed to be, in principle, impossible to locate in space and time?³

To answer this question, we return with Cassirer and Kant to investigating how utopias are created as essays, political treatises, and novels (as pieces of art, not just as reasoned arguments about political life). We must first better understand the creation of great cultural products. It is for this purpose that it is important to examine Kant's theory of genius, especially Cassirer's handling of it for his theory of utopia. In this essay, I explore Cassirer's brief discussion of utopia in *An Essay on Man*, as likely built upon, and clarified by, Kant's theory of genius from the *Critique of Judgment*. This exploration of Cassirer's theory of utopia lays the groundwork to argue that a utopia is the dynamic product (work) of the “ethical genius,” a work that advances culture by luring it (via ideal imaginaries) to new realms of possibility for ethical advancement. Utopias have their dangers and limits, but nevertheless have a critical role to play in improving our ethical life.

First, I will briefly overview Kant's theory of genius. Following this analysis, I will explain how Kant saw geniuses (in a limited fashion) as advancing culture. I then explore how Cassirer's discussion of utopia in *An Essay on Man* can be thought of (for our purposes) as following from Kant's theory of genius. I then conclude the essay by unpacking what Cassirer clarifies about the place, limits, dangers and tasks of utopia. Utopias, when kept out of reach as alluring dreams, will be found to be critical to ethical progress.⁴

Kant's Theory of Genius

To understand Kant's theory of genius, and what role it plays for Cassirer's theory of utopia, it is important to review how Kant demarcated fine art (the territory of genius) from other types of activity. For Kant, art is distinguished from nature, as doing is from acting. Art is a “production through freedom:”

Art is distinguished from nature as doing (*facere*) is from acting or operating in general (*agere*); and the product or result of art is distinguished from that of nature, the first being a work (*opus*), second an effect (*effectus*)... By right we should not call anything art except a production through freedom, i.e., through a power of choice that bases its act on reason.⁵

Art is made by purposive free agents who have their own ends. Art further splits into “craft” and “fine art.” “Crafters,” or “mercenary artists,” have already cognized an instrumental product, and as such, beauty will always be secondary, and not the primary outcome of the product. The broom may be beautiful, but the crafters' (and the users') interest in it is largely as a tool, and such an aim limits its power to be an exhibition for taste.

2) Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 68.

3) Dystopias also “reshape our human universe.” From Aldous Huxley's *A Brave New World*, to George Orwell's *1984*, to David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, there have been many visions of utopia's shadow. Although I will not discuss the dystopian *oeuvre* here, I think it also, when successful, functions along the same lines as the utopian *oeuvre*.

4) The essay has two component sections: A study of Kant's theory of genius, and a discussion of the product of a kind of Kantian genius (the ethical teacher), the utopia. By understanding the utopia as a fine artistic object of genius, its place and value for culture will be better understood.

5) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 170 [§43, 303].

The fine artist, on the other hand, in Kant's sense, seeks to cultivate an experience of the beautiful. To achieve such an end, the fine artist cannot simply create a work of sensuous pleasure (just because blue pleases us, does not make a blue painting beautiful). Such agreeability falls under the mercenary understanding (yet again). Picasso may be a fine artist (even a genius), but he is not so because we like the color blue in his Blue Period paintings. Fine art is not about agreeableness, but about creating a product that, as exhibited to us, has "purposeless purposiveness."⁶

This seems to be a paradox, as the product is created with a purpose to "not have a purpose." Kant explains that this apparent paradox is the prime challenge and test of any artist; though we should see fine art as art, not nature, "the purposiveness in its form must seem as free from all constraint of chosen rules as if it were a product of mere nature."⁷ To find an object beautiful, the forms must be given in such a way that we as persons feel as if we are confronted by the (more significant) purposiveness we find in nature. Fine art offers "aesthetic ideas,"⁸ such as those we can find in nature, except that fine art's "aesthetic ideas" are prompted by our determined concepts. It might astonish many philosophers unfamiliar with the *Critique of Judgment* that Kant argued that clear concepts impede both art and genius. The clarity of our concepts are not always the most interesting aspect of being persons.

Kant's theory of fine art is the basis of his claim that the very predispositions of geniuses allow them to be mediums through which "nature gives the rule to art." By the unique play of the genius' powers (that nature has "given" them), they can produce dynamic, symbolic products (works) that have a "purposeless purposiveness" like we find in nature. When most successful, geniuses offer an "aesthetic idea" that overflows the conceptual organization pervading the sensuous product; the product of genius is more than the sum of its parts. The product of genius (at its best) has the power to be always vital, even after its creation.

Four points⁹ follow from this theory of genius:

(1) Genius is a talent for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given, not a predisposition consisting of a skill for something that can be learned by following some rule or other; hence the foremost property of genius must be originality.¹⁰

Originality is not, as we typically think, a quality of an object that makes it utterly novel to the universe but the power of the product of genius for which no rule can be given, and which brings forth deeper aspects of nature.

(2) Since nonsense too can be original. The products of genius must also be models, i.e., they must be exemplary; hence, though they do not themselves arise through imitation, still they must serve others for this, i.e., as a standard or rule by which to judge.¹¹

6) For a general overview of Kant on "purposeless purposiveness," see: Ernst Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 312–313.

7) Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 173 [§45, 306].

8) For more on "aesthetic ideas" see: *Ibid.*, 182 [§49, 314].

9) In quantity, quality, relation, and modality.

10) *Ibid.*, 175 [§46, 308]

11) *Ibid.*, 175 [§46, 308]

In order for the product of genius not to be “nonsense,” these deeper aspects of nature need to be an intelligible standard that is of service to culture. As we shall see, this point is critical for Kant in distinguishing the cosmopolitan genius from the fanatical one.

(3) Genius itself cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products, and it is rather as nature that it gives the rule. That is why, if an author owes a product to his genius, he himself does not know how he came by the ideas for it; nor is it in his power [*Gewalt*] to devise such products at his pleasure, or by following a plan, and to communicate [his procedure] to others in precepts that would enable them to bring about like products. (Indeed, that is presumably why the word genius is derived from [Latin] *genius*, [which means] the guardian and guiding spirit that each person is given as his own at birth, and to whose inspiration [*Eingebung*] those original ideas are due.)

(4) Nature, through genius, prescribes the rule not to science but to art, and this also only insofar as the art is to be fine art.¹²

Given the horizon of activity in art, Kant thought that scientists are never geniuses, for genius properly belongs to the (fine) artists:

Thus one can indeed learn everything Newton has set forth in his immortal work on the principles of natural philosophy, however great a mind was needed to make such discoveries; but one cannot learn to write inspired poetry, however elaborate all the precepts of this art may be, and however superb its models.¹³

But why is this so? He goes on to say:

The reason for this is that Newton could show how he took every one of the steps he had to take in order to get from the first elements of geometry to his great and profound discoveries; he could show this not only to himself but to everyone else as well, in an intuitive[ly clear] way, allowing others to follow. But no Homer or Wieland can show how his ideas, rich in fancy and yet also in thought, arise and meet in his mind; the reason is that he himself does not know, and hence also cannot teach it to anyone else.¹⁴

Science must be able to give an exact recipe for how it got to its conclusions. The genius could not do so, even if they wanted to do so. Genius' products, even if originating in the sciences, do not belong to that domain.

A genius cannot show how she arrived at her “spirited” product(s) because, by her very predispositions, her imagination is no longer enslaved to the needs of the understanding. Her imagination is now in free play with the understanding in such a way that she can mold a product that enhances and overflows its sensuous form. Further, neither reason, nor understanding, nor even imagination alone allow for products with true creative overflow. Rather, these products are created by the very harmony and play of these powers, given to the genius by nature. Geniuses do not know what makes them able to be geniuses, because their whole natural disposition is guiding them.

12) Ibid., 175–176 [§46, 308]

13) Ibid., 176 [§47, 309].

14) Ibid., 176–177 [§47, 309].

Our ever-insatiable reason is frustrated by our lack of access to others and ourselves, and this is doubly so when trying to understand what makes a genius a genius. People have spent lifetimes studying Beethoven to find the secret to his genius, yet we have yet to be ultimately satisfied, as we continue to read, write about, perform, and portray his life and work.¹⁵ Although we never really know the secret heart strings that play the song of genius (nor do the geniuses know that melody) we can certainly see their influence in human culture. In his *Anthropology*¹⁶, Kant explored whether such influence had any positive effect on the progress of the human species. It is in this study of genius, and the progress of culture, that we will begin to see what role Cassirer might have understood the utopia having as artistic product in cultural life.

Genius and the Progress of Culture

In “Spirit without Lines: Kant’s Attempt to Reconcile Genius and Society,” Corey W. Dyck explored the ways that, according to Kant, genius advances culture, while recognizing Kant’s concerns about “fanatical genius,” and Kant’s preference for the person of “perfected judgment.”¹⁷ Dyck uses Kant’s own metaphor in the *Anthropology*, that of a comet, to distinguish between the fanatical genius and the cosmopolitan genius:

The metaphor of the comet [that Kant invokes in his *Anthropology*] suggests that present works of genius co-exist in continuity with works of genius of the past and future, and it is for this reason that Kant had critiqued Herder for not adding to the stock of genial [sic.], yet communicable, expressions of aesthetic ideas. The same comet returns, after having run its long course, and re-illuminates the horizon. Similarly, the genius wins “a new rule” for art and the progressive, cosmopolitan genius will indeed stand in relation of continuity to geniuses of the past, though crucially his work will transcend that particular audience and radiate with universal appeal.¹⁸

The works of the cosmopolitan genius stand the test of time. They share, with other works of genius, an insight that is not reducible to the contingencies of their creation. They are the kinds of products we turn to again and again for new insight. They are not the kind of “nonsense” that is unintelligible, and therefore, of no real cultural power. Despite the centuries that have passed, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is constantly drawn upon for insight into our Promethean desire and reconstructed for new media and contexts.

Such products are to be distinguished from the products of the “fanatical genius” (what Kant suggests are “human meteors”), that create narrow, agitative, almost nonsensical, and mystical products for a select few. They only burst forth vital energy, but do not continue to reinvigorate culture; they are not “bright enough” to “radiate with universal appeal,” and to bear the test of time. Instead, these products flash once, before crashing to the earth. Despite the wide success of W. H. Ainsworth’s, *The Miser’s Daughter* in England in the year 1842, it has not arisen from its context to be such a revitalizing resource for culture. Instead, it has stayed dead and buried. *The Miser’s Daughter* also never rose from the ashes of its initial reception, like Herman Melville’s, *Moby Dick* did after his death. Although Melville was often derided as writing “nonsense,” his products commu-

15) For an excellent study of Beethoven that explores this very problem of our desire to access the spirit of genius, see: J. W. N. Sullivan, *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development* (New York: Vintage Books, 1927).

16) Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Loudon, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 119–124 [§57–§59].

17) Corey W. Dyck, “Spirit Without Lines,” ed. Gary E. Overvold, *Idealistic Studies* 34, no. 2 (2004), doi:10.5840/idstudies20043422.

18) *Ibid.*, 158.

nicability as insight, and as standard for deepening our relationship to nature, eventually shined forth. The “cosmopolitan genius” creates products that can be revitalized and renewed, even if it takes some time, and luck, for them to find their celestial courses.

Given this framework, I suspect Cassirer utilized Kant's exploration of the products of the “cosmopolitan genius” (human comets) in his theory of utopia, and more broadly throughout his corpus. Cassirer described these symbolic, cultural products as having been “molded” in such a way as to return always as *forma-formans* (form-as-form-that-is-becoming), which I take to be the products of what Dyck calls the “cosmopolitan genius.”

The “cosmopolitan geniuses” often feel they failed in their task, for the finished product never contains all the possibilities of the artists' reflective intuition. However, Cassirer argues that the “audience” sees something different in the products of such geniuses:

Where he sees too little, we are overwhelmed by too much: where he felt an inner inadequacy, we stand before an impression of an inexhaustible plenitude we believe we will never be able to fully appropriate ... And with this we also realize why the truly great works of culture never confront us as something essentially stiff and solidified that restricts and hinders the free movement of the spirit in this rigidity. Their content exists for us only by virtue of the fact that it is continually taken possession of anew and as a result always created anew.¹⁹

The great works of culture keep their vital aspect by always being taken by us as persons and revitalized by us through their ability to be “repossessed:”

Just as Scholastic metaphysics coined the concepts of *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*, so the philosophy of symbolic forms must distinguish between *forma formans* and *forma formata*. The interplay between both is what constitutes the swing of the pendulum of intellectual life itself. The *forma formans* that becomes *forma formata*, which it must become for the sake of its own self-preservation without ever becoming reduced to it, retains the power to regain itself from it, to be born again as *forma formans*—this is what is distinctive of the development of [G]eist and culture.²⁰

For Cassirer, in the intellectual life of *Geist*, as manifested through its cultural products, the *forma-formata* is perennially remolded through *forma-formans*. Cassirer saw the products of genius as special, as they can be perennially revitalized, and not simply remolded or destroyed. For example, *War and Peace* by Tolstoy, although translated into multiple languages, and over 151 years old, is a “new book upon every reading,” without having to be remolded or destroyed in service to some new product of culture. As Dyck suggests, Kant thought perpetual communicability was a good test of the mettle for a cosmopolitan product of genius.²¹ Tolstoy's book has “purposiveness,” despite its author having passed, because it is a dynamic product of a genius. Products of genius have a perennial energy to renew themselves.

19) Ernst Cassirer, *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences: Five Studies*, trans. Steve G. Lofts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 111.

20) Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms-The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, ed. John Michael Krois and Donald Phillippe Verene, trans. John Michael Krois, vol. 4 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 19.

21) For more on Kant, translation, and the products of genius, see: Dyck, “Spirit Without Lines,” 158.

Utopia as the Product of the Ethical Genius

So, where do utopias (as artistic products) come from, and what are their purposes? To answer that question, we turn to Cassirer's *An Essay on Man*. Cassirer's chapter, "Facts and Ideals" in *An Essay on Man* (which includes his brief theory of utopia), begins with an overview of Kant's *Third Critique*. We investigated certain parts of *The Third Critique* in order to understand Cassirer's attention to it in this chapter. There is no question it plays a central role in Cassirer's theory of utopia. In this chapter, Cassirer wrote that:

In his *Critique of Judgment* Kant raises the question whether it is possible to discover a general criterion by which we may describe the fundamental structure of the human intellect and distinguish this structure from all other possible modes of knowing. After a penetrating analysis he is led to the conclusion that such a criterion is to be sought in the character of human knowledge, which is such that the understanding is under the necessity of making a sharp distinction between reality and the possibility of things. It is this character of human knowledge which determines the place of man in the general chain of being. A difference between "real" and "possible" exists neither for the beings below man nor for those above him.²²

For Kant, it is our ability as persons to distinguish between the "real" and the "possible," which determines humanity's place in the order of reality. A difference between "real" and "possible" is, perhaps, unique to humanity. In what follows, we will see how some aspects of the role of possibility advance a more ethical world. Cassirer begins with Kant's story of possibility to help us understand this essential feature of our ethical and cultural life.

For Kant, possibility, as we experience it, is peculiar to how our imagination (sphere of the possible) interacts with the sensible (sphere of the actual). Kant did not think this relationship was necessary for other beings.²³ Cassirer, to differentiate himself from Kant, noted that the human intellect needs symbols, instead of images, to make this distinction between the actual and possible: "Instead of saying that the human intellect is an intellect which is 'in need of images' [*ein der Bilder bedürftiger Verstand*] we should rather say that it is need of symbols."²⁴ Building off of Kant's critical philosophy, Cassirer argued that symbols play the role of a universal we cannot access. Symbols can produce stabilized meanings beyond our sensuous immediate experience; they stand for that which we do not have sensible access to in experience.²⁵ In other words, symbols are the mediums in which we self-consciously engage with possibility in a phenomenal form. The "standing-in-for" quality of symbols is a product of the imagination, but moves us beyond the mere image. We move beyond the sensuous image, since we do not "really know" the universals we are symbolizing. Cassirer wanted to suggest that our imagining power was ever more pulled away from immediacy with sensuous reality. Symbol, as opposed to "image," better expresses the ever-widening creative polarization of sensuous expression and reflective ideas. In Cassirer's words:

22) Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, 61.

23) Kant did not think any other animals had such a conscious sense of the possible, and he speculated that higher beings might have an understanding that needed no such dichotomy. Although I am more inclined to a Whiteheadian account of the status of the possible, I agree with Kant that it is extremely rare to have some sort of self-conscious experience of the possible. That is probably exclusive (so far as we can tell) to higher primates, whales, and a few other creatures.

24) Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, 62.

25) For more on Kant's theory of the symbol, see Immanuel Kant, "On Beauty the Symbol of Morality," in *Critique of Judgment*, 225–30 [§59].

Man cannot escape his own achievement. He cannot but adopt the conditions of his own life. No longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe. Language, myth, art, and religion are parts of this universe. They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experiences. All human progress in thought and experience refines upon and strengthens this net. No longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see it, as it were, face to face. Physical reality seems to recede in proportion, as man's symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with the things themselves man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols, or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium. His situation is the same in the theoretical as the practical sphere.²⁶

This symbolic achievement, this fall from innocence, is not to be regretted; we would not be who we are without this cumulative concretization of our expressive life. Without it, we would not have the flexible symbols that have made our culture, nor would we be able to "turn back" and reflect and critique our situation. Cassirer advanced a multicultural and historical expression of the parameters of consciousness that Kant laid out in his systematic philosophy. He weaved a story of how we gained our subjectivity, and by that very process, began to recognize something "other." It is the story of how, particularly in the West, subjects and objects became split.

Cassirer thought this aspect of symbolic life was continually dismissed by positivists and (mere) empiricists alike:

Empiricists and positivists have always maintained that the highest task of human knowledge is to give us the facts and nothing but the facts. A theory not based on fact indeed would be a castle in the air. But this is no answer to the problem of a true scientific method; it is, on the contrary, the problem itself. For what is the meaning of a "scientific fact"? Obviously no such fact is given in any haphazard observation or in a mere accumulation of sense data. The facts of science always imply a theoretical, which means a symbolic, element. Many, if not most, of those scientific facts which have changed the whole course of the history of science have been hypothetical facts before they became observable facts.²⁷

The problem lies in that, in order to know facts, we must distance ourselves from their source. Further, to advance our knowledge of this source, we must make hypotheses (that is, imaginatively symbolize the possible) before we have all the facts. We do so to test, verify and further advance our understanding of the rich world of experience. Without such an openness to creative speculation, non-Euclidean geometry could not have been advanced, as its applications and relationship to "fact" has taken generations to sort, out and was not initially apparent.²⁸ Facts and ideas should go hand in hand, but one cannot simply precede the other.

As I already discussed, Cassirer argues that Kant's work in the *Critique of Judgment* helped articulate the way that our human power of imagination allowed us access to self-consciousness of the possible (as an imaginative symbol). This power of symbolic life allows humanity the opportunity to create fine artistic symbolic

26) Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, 27.

27) *Ibid.*, 64.

28) Cassirer explored the history of this kind of problem of speculation as it relates to non-Euclidean geometry in: Ernst Cassirer, *The Problem of Knowledge: Philosophy, Science, and History since Hegel*, trans. William H. Woglom and Charles W. Hendel, vol. 4 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 21–81.

products and scientific hypotheses (which are also products) to illuminate and enliven experience in different ways. Also, and perhaps most importantly, this power allows us to create great ethical symbolic products: “Possessed of great intellectual and moral power, the “ethical teachers” of mankind were endowed too with a profound imagination. Their imaginative insight permeates and animates all their assertions.”²⁹ Such a statement about the permeation and animation (dynamism) of the assertions (a certain type of symbolic product) of great “ethical teachers” has a very important implication. It suggests that the great “ethical teachers” could be considered a special type of “cosmopolitan genius,” that is, the “ethical genius.” I suspect that Cassirer drew on *The Third Critique* to talk about a special kind of artistic product, that of the great “ethical teachers.” As we shall see, in the spirit of *The Third Critique*, Cassirer wanted to show that the artistry of ethics is also located in its ability to utilize the possible through symbolic products, and not simply to “stay with the facts.” That is the point of the chapter “Facts and Ideals.” The products of the great “ethical teachers” exceed any mere conceptual analysis. Their “imagination” overflow their “assertions.” There is something more in the products of the great “ethical teachers” than merely the sensuous words on the page. The assertions of the great “ethical teachers” are more than the sum of their sensuous parts. The “assertions” of the great “ethical teachers” have a “purposeless purposiveness.” These assertions, in short, are aesthetic ideas, although they are also more than that.

But what are these products of the great “ethical teachers” (what I am calling ethical geniuses)? Cassirer reminded his reader that for “ethical teachers” to illuminate the possible, they must give a vision that has no-place and no-time. To defend his argument, he quotes a passage from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, reminding us that:

[The Platonic Republic] has been supposed to be a striking example of purely imaginary perfection. It has become a byword, as something that could exist only in the brain of an idle thinker... . We should do better, however, to follow up his thought and endeavor to place it in a clearer light by our own efforts, rather than to throw it aside as useless, under the miserable and very dangerous pretext of its impracticability... . For nothing can be more mischievous and more unworthy of a philosopher than the vulgar appeal to what is called adverse experience, which possibly might never have existed if at the proper time institutions had been formed according to those ideas, and not according to crude conceptions which, because they’re derived from experience only have marred all good intentions.³⁰

Utopias, insofar as they are communicable aesthetic ideas, ought to be able to be used as original standards for actual institutions. They are not located in the facts of adverse political experience in such a way that might allow us to empirically defend their credibility, but they are efficacious for experience. Without such visionary products, we are left to limited “adverse experience,” which often inhibits our ability to advance a better world. In Cassirer’s words:

When Thomas More wrote his *Utopia* he expressed this view in the very title of his work. A Utopia is not a portrait of the real world, or the actual political or social order. It exists at no moment of time and at no point in space, it is a “nowhere.” But just such a conception of a nowhere has stood the test and proved its strength in the development of the modern world.³¹

29) Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, 66.

30) As quoted in: *Ibid.*, 66. Original Citation: *CoPR* A 315, B 372- A 317, B 374.

31) Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, 66–67.

Cassirer concludes that “ethical teachers,” whether Plato and his *Republic*, or Rousseau and his “natural man,” also seek to offer new horizons of ethical advancement. These “ethical teachers” offer utopias (through a sensuous medium, such as the written word) that helps us “reshape our human universe,” and, should the utopias be truly worthy “human comets of communicability,” they will, upon each approach, illuminate new possibilities for ethical progress. Whether we like the visions of *The Republic* or “the natural man,” or not, we all recognize the fact that these utopian visions continue to return, bearing new insight (including criticism).³²

We now arrive where we began, with new insight: “The great mission of the utopia is to make room for the possible as opposed to a passive acquiescence in the present actual state of affairs. It is symbolic thought which overcomes the natural inertia of man and endows him with a new ability, the ability constantly to reshape his human universe.”³³ The products of the great “ethical teachers” meet the four points of genius, as described earlier: 1. They are original works that deepen our reflection and understanding of nature, and cannot be fully explained by experience or imitation of previous products; 2. They are standards for human political life; 3. They cannot be reduced to a formula or scientific rule; 4. They are not products of the sciences, but of an aesthetic (artistic) idea that is more than the sum of its parts. The cosmopolitan ethical genius helps humanity escape its own recalcitrance in the present. She does so by offering new horizons that reflect the purposeless purposive dynamism we find in nature, and that lure us to possible ethical improvement. This ethical improvement is often successful, because it is always luring us, ever just out of reach.

Utopia's Place, Limits, Dangers, and Task

Cassirer's theory can help us parse important questions of utopia's place in our ethical and political life. There is a popular debate in current political philosophy on ideal vs. non-ideal theory. Since John Rawls made this distinction, the debate has diverged into endless streams of academic discussion.³⁴ The heart of the debate centers on the very relation of facts and ideas we have been exploring. In this context, what role do ideas play in resolving the problems of our actual political life (i.e., the world of facts)? Cassirer suggests an interesting insight about this debate; it is a temporal problem. In this context, it is probably not very helpful to ask whether political theory maps the facts as they are, and slowly works to improve them, or whether it provides the strong “ought” for ourselves and society. Instead, the better questions surround the issue of what kinds of stories, given “adverse experience,” help us in the present, to “re-imagine our human universe”? Also, what stories can address “adverse experience” (without being reduced to it), so as to give us hope for the future, and advance, at least, the possibility for ethical improvement? Further, what stories limit us, or are dangerous and destroy our chances of a better future?

There are spaces for more practical, transitional, political philosophies to ameliorate our current world problems. However, when it comes to the stories that give us hope for the future, that truly commit us, and move us to ethical action, it is those alluring utopias that are, perhaps, of the greatest help. The question, then, is a temporal one, not only of what goals move us toward a better society in time, but also what “ideal imaginaries,” free from the fetters of our current time and place, move us toward a new kind of time. Which stories give us a new orientation on time, or who we were, are now, and who we might be (for better or

32) For concrete examples of how Cassirer understands the influence of utopia (in this case, Plato's *Republic*) on the Western political world, see: Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, ed. Charles William Hendel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 53–175.

33) *Ibid.*, 68.

34) For a good overview of these divergences, see: Laura Valentini, “Ideal vs. Non- Ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map,” *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 9 (2012).

worse)? There is no question that imaginative literature and re-mythologizing have played such a role in the past. For example, the role that the Christian “city on the hill” (from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount) has played in American life, from Jonathan Winthrop through Ronald Reagan.³⁵

A good utopia is not a Rawlsian story of the realizable perfect test subject society, but rather a more artistic exercise in storytelling. The utopia tells us about the past and present state of affairs and gives us new ideas for orientations on the future. The ideals and/or conditions of the problem for the present can even be set in the fictional past, as with Rousseau’s “natural man,” or the stories in Pre-Chin China about the great sage kingdoms of old. Cassirer suggested that it is beside the point whether utopias like Plato’s *Republic*, or (after Cassirer’s lifetime) Rawls’ thought experiment match the current world. The question is whether utopias tell us the kind of stories about ourselves that guide our experience to new accounts of the world and may improve the facts of our ethical life. I suspect Plato’s story will outlive Rawls’, not because one is more feasible, or the other more ideal, but due to the alluring artistic nature of Plato’s vision of the world as it could be.

These stories sometimes motivate people to actualize utopias (however fallibly). I call these communities “*eutopias*.”³⁶ They are actualized and forward-looking institutions for the advancement of human dignity and culture. *Eutopian* politics aims at refining human political life through enacting the “good life” in a smaller place, a kind of microcosm. Such a politics proffers tantalizing alternatives to the broader culture, which did not seem possible within that culture. Plato’s Academy is a classic example of such an institution. It is nothing like his ideal Republic, but is a context for thinking about such experiments. Utopias “proposition us” (in the Whiteheadian sense)³⁷ to new ethical horizons we may have felt but did not see, while *eutopias* actualize such possible versions of the good life on a small scale to help others feel the reality and lure of living one kind of “better life.” In either case, the allure has its dangers. Could not such ethical possibilities be siren calls, seducing persons and cultures closer to destruction (think of Lenin’s real outcomes)? What keeps utopias from creating dangerous communities?

It would be foolish to deny that many a utopian artistic vision has come dangerously close to, or has fallen into, mythic dogmatism, totalitarianism, or fascism. Cassirer recognized this aspect of utopian imagination well. After Cassirer (who was of German-Jewish descent) fled Germany, and the horrors of the Second World War, he began to explore the dangers that were “pregnant” (his word) in Western civilization. He thought humanist intellectuals, like himself, had disastrously underestimated these underlying forces. After several of his friends requested that he respond to the current crises of culture, he wrote several articles, and finally *The Myth of the State*.

In *The Myth of the State*, Cassirer traced the genealogy of Western political thought, the ways in which it underestimated myth’s power to reemerge, and how myth could be used as a technique of political domination. In the modern world, myth may, again, flatten our symbols and their objects into one image (felt as unmedi-

35) For example, see: Ronald Reagan, “We Will Be a City Upon a Hill” (speech, First Conservative Political Action Conference, Washington D.C., January 25, 1977).

36) In my Master’s Thesis “Utopia and Human Culture: Alternative Communities of Higher Learning in American,” I reimagined *eutopia* (what I then called “actualized utopias”) as a cultural concept. I attempted to distinguish *eutopias* (actualized utopias) from the popular understanding of utopias. As discussed previously, Sir Thomas More’s coinage of the word “utopia” has a double meaning; utopia’s Greek root is both *ou-topos* (no-place/nowhere) and *eu-topos* (good-place). Although these are idealized dreams of the “good” as manifested in community life, they can be actualized, albeit under tremendous strain, and on a very limited scale. Given such Greek roots, and to differentiate these kinds of communities, I have used the *eu-* prefix, and thus *utopias* (which have “no place”), are replaced by *eutopias* (which are “good places”).

37) For more on Whiteheadian propositions, see: Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, Corrected ed. (New York: Free Press, 1978), 184-215, all see “lure for feeling,” 111–114.

ated), in service of dominating other beings. Cassirer thought that utopian political aesthetic ideas, whose reality is kept merely ideal, all too easily become political myths, which are felt as unmediated, and simply true. He thought these utopian political myths were dangerous and must be understood and resisted. The symbol and its object must be held in tension, keeping their mediated distance insofar as is possible. In other words, once we demand that our ethical (artistic) geniuses become oracles who do not tell stories, but prophesize the history of the world, we fully exhaust the meaning and truth of the world and create dangerous tools of domination. Such demands arise in the presence of “unsolvable problems” that threaten the existence of a people (in the sense of a *Volk*) and initiates fear across culture. Such fear leads to the flattening of symbols and the transformation of artistic story into mythic political technique.

When utopias are dragged into a time and place as a final solution to the meaning and truth of a culture, or even humanity's history, that is when utopia becomes a truly dangerous, mythic story. It becomes a political tool to force culture and its artistic products into one horizon of meaning—the political, understood only as technique. People who are the story's antagonists, or question this mythic narrative, or are simply not included in it, are candidates for destruction, erasure, or neutralization, in order to make the story the truth of the world. Many of the genocides of the last three centuries are testaments to the dangers of such myths. As discussed in the previous section, it is a utopia's gift to always renew itself by and through us, always to help us intelligently see and engage with the world in new more ethical ways. An open artistic and personalistic³⁸ theodicy is what keeps the utopia from feeding a cult of domination, or an organization bent on a depersonalizing and dehumanizing the opportunities of others in service of a singular vision.

There is a dangerous grey area between envisioning a brighter future, and using that vision to squelch all other possibilities. The Nazis, the Khmer Rouge, the Belgian colonizers of the Congo, and the American state as the herald of “manifest destiny” (which includes Reagan's use of the “city on the hill” as mythic political *techne*) are extreme cases of the manipulation of utopian vision and its dangers. When does an alluring artistic vision, in practice, start to depersonalize and limit the possibilities of others? This is not always so easy to tease out. Did Plato's *Republic* primarily expand our ethical life, or mostly just feed the mythic narrative tools of many a dictator for generations to come? What about Thomas More and his immediate relation to the cruel reign of Henry VIII? The best utopian products are the ones ever rich for our ethical intelligence. But those very same visions, if they are dragged back into time and space, for the purposes of limiting all other meaning, are very dangerous mythic weapons. They are no longer utopias, but mythic political techniques of domination.

Kant's preference for the person of “good judgment” now becomes clear. Genius' gifts, especially those of the ethical genius, are powerful, and by that power, dangerous. To prevent its becoming a weapon of politics, utopia must remain limited. Utopias are artistic sources of creative, ethical energy. They are not the final word of what we must do, but creative standards for new stories of what we could be. The gift of great “ethical teachers” is a dynamic vision of the good life hungry to be reinterpreted anew and recreated anew. These artistic visions open us up, as the work of genius, to new horizons of meaning, but do not expect or seek to satiate our needs. They empower us to enact ethical improvement, whether in smaller communities, or by ourselves, as members of a larger, purposive, ethical community. They are artistic fictions not meant to be forced into this world, but to be contemplated with love and used for our creative ethical work. In the tradition of Kant, Cassirer asks us to appreciate our imaginative and rational capacities, but cautions us to stay humble and within the boundaries that afford a responsible life. Sometimes the best gifts are dreams that can never be.

38) Although I do not have time to defend the position here, I think there is no denying that thoroughgoing humanists, like the Nazis, can carry out acts of genocide. Personalistic theodicy will insist upon human dignity as the core value, inviolable and sacred, which makes a difference.

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