

# Identifying Utopia

Simon Herbert\*

**Abstract:** Is ‘utopia’ a generic name for an imagined ideal world, as some believe, or is it only one type of ideal society? In this article, I argue for a distinction between utopia as a relatively generic term and ‘utopia proper’, which signifies a particular type of ideal society. I do this with reference to what I term the ‘realistic attitude’ of utopia which is a necessary condition for a proper utopia. This gives us a litmus test to identify and distinguish between a common utopia and ‘utopia proper’.

**Keywords:** Ideal society, utopia, definition, realistic attitude, collective problem, recognition.

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## 1. Introduction

Recently, Gregory Claeys described utopianism as «a process of imagining much better or ideal (but not ‘perfect’) societies, which serve as models to judge the inadequacies of the present» (CLAEYS 2018: 231). In an earlier essay, Claeys comments that «if the premise that utopias are not merely conceived as ‘good places’, but can actually be created as such, and indeed have been, is accepted, then the more wildly improbable fantasies of idealized worlds require another categorization» (CLAEYS 2013: 148). There is a tension here. The former comment implies that any account of the ideal society is a utopia, so long as it provides a model by which the inadequacies of the present can be judged; the latter indicates that there are at least two categories: utopias, which can be realised, and «more wildly improbable fantasies», which cannot. This tension needs to be resolved, for if we want to use utopia as a guide to improving our actual societies (which is at least one of the purposes of a utopia), we need to be able to accurately distinguish it. It will be of no use to us to attempt to realise an ideal which is

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unrealisable and impossible; such an exercise is futile. We want to find an ideal society which is somehow realistic – though, of course, the most realistic ideal society would be exactly the same as society actually is (ESTLUND 2014: 115). In order to avoid wasting our time, then, we need to establish what it is that characterises utopia as opposed to any other kinds of ideal society.

We should acknowledge at the outset that there are several senses of the word ‘utopia’. Probably the most common use of the term is perjorative: in this sense ‘utopia’ signifies unrealistic, fantasy thinking, which tends to «dismiss speculation about the good society as intrinsically impractical» (LEVITAS 1990: 3). For the purposes of this article, I want to set that use of the term aside in order to focus on distinguishing between utopia in its ordinary sense, and utopia in the proper sense of the word. To distinguish these two uses I shall refer to ‘common utopia’ and ‘proper utopia’. Claeys observes, quite rightly, that the ordinary sense of utopia as a generic term for an imagined, ideal society «is not likely to be displaced by any single methodological discussion» (CLAEYS 2013: 147). Recognising this, I want to try to distinguish the proper sense of utopia from its less strict ordinary usage.

To begin with, we take as axiomatic that theorising on the ideal society is motivated, possibly primarily motivated, by dissatisfaction or discontentment with the world in which one lives, and a desire for a better life (VIEIRA 2010: 6). The idea of a perfect society is a «very old dream», where the ills of the present can inspire people to imagine what the world would be like without them; to «imagine some ideal state in which there was no misery and no greed, no danger or poverty or fear or brutalising labour or insecurity» (BERLIN 2013: 21). Indeed, some use this discontent as a basis for defining utopia: Mark S. Ferrara, for instance, defines a utopia as «a society – earthly or otherworldly – that springs from a radical dissatisfaction with the imperfections of the world and proclaims the amelioration of society» (FERRARA 2011: 20). The results of such theorising can take many different forms. In Section 2 I argue that not all of these forms should be labelled utopias, which gives an entry point to discussing proper utopia. To work out what characterises a proper utopia, I turn to J.C. Davis, who characterises utopia as a type of ideal society based on its response to the scarcities of the real world (Section 3). From Section 3 onwards, ‘utopia’ should be understood to refer to utopia proper, unless indicated otherwise. I emphasise Davis’s

point in a slightly different way, which gives us a litmus test to identify utopia, and I discuss why we want to be able to do this (Section 4). The focus in this article is on the literary utopia rather than utopian ideologies or experiments; the utopian form rather than utopian content, as Claeys puts it (CLAEYS 2013: 146). In part this is because the literary utopia seems to be the predominant form of utopia, and it can also claim to achieve the purpose of utopianism better than any other form: namely, to show what it would be like to live in such a society (KUMAR 2010: 555).

## 2. Generic Ideal World

It has been claimed that, though stories and writings of the ideal society existed well before Thomas More's eponymous work – Plato's Republic and the Biblical Garden of Eden are common examples – «*utopia* has become the generic term for these imagined ideal worlds» (FERNANDO ET AL. 2018: 779). If this is so, then More's ideal society, outlined in *Utopia*, and a child's fantasy in which ice cream is a breakfast food and homework is outlawed can, it seems, both equally claim to be called utopias. This seems *prima facie* problematic. We might balk at calling the child's fantasy a utopia because it seems insufficiently detailed; it is essentially the same as the real world, but for two minor tweaks. Compared with the level of detail More put into *Utopia* and the vast difference between that work and the world in which it was published, the child's fantasy is a poor effort indeed. However, we can agree that both are imagined worlds. Further, we would be likely to agree that *Utopia* is an account of the ideal society. But there are many features of that society which we would find far from ideal; indeed, which we would consider downright totalitarian. There is minimal privacy, limited range for individuality, and strict work rotas. Like Plato's Republic, «*Utopia* alternates attractive features with repellent ones, and mixes practicable institutions with lunatic devices» (KENNY 2010: 710). Yet we have just agreed that the society of *Utopia* is an ideal one. Ideal for whom? If utopia is the best of all possible worlds, the world which is best for me will not be so for you (NOZICK 1974: 298). One person's utopia is another's dystopia (ROTHSTEIN 2003: 4). Accordingly, it is the author with whom we must concern ourselves. Whether More really thought that *Utopia* was the ideal society is beyond the scope of this article to say; for our purposes it will be sufficient to say that if an author sincerely offers a society as ideal – that is, it is not intended simply as a satire, like, for example, Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* is – then we should call it

an ideal society. Accordingly, if More sincerely offers Utopia as an imagined ideal society, which he did, then it is a utopia. If we agree with this, then we must concede that the child's fantasy is just as utopian as More's island. If the child believes that their fantasy world would in fact be an ideal world – and let us for the sake of argument assume this is the case – then it seems we have no choice but to admit that the child's fantasy is an imagined ideal world and hence by definition a utopia. Yet, this still seems problematic.

If utopia is a generic term, then it could be found in any number of things: «literary fiction, satire, fantasy, science fiction, religious or secular paradises, political theories, political programmes and manifestos, small-scale attempts to create ideal communities and nationwide attempts to create the good society, to name but a few areas» (LEVITAS 1990: 4). This seems also to conflict with our general assumption that utopia is to be taken seriously, where we might be less inclined to take fantasy seriously. The solution is that utopia is not a generic term for an imagined ideal world. Utopia is instead a sub-set or kind of ideal world. Treating utopia as generic leaves the term all but useless, rendering incoherent accounts of how we can identify and distinguish utopia. It also clashes with practice: most commentators place limits on what they consider proper utopias—but without agreement on what the proper limits are, we risk making arbitrary or subjective selections (LEVITAS 1990: 4). As Lucy Sargisson puts it, «utopianism is everywhere but not everything is utopian» (SARGISSON 2012: 6). One way of putting those limits in place is suggested by Krishan Kumar: use and context are key to recognising a utopia. Rather than insist on an essentialist definition, Kumar advises us to expect some sort of family resemblance among utopias, following Wittgenstein (KUMAR 1987: 26). Here we are beginning to distinguish between the ordinary sense of utopia and utopia proper, as discussed above.

If utopia is a generic term then Kumar's precept quickly leads us into absurdity. Suppose that World A and World B are both imagined ideal worlds. Therefore, World A and World B are by definition both instances of utopia. We know, further, that if A and B are both utopias, there must be a family resemblance between them. However, this is circular: we know there is a family resemblance between them, and recognise them as utopias, because we already know them to *be* utopias. Treating utopia as a generic term forces us to assess an ideal world as a utopia first, *then* look for family

resemblance between it and other ideal worlds. Kumar's precept, as I interpret it, works the other way around. We start with World C, which we know to be a utopia, and notice that World D bears a certain family resemblance to World C. Accordingly, World D is a utopia as well. This formulation of family resemblance gives us a basis for our objection that More's Utopia and the child's fantasy are not created equal: they are too different; the resemblance between them is too slight, or they resemble each other in the wrong ways.

Though we have prevented family resemblance from falling into circularity, we ought not to rely on it because it is too vague to be much use. Our objective is to be able to recognise a utopia; family resemblance means we can only recognise it in relation to other utopias. A resemblance requires at least two objects; one thing can only be said to resemble another, it cannot resemble itself. This means we need a utopia which is unquestionably a utopia to use as a reference. The most logical option would be to use More's Utopia as such a reference point. But then we are left with an essentially subjective method: we have to judge that such-and-such a world has enough of a family resemblance to Utopia to qualify as utopian. But it is by no means clear what qualifies as 'enough' of a family resemblance, or in what way a society ought to resemble Utopia to have the 'right' kind of family resemblance. It also limits us to utopias which resemble More's, which constrains the range of possible approaches. This is problematic, so we should look for a way of distinguishing utopia from other kinds of ideal society which relies less upon subjective intuition, and can be quantified somewhat more than can family resemblance.

### *3. Davis's Collective Problem*

It is at this point that we turn to J.C. Davis, who distinguishes five kinds of ideal society on the basis of each of their responses to what he terms the collective problem, which is «a paucity of satisfactions weakly co-ordinate with desires and aspirations of a community of individuals» (DAVIS 1981: 19). The collective problem recognises the fact that the total number of desires in any given society will be greater than the number of desires which are able to be satisfied; it is the acknowledgement of scarcity, of which Davis describes two kinds, material and sociological. Material scarcity refers to the

scarcity of resources: there are only so many beautiful people, only so much fertile land, and so on. Sociological scarcity acknowledges that there are a limited number of seats on a council or committee, a limited number of people who can hold a position of honour or prestige, there is one king or centre of power. The collective problem, then, is the recognition that the world is not infinitely accommodating. The five kinds of ideal society are named by Davis the Land of Cockaygne, Arcadia, the perfect moral commonwealth, the millennium, and utopia. We will deal with each of these in order, relatively briefly.

The Land of Cockaygne, named for the medieval poem, deals with the collective problem by simply ignoring it; in Cockaygne any and all desires are satisfiable. The poem describes a country with rivers of oil, milk, honey, and wine; there are buildings whose walls are made of food, free for the taking. Davis notes that «needless to say, in Cockaygne women are always sexually promiscuous and men may forever remain at the age of thirty by drinking at fountains of youth» (DAVIS 1981: 21). Cockaygne is «there to satisfy all needs and desires, however greedy or gross» (KUMAR 1987: 8). It satisfies the desire for an easy life without needing to indicate how such ease could be delivered (MOYLAN 1986: 3). Many daydreams and fantasies fall into this category, where everyone can do just as they please. Thus the child's fantasy, above, seems to be some sort of land of Cockaygne. An example rather more recent than the medieval poem is the American folk song *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, with its cigarette trees and soft-boiled-egg-laying chickens. With its side-stepping of the collective problem, Cockaygne is manifestly impossible to realise in the actual world.

Arcadia, named after the province of Greece, takes a slightly more sophisticated approach to the collective problem than the unrestrained indulgence of Cockaygne. While it does reduce scarcity, it also moderates people's desires. That is, it postulates «both an abundance of satisfactions and a moderation or simplification of desires to a 'natural' level» (DAVIS 1981: 26). The assumption is that if material scarcity is eliminated in a world where people have only moderate desires, then sociological scarcity will similarly dissipate (DAVIS 1981: 22). The account of the Golden Age in Hesiod's *Works and Days* is a good example, in which mortals «had all good things. The grain-giving plowland of her own will bore her produce, much of it, and without grudging. And they enjoyed the fruits of their works in ease and peace with many good

things» (TANDY AND NEELE 1996: 67). The starship *Enterprise* in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* seems to be broadly arcadian: material scarcity has been more or less eliminated, and the driving desire (for the protagonists, at least) is curiosity rather than, for instance, a desire for power or wealth.

The latter two kinds of nonutopian ideal society which Davis identifies are, to a greater extent than the Cockayne or arcadian traditions, products of the medieval worldview, though both lasted well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Both the perfect moral commonwealth and the millennium tradition are rooted in a contemporary view of history and the moral lessons which are to be drawn from it (DAVIS 1981: 26). There are two factors which limit the medieval worldview: a prescribed moral order and a providential history (FERGUSON 1965: 33). The perfect moral commonwealth occupies itself with the former of these two factors; the millennium is inspired by the latter.

In the perfect moral commonwealth, existing social arrangements and political institutions were accepted; «society is to be made harmonic by the moral reformation of every individual in society, and hence of every class and group» (DAVIS 1981: 27). Thus the collective problem is solved by limiting human appetites. Many writers in this tradition focus on the ‘moral rearmament’ of kings, nobles, and other upper-class lords largely because, as Davis notes, those literate groups formed their audience. Examples, therefore, include Erasmus’ *The Education of a Christian Prince* and Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (DAVIS 1981: 27). Many of the texts in the ‘mirrors for princes’ tradition – in which political ideas are expressed as advice to a ruler<sup>1</sup> – qualify as examples of the perfect moral commonwealth, but we need not assume that the focus is always on the ruler as opposed to the ruled. For instance, Edward Forset’s *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politique* shifts the emphasis and sets out the obligations of both king and subjects (DAVIS 1981: 28). The perfect moral commonwealth, it should be stressed, does not lay out a programme of education and moral improvement; it is not an argument for how society might be improved; rather, it idealises people.

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<sup>1</sup> See LAMBERTINI 2011.

The millennium tradition focuses on a providential view of history. In this tradition, the solution to the collective problem is found by invoking some *deus ex machina* – emphasis on *deus* (DAVIS 1981: 36-7). Generally the millennium is looking forward to the second coming of Jesus predicted in the Bible. Accordingly, the ideal society in the millennium tradition tends to be vague and informal. In the debates surrounding England's new constitutional arrangement following the execution of King Charles I in 1649, for example, some in Parliament of a millenarian disposition argued against adopting *any* new constitution, for «God will bring forth a New Heaven and a New Earth»; it was not for men to second-guess the Almighty (DAVIS 1993: 18).

The final response to the collective problem, utopia, is the most realistic of the ones we have looked at here. Unlike the other ideal societies, utopia accepts the collective problem as it is: a limited supply of satisfactions exposed to unlimited wants (DAVIS 1981: 37). The other kinds of ideal society all contrive to tip the scales: in Cockayne, nature is idealised, so scarcity is eliminated; arcadia idealises both people and nature to reduce scarcity and moderate human desires; the perfect moral commonwealth idealises people, modifying the range of acceptable desires; and the millennium leaves it all up to some great outside force, commonly God. In utopia, though, «it is neither man nor nature that is idealised but organisation» (DAVIS 1981: 38). Davis concludes that utopia

is a mode of visualising social perfection which is best defined by distinguishing it from alternative modes of social idealisation. The utopian mode is one which accepts deficiencies in men and nature and strives to contain and condition them through organisational control and sanctions. (DAVIS 1981: 370)

Utopia, then, is the only kind of ideal society which begins by accepting that *this* is the way things are, and working from there.

One feature common to many utopias worth bringing up here is «a certain sobriety. A certain wish to walk in step with current realities» (KUMAR 2003: 64). As just mentioned, all the non-utopian versions of the ideal society tip the scales somewhat. By tipping the scales, those other kinds of ideal society miss out on utopian sobriety. For our purposes, then, we can simplify the problem: rather than trying to distinguish five kinds of ideal society, we are only looking to distinguish two: utopia and not-



utopia; sober and not-sober. Utopia, uniquely among Davis's types of the ideal society, idealises neither people nor nature, but organisation. Incidentally, this illustrates the problem with relying on family resemblance. There is, it seems to me, a certain kind of family resemblance between the five ideal societies we have just discussed, yet only one of them is utopia. This is the distinction between utopia as a common term for the ideal society, and utopia proper, which is our focus. Hereafter, the term 'utopia' should be understood to refer to 'utopia proper', unless otherwise noted. The difference is analogous to 'classical music', a shorthand for music from the end of the Renaissance to the present, as distinct from the Classical period in music, generally understood to last from about 1730-1820.

#### 4. *The Realistic Attitude*

Davis argues that utopia is best defined by distinguishing it from other forms of ideal society, and uses the collective problem as the key way of distinguishing the alternatives. Above, I have simplified Davis's taxonomy to a dichotomy: utopia (proper), and non-utopian ideal societies. At the beginning of this article I noted the distinction Claeys draws between utopias and «more wildly improbable fantasies». We can quantify this distinction by noting that proper utopia, uniquely among accounts of the ideal society, takes «men as they are and laws as they can be», in Rousseau's famous phrase (ROUSSEAU 2012: 9). This is to say, utopia is a process of imagining an ideal society which accepts people and nature as they are. To re-use Davis's description of scarcity, utopia accepts material scarcity, accepts at least some sociological scarcity, and devises the best possible system to work within these constraints. For convenience, I will call this the *realistic attitude* of utopia. I suggest that, for our purposes, the realistic attitude is more useful than the collective problem. There is not a vast difference between the realistic attitude and the collective problem. The former can be compared to litmus paper, which is used to test whether a given liquid is acidic or basic, where the latter is like a more sophisticated test which will show what the pH of a particular liquid is. Because we have simplified the question to identifying utopia (proper), we do not need the more sophisticated identification which the collective problem offers; we just need a litmus test.

Davis's approach, using the collective problem, might by itself offer a definition of proper utopia; the realistic attitude is not a definition in itself. It is at most a necessary condition for a definition; that is, a condition which, in order to be considered a utopia, an ideal society must meet. However the realistic attitude seems to be somewhat neglected of late. Some recent definitions and descriptions of utopia do not include it, with the result being that they do not distinguish between proper and common utopias. As we have seen, Claeys describes utopianism as the process of «imagining much better or ideal . . . societies, which serve as models to judge the inadequacies of the present» (CLAEYS 2018: 231). This description would treat both Cockayne and More's Utopia as examples of utopia. We should not be too harsh on Claeys here, for in the work just cited he is not exploring a definition of utopia in detail. We can pay a bit more critical attention to his earlier essay, which is seeking to define utopia. There, Claeys finds the core of utopia in «an ideal of enhanced sociability, or a modified form of friendship» (CLAEYS 2013: 146). There is no reason why an arcadian society should not fit this description. Another definition of utopia which neglects the realistic attitude comes from Lyman Tower Sargent, who defines utopia as follows:

A non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space. In standard usage utopia is used both as defined here and as an equivalent for eutopia or a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived (SARGENT 2010: 6).

On this account, there is no formal difference between Cockayne and Utopia. Yet, if we were to ask what the difference between those two societies is, the most common response would most likely be something along the lines of «one is more realistic than the other». Kumar points out that utopia has «sought to create a picture of a good, even a perfect, society. But it has wanted to remain within *the realm of the possible* – possible according to the human and social materials to hand» (KUMAR 2003: 64)<sup>2</sup>. Ruth Levitas argues that a broad definition of utopia is essential (LEVITAS 1990: 179). She is talking about common utopia rather than proper utopia, for she gives Cockayne as an example of a utopia (LEVITAS 1990: 190). For Levitas, utopianism is

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<sup>2</sup> My emphasis.

characterised by «the desire for a better way of being», which is reflected in the axiom we accepted at the beginning of this article but which does not account for the distinction between common and proper utopia. Definitions of utopia, then, should take the realistic attitude into account, for the utopian genre does not aim, as one author describes, «to reveal perfectly unreachable worlds like Peter Pan’s Neverland, with its boyhood fantasies, or Tolkien’s Lothlorien, with its dreamlike forest glades and elfin rulers» (ROTHSTEIN 2003:3). Rather utopia is a place that can conceivably exist.

It is just as well, at this point, to remind ourselves of the purpose of this exercise. Kumar poses the question: «if utopia, by definition, is not and can never be somewhere, if ‘nowhere’ can never become ‘now, here’, why restrict ourselves to the merely practicable, let alone the realistically probable? Why not give the freest play to our fancies, let our imagination rip to devise schemes for the fullest fulfilment of our desires?» (KUMAR 2003: 64). He notes, as we have seen above, that we *have* given freest play to our fancies in stories of Cockayne or the Golden Age, and so on. As mentioned above, at least one of the purposes of a utopia is to give us guidance to improving our actual societies. I say at least one purpose for there is no reason why utopianism – particularly utopian literature – must be confined to only *one* purpose. If we find a utopia which we think is the best guide, we want to be able to bring reality to reflect that utopia, even if only partially. Of all the kinds of ideal society which Davis identifies—assuming it is a reasonably comprehensive list—utopia is the only one which we can possibly bring our actual world to reflect; all the others are, for one reason or another, impossible. The realistic attitude allows us to mark off that section of imagined ideal worlds which we can identify as utopia. That answers Kumar’s question: we should restrict ourselves to the realistically probable because we want to realise it as much as we can.

It is important to keep utopia grounded in the way people actually are, for utopia plays a role in criticising our real-world societies. This is reflected in the axiom, above, that utopia is motivated by discontent with the world in which one lives and a longing for a better life. While utopia is an image of how things *could be*, it often goes beyond that to become the way things *should be*: «the wish that things might be otherwise becomes a conviction that it does not have to be like this» (LEVITAS 1990: 1). Utopia works like a circus mirror in reverse: it shows how much *better* things could be

(SARGENT 2010: 112). Reflecting on the ideal society can provide a motivation for change. Utopia has provided «images of alternatives to the given situation which, while not yet existing in history, drew on the contradictions of the time and anticipated a response to the conflicting needs of dominant and subordinate classes» (MOYLAN 1986: 3). As Victor Hugo puts it, «there is nothing like dreams for engendering the future. Utopia to-day, flesh and blood tomorrow» (HUGO 2015: 594).

While utopia is the most realistic type of ideal society, this is not to say it can be completely realised in all its details. Plato recognised this: in *Republic* he asks whether it is possible «to do anything in practice the same as in theory? Or is it the nature of practice to grasp truth less well than theory does?» (*Republic V*: 472e-473a)<sup>3</sup>. He is not alone in this: Sargent comments that any society created by humans «can only be a poor reflection of the ideal» if for no other reason than humans are non-ideal creatures (SARGENT 2010: 17). Utopia, then, seems to be a regulative ideal; a «goal or standard which may be approached but which cannot be attained» (EMMETT 1992: 2). The most likely explanation for this to my mind is that accounts of utopia assume what John Rawls calls ‘strict compliance’; that is, utopia assumes that everyone, or nearly everyone, abides by the societal arrangements the utopia advocates (RAWLS 2001: 13), as well as assuming generally favourable conditions. Once we are in the business of realising utopia, strict compliance and favourable conditions can no longer be assumed. It may well be that we can get very *close* to the ideal of a given utopia, but it will not be possible to attain the ideal completely. The implication of this for the realistic attitude is that utopia, of all the ideal societies we can imagine, is the closest one to being feasible, though it is not itself feasible in its details. Nor should we expect it to be; a completely feasible version of society would be an argument for reform, not a utopia.

If utopia is by definition unreachable, we might ask why we should strive for it at all. Regulative ideals can be extremely helpful to us. For instance – taking a non-utopian example to begin with – the Vision Zero project, which began in Sweden in 1997, and has since spread across Europe and the United States, is a regulative ideal. Vision Zero has the long-term goal of eliminating all traffic fatalities. It will be impossible to bring traffic fatalities down to zero; accidents happen, after all. But

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<sup>3</sup> PLATO 1997: 1100.

because of its long-term character, the ideal can co-ordinate both long-term and short-term action in a way which might be more effective than, for instance, setting a more ‘realistic’ target of reducing traffic fatalities by 40% in the next five years, and so on (ERMAN AND MÖLLER 2013: 31). Further, there is good evidence that utopian visions of the ideal society have motivated actual change (FERNANDO ET AL.: 780). Examples include socialist movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who sought both an account of society’s history and current ills and a plan to reshape it; many social change movements—feminism, for instance—which existed in utopian literature before becoming widespread in society; even some neoconservative movements have their roots in utopias (FERNANDO ET AL.: 780). Thus we should not be discouraged by acknowledging utopia as a regulative ideal; it permits ‘holistic and long-term thinking’ (LEVITAS 2007: 300).

We might think of utopia, as one author describes it, as a mythical *Paradise Island*. While we do not know exactly where it is – and there are some who doubt its existence – we have heard wonderful stories about Paradise Island, and want to go there, and try to work out in which direction we should go in order to eventually reach it (ROBEYNS 2008: 344). This is why being able to accurately distinguish utopia from non-utopian ideal societies is important: the journey to Paradise Island is not going to be a short one. If we pick a destination only to eventually discover it is beyond our reach, it will take us a long time to get back on course. Oscar Wilde was right when he said the only map worth looking at was one which had utopia on it; on the others is written «here be dragons»<sup>4</sup>.

### 5. Conclusion

Utopia, as we have shown, is not a generic name for an imagined ideal world. Rather, it is the most ‘realistic’ of the set of imagined ideal worlds for, uniquely, it accepts people and nature as they are and idealises organisation. The realistic attitude gives us a litmus test for whether a given imagined ideal society is a utopia (in the proper sense of the word), or not. Determining what counts as ‘realistic’ is a challenge, which we cannot

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<sup>4</sup> I paraphrase Wilde; he said that a map *without* utopia on it was not worth glancing at.

adequately solve here. However, when contemplating an ideal society there are two questions which I think helpful. First, does the society require nature to be more than ordinarily beneficent? Second, does the ideal society require people to be more than ordinarily virtuous? While More's Utopia seems to require – or expect – a certain level of virtue from its citizens, it does not seem to require that they are greatly more virtuous than we should ordinarily expect. If we are able to answer both questions in the negative, then it is likely, though not conclusive, that the ideal society we are considering is a proper utopia. If either or both of the questions is answered positively, then the ideal society is non-utopian. If we wish to work out exactly what sort of ideal society it is, we can refer to Davis's collective problem. In any case, the litmus test we have identified means we can avoid identifying, as some have, Cockayne, Hesiod's Golden Age and the Garden of Eden as pre-Morean examples of proper utopias (GORDIN, TILLET, AND PRAKASH 2010: 4). It is certainly possible to conceive of a utopia without explicitly acknowledging the realistic attitude, but the realistic attitude is a necessary condition for a given ideal society to be considered a proper utopia.

The best possible ideal society would naturally be one in which people are all angels, but unfortunately that is not the way people are. Utopias are based on hope for a better life. But hope is not enough—any of Davis's five ideal societies could be a hopeful goal. To have a hope of realising utopia, we need to be able to recognise it.

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