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Utopia and Contemporary Human Society: A Model for Sustainable Continuance

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Sir Thomas More's Utopia outlines a bustling, blissful society in which all individuals live equitably, happily, and comfortably. Utopia, which literally means "no-place," simply does not exist. However, More provides Utopia as a progressive template through which analogous contemporary social and economic structure may be assessed. Juxtaposing contemporary society with Utopia, a relatively superior or perfect state, illuminates some factors inhibiting modern society from otherwise ascending to the state and functionality of a Utopia.

I will introduce and discuss suggestive empirical evidence and central ideas pertaining to the precarious contemporary state of human civilization with respect to factors such as ecological economics, environmental issues and human-nature interactions, and legislation and education. Each of these factors is holistically separated into four categories in an order such that specific issues are expounded upon and compared to the Utopian counterpart. These categories are, objectively, a part of the greater issues facing modern human society. The first category is The Population Problem, in which Paul Ehrlich and Thomas Malthus' essays on the principles of population, demography, and population dynamics—the effects of a rising population—are discussed. Next follows The Environmental Problem, which can be summarized as issues with overconsumption, global climate change and the degradation of the environment. Thirdly, The Economic Problem will be discussed. This analysis includes topics such as ecological economics, contemporary capitalism and its pervasiveness, the allocation and distribution of resources, and the nature and philosophy of scarcity within human existence. These three problems are the central factors, in their current state, that inhibit the ascension to a more utopian civilization. However, The Social Problem, one that includes factors such as family planning, awareness, education and adaptive capacity, influences the degree of the central problems.

In order to grasp and comprehend the interrelated nature of these problems, one needs to be acquainted with The Population Problem. Both the growth and magnitude of the human population places much stress on human, social, and environmental health. In Thomas Malthus's "An Essay on the Principle of Population", he writes: "Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio" (Malthus 20). Organisms, when in ideal conditions, reproduce exponentially. This is represented with a J-curve, conveying that with every unit of time, the growth rate increases. However, the production of food is a linear, arithmetic relationship. Over time, the population is supplied with less and less food until there is a crisis or development in technology. Malthus described this relationship between populations and subsistence as natural law.

Assuming that the first "human" appeared around 1.6 to 1 million years ago, and considering that the population is now well into seven billion—after reaching one billion around 1850—it is not

difficult to evaluate the future growth of the population (Ehrlich 6). When the carrying capacity, which is the environment's limit to sustaining a population, is reached, the population curve takes on an S-shape. Carrying capacity typically denotes that a further increase in population would not be supported by the environment and may result in a population crash, culminating in resource depletion and death. The human population will invariably reach this state, whether voluntary or involuntary.

With a large and growing population, there must be increasingly diligent and modern developments in farming practices, transportation, medicine and health technologies. When population increases, food demand, consumption, pollution, crime, and technological advancement soon follow. As people consume more, industrial and commercial output increases. While this benefits some sectors of the economy, it also increases runoff, greenhouse gas emissions, and the exploitation of people, plants, animals, and resources.

Goods, services and resources are distributed much more equitably in Utopia than in contemporary society. This equity allows for Utopians to operate under a system of population control. This system involves the smallest social unit being the household. In the household, there are no less than ten and no more than sixteen adults. Each town has a fixed number of households. Since the quantities of households and adults in households are static, the only natural variable is birth rate. Supernumerary adults are "simply moved to smaller households" (More 60). If the established towns become overpopulated, the society instructs a group of Utopians to start a colony elsewhere on the island. Once the island is full, they settle on the nearest uninhabited mainland. This would not be ideal for contemporary society due to the fact that larger population centers are dispersed across global land, leaving no habitable areas for settlement. This would cause conflict and destabilization in the region and is likely in violation of international law. Geographical development and the family social structure has long been established, inhibiting any sort of transition to this system. Another potential system calls for limiting the number of children those on government funding, such as welfare, may have. However, while these family cap systems have been discussed in developed countries such as the United States, which delegated this discretion to the States in 1996, the implementation of such an idea would obstruct liberty and freedom by fracturing the family unit. It can be argued that contemporary immigration policies and minimum sentencing laws propagate the same effect, however that argument is left to the academic to discuss. Malthus recognized the difficulty of these types of regulatory systems and strongly encouraged the deliberate, personal decisions of individuals, such as celibacy and birth control. In order to alleviate the detrimental stresses generated by The Population Problem, society must fully recognize the power of population and reconcile in the imperative duty of lowering the birth rate.

Having discussed population, how it grows exponentially, some implications of its growth, and applications to alleviate its effects—Utopian to Malthusian—it is important to be astute of the environment and how it is currently being affected by human civilization. As previously mentioned, as population rises, societal systems are further strained. Food, medicine, transportation, education, finance, housing and many other core facets of society have to be tailored to the new and larger population. The Environmental Problem can be viewed through a

lens of environmental unity, the concept that every system is connected and altering one variable might not simply result in a summed effect of the individual changes, but rather that of a synergistic function, such that $1+1 \neq 1$, but a value much greater than 1. For example, releasing nitric oxides and sulfur oxides into the atmosphere may individually not seem threatening since they are not primary greenhouse gases. However, when these substances interact with the weather and composition of the atmosphere, destructive acid rain precipitates.

When society consumes unsustainably, resources are depleted at a greater rate than they are replenished. As discussed in Environment, petroleum-based fuel falls under the non-renewable resource category, for it cannot be replenished on a time scale relative to human beings.

Robert Nadeau, a retired English professor, writes in *The Environmental Endgame* that “the growth of the human population is largely due to the consumption of matter-energy” (Nadeau 73). Society has refined oil and developed technologies to increase its efficiency, however the combustion of these oils releases unhealthy heavy metal oxides, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxides, sulfur oxides, and water vapor into the atmosphere. These primary pollutants interact with other species in the atmosphere to form secondary pollutants such as acid rain, which destroys artificial structures and plant tissues (Raven 396). The CO_2 , a primary greenhouse gas which inhibits infrared radiation from leaving Earth, warms the atmosphere by means of the greenhouse effect (Robin 295).

The *Environmental Endgame* provides that only 2.5% of all Earth’s water is fresh, and that “global climate change alone has been found to be responsible for 20% of the overall decline in potable water,” and “as much as 2,000,000 metric tonnes of waste is thrown into rivers and lakes every day” (Nadeau 12). These wastes, often hazardous in composition due to the varying refining and extraction processes used in industrial parks, eventually make their way to the ocean. This, in conjunction with the aforementioned increases in atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations, shifts a multi-billion-year-old, fine-tuned equilibrium of the oceans. The higher concentration of greenhouse gases becomes soluble in the oceans, which is the process of ocean acidification. As the ocean acidifies, ocean life dies and biodiversity decreases. Also, rising atmospheric temperatures correspond with rising ocean temperatures. Rising ocean temperatures can drive severe changes in weather patterns in addition to biodiversity loss.

It is important to acknowledge that the biodiversity of life on Earth has risen from billions of years of an undisturbed system at work. When the agricultural revolutions occurred within humanity, it only took a mere 10,000 years of development to reach contemporary society, 200 of which were after the industrial revolution in the 19th century (Ehrlich 3). The juxtaposition of the geologic and human time scales shows that the human experience is dwarfed by the age of Earth. When the system is disturbed, environmental unity suggests that the effects are synergistically larger than the individual sums. In a publication from the MIT Press entitled *Global Environmental Change & Human Security*, the loss of biodiversity today is described as having brought about the seasonality of diseases and disease-spreading species. The vast number of species on earth, still largely undiscovered, might hold answers to critical and enduring medical questions that without such vastness of biodiversity society may never discover. West

Nile, yellow fever, and a multitude of other pathogens benefit and thrive when their inhibitions disperse and pathways are introduced (Matthew 42). Another contemporary example of this occurring, as described by Matthew, is that when permafrost melts, frozen viral and bacterial agents become exposed to living organisms. These types of vector-borne diseases are highly contagious, and if the atmosphere and wet climates continue to warm it can be expected that the rates of infection for these diseases will rise. Surely More would not have thought of something like this, however for that reason it is evermore a pressing responsibility to harness science and pressure communities to prevent the rate of warming from increasing. Through deforestation, cultivation, the introduction of invasive species and over-exploitation, the physical geography and distribution of keystone species changes, and their niches, are lost. Without particular individuals in an ecosystem fulfilling their position or function, a trophic cascade might occur whereas a biodiversity decrease is significantly affected by the ebbing of other biodiversity. An alarming rate was published by the Yale University Press when *The Bridge at the Edge of the World* was released: that in the next 100 years, up to 50% of Earth's current biodiversity could be lost. The magnitude of the Holocene mass-extinction could surpass that of the dinosaurs in the Cretaceous–Paleogene era (Speth 36).

While it is quite difficult to interpret More's work for solutions regarding The Environmental Problem due to the lack of technology during the 16th century, it can be taken that with a small island such as Utopia, the way they conserve their resources, and their cultural denouncement of materialism, it may be surmised that the common school of thought on environmental degradation as a result of consumption would be negative. This deduction is supported in More's dialogue in which he outlines that "In ethics they discuss the same problems... Having distinguished between the three types of 'good:' psychological, physiological, and environmental, they proceed to ask whether the term is strictly applicable to all of them, or only to the first" (More 71). An additional perspective of the good, founded by Jeremy Bentham—whom was heavily influenced by Immanuel Kant—is utilitarianism. With utilitarianism, moral good is perpetuated by acts increasing the utility or happiness of a sentient being. Some contemporary issues encompassed by capitalism, environmentalism, and human psychology all directly oppose utilitarianism and decrease the summation of human happiness. Utopia's perspective on good poignantly echoes the issues present today, that avarice and the affinity for psychological and material benefit corrupts the very core of ethical frameworks and their corollaries.

For a society to prevail through bouts of misgivings and mistakes regarding the common home, the environment, it is imperative that all members of that society- not just the legislators, be educated on the issue and be provided with the tools to slow down the rate at which the world is burning and life is dying. These types of educational programs are the answer to these issues.

What inhibits this education, however, is the world market and capitalism, which has an intricate role in modern globalization and politics. Understanding environmental unity with regard to a growing people and a finite Earth is imperative to shifting contemporary consumption to a sustainable level. However, as mentioned, educational programs and community involvement at the state and national levels that might fuel public opinion and spark participation is indirectly

quelled by the processes of capitalism and the inequitable distribution of resources. In a capitalist society, money invariably becomes most concentrated in a relatively minuscule portion of the population. Because the primary goal is maximizing individual profit, the rest of the community is left with less, and thus, without educational nor physical investment, people become less valuable to society over time. More acknowledged this, writing “It was evidently quite obvious to a powerful intellect like [Plato’s] that the one essential condition for a healthy society was equal distribution of goods—which I suspect is impossible under capitalism” and “For when everyone’s entitled to get as much for himself as he can, all available property... is bound to fall into the hands of a small minority, which means everyone else is poor” (More 44). With capitalism necessarily resulting in an unequal distribution of wealth and resources, it must be considered a broken economic system. While it is unreasonable to pioneer a full reformation of capitalism and current corporations’ functionality and bureaucracy, there can be progressive and often socialist development and legislation that empower the consumer. For example, increasing the minimum wage and providing health benefits would require corporations to lower their profit, however they would be providing their employees with adequate financial and physical support that essentially equates with cost of living adjustments.

More explains that the chief business of the Stywards is to ensure productivity and lessen debauchery. However, their methods of ensuring productivity revolve around mandating a “six-hour working day... [then] they go to bed at 8 p.m.” (More 56). The leftover time is left for congenial activity, such as furthering education. While this is a rather antiquated notion, I suspect that the disproportionate wealth harbored by corporations supersedes that of providing a reasonable pay capable of motivating the consumer and worker to be productive without monitoring or excessive authoritarian management. Peers mutually interested in the progression of their work, project, or agenda could simply perform at the appropriate efficiency given that they feel their pay is adequate and fair.

Given that capitalism causes wealth to shift to a small portion of the population, the interests, power, and the precipitation of those interests such as furthered poverty, environmental damage, and political corruption soon follow. A contemporary example of this point is illuminated greatly by the Trump Administration in the United States. In addition to the recent legislation and executive orders that are poised toward the dismantling of industrial and environmental regulations for the profit of the respective economies, the Office of Management and Budget’s 2018 proposal cuts \$2.6 billion, or thirty-one percent of the 2017 budget, from the Environmental Protection Agency. The Department of Education will lose \$9 billion, or 13% of its current budget, benefiting the fossil fuel industry and perpetuating ignorance regarding the delicate and intertwined nature of environmental health and public education. The implications of this type of societal behavior are dismal for the environment and the average individual—on the citizen and consumer levels.

The Limits to Scarcity explains a principle referred to as the non-satiety requirement, which is the idea that a smaller grouping of goods is preferred to a larger one. This utilitarian approach is not manifested within the contemporary production and distribution of goods. This is because it is more cost efficient to mass produce goods and sell them at a low enough price that

the consumer innately feels more secure to simply purchase it (Mehta 130). This further drives consumption to unsustainable levels. Although in this instance production can be argued to be unsustainable, the waste of resources factors into the summation of resource consumption. One figure of reference is the amount of food Americans waste. The United States Department of Agriculture estimates that 30-40% of the food supply in the United States is wasted, corresponding to “133 billion pounds and \$161 billion worth of food in 2010” (USDA). If the production and processing of resources is done in a way to manipulate consumer activity, more resources will be wasted. This again boils down to the end goal of capitalism being profit, even if scarcity must be manufactured.

A publication into The Journal of Ethics entitled “Agency, Scarcity, and Mortality” provides an insightful look into the nature of scarcity within the human experience and perhaps how capitalism came to exist. The article expresses the philosophical entanglement of scarcity and mortality by arguing that since an immortal existence would still be met with the scarcity of resources, the mortal counterpart drives yearning and wants. This is perhaps a background function of the human mind: unable to reconcile with death, the individual passively embodies a narrative experience, and due to the very nature of narratives, they end (Ferrero). Perhaps humanity finds reason to live merely in its biologically embedded sense that obtaining and consuming materialistic possessions and resources secures existence for an additional period of time. Contemporary society should transcend this biology and reconcile with mortal existence in order to provide the metacognition necessary for letting go of materialism and avarice, allowing for a more equitable distribution of resources that is exemplified by Utopia.

It is important to recognize that while capitalism generates growth and a powerful economy, its features as worn today work together to produce an economic and political reality that is negatively and directly affecting not only the environment, but the average individual. In 2014, UC Davis used the Census Bureau’s data to conduct research into the working class American. They found that over 12% of full-time workers live in poverty. How is it that individuals working at what is defined as full-time live in such destitute conditions, especially in a country as developed as the United States? I believe that the issue is not the exploitation of one set of resources or one individual, but rather the systematic exploitation of groups of people for profit.

While More incorporates capitalistic notions in his Utopia such as slavery and their similar use of manifest destiny, it can be argued that the enslavement of the Utopian individual is the application of due process and justice. In addition, the Utopian government incentivizes slaves with good behavior by providing opportunities for freedom. More writes, “It comes down heavy on crime...they’re forced to become good citizens” (More 31). This method of discouraging crime seems to me as a more applicable one than incarcerating, disenfranchising, and disempowering egregious numbers of petty criminals, waging the cost on the taxpayer, then watching it all happen again due to the lack of rehabilitation methods present in contemporary prisons.

In a capitalistic society, resources invariably become distributed inequitably.

Nonetheless, if a society is innately going to take the form of capitalism, there will be points where one entrepreneur one-ups another, the working man misses the opportunity, and creditors chase their prey. However, the systematic disproportionality of capitalism exhibited in the globalized world must not continue. When the results of capitalistic functions transform from small setbacks for a few to major setbacks for many, only benefiting a relatively minuscule population, the establishment is a regime, not a free market. This is one major difference between the capitalism exuded in Utopia and in contemporary society. Legislation and protections dissolve away as power shifts from the people to the money.

In Phillip Lawn's compendium, *Resolving the Climate Change Crisis: The Ecological Economics of Climate Change*, he calls for the implementation and reverence of ecological economics, which overcomes the contemporary failures of capitalism by adopting a dualistic approach regarding both the economy and ecosphere. Ecological economics attempts to make capitalism work for the environment and the economy. Lawn claims that "recognizing the significance of objective values, the existence of choice, the importance of adhering to biophysical constraints, and the need for relativism when choosing between alternatives of equal moral value" is imperative to ensuring the equitable distribution of resources (Lawn 160). When these subjects are given respect in the political-economic arena, the ends-means spectrum is accurately embodied by civilization. This spectrum expresses that the ultimate end goal of life must be approached progressively by regulating the use of matter-energy, implementing new technologies to build and protect human capital, and promoting a democratic political system that facilitates the capability of meeting wants, needs, and self actualization on the individual level. Otherwise, the former functionality of capitalism paves the way to environmental destruction, economic injustice, and social division.

One strategy that Lawn proposes is to establish a legal minimum income being greater than or equal to the minimum cost of living, which would be annually assessed and updated to fit the changing market (Lawn 319). Secondly, the government could provide subsidies for industries that value and work toward minimizing their environmental footprint (Speth 100). Thirdly, passing legislation that implements a retainer of secured, low-skilled government positions that unemployed, job-seeking individuals may fill after a specified time of seeking employment may keep unemployment down. After all, an economy with a relatively lower unemployment rate is inherently healthier than one in which that rate is higher. Clearly, there are many ways to work with the economy to ensure individual and community needs are met.

Now having discussed population, the environment, and the economical functionality of capitalism, the three core problems faced by contemporary society, it is imperative to take a look at one additional problem that influences the degree of these three core issues: The Social Problem. Issues such as family planning, education, and biology promote unchecked population growth and resource consumption. The aforementioned biological drive to perpetuate the gene pool is one that has been embedded in all organisms. Previous generations of humans would have many children in anticipation of death in a few. In contemporary society, while still very unequal across varying populations, medicine has made longevity and infant mortality no longer an enduring concern.

One predominate issue plaguing developing countries and their impoverished citizens is that there is very little attention given to the family. Family planning is the third-party assistance and advocacy to help couples and communities plan their families and how they will be supported. Richard Grossman's article "The Importance of Human Population to Sustainability" in *Environment, Development, and Sustainability* provides that "It is estimated that 215 million women worldwide would like to space their pregnancies or end childbearing, but do not have access to modern family planning methods" (Grossman 973). In addition to the lack of family planning methods, women in developing countries are often under the cultural control of their husbands and contraceptives are not readily available. Educational programs are often proposed for citizens in these situations, however they are oftentimes facing more crucial issues with simply allocating the resources to live. These countries' governments and economies are very weak, hampering the development of infrastructure and the investment in communities. Humanitarian efforts that provide resources, shelter, contraceptives, education, and community all benefit these areas of the world so that they may develop their cities and towns more effectively.

Another issue in The Social Problem is that of education, which primarily affects the environment, but is impressionable by the economy. When individuals are not educated on the functionality of their government, economy, and educational system, they are not included in the larger dialogues, whether by complacency or ignorance. According to the MIT Publication, genuine savings of an economy in the long term is provided by a formula that includes investment in manufactured capital, net foreign borrowing, net official transfers, depreciation of capital (natural and manufactured), education expenditures, the cost of pollution, and the gross national income. What has been found is that the unsustainable combination of high consumption, low investment in manufactured capital and education, high resource depletion, and high pollution leads to negative genuine savings in the long term while benefiting the economy in the short term (Matthew 269). This seems to be reflected in the aforementioned budget proposed by the current administration. The costs of remediating the effects of generations with no educational investment, years of unchecked environmental damage, and critically scarce resources would not be equal to the cost of merely implementing a sustainable system in the beginning. The cost would synergistically increase, for funding must be allocated to agencies and institutions to manage the issues stemming from a lack of investment and too high of consumption. Furthermore, the wages of the employees of these institutions would also have to be paid. In short, education provides individuals with the tools and knowledge to be an active, effective part of their society. Without it, interests and avarice continually shift the distribution of money and resources to increasingly worse inequity.

To revisit the philosophy of life's biology, it is important to understand that again, the entropic, objective goal of all life is to survive and reproduce. The beginning and end have no importance, for they are variables that cannot be controlled. When stepping into the realm of sentient-intellectual experience, plethoras of possibilities and opportunities enrich that experience, only if they are reachable. People fall into this seemingly endless experience of life where during their lives, they reason, laugh, love, and suffer. It is an individual, punctuated experience, however, to evaluate what it means to live and what it means to live with others.

It is a fact that death will come for all beings, and when the individual's inability to reconcile with death meets the natural scarcity of resources, the precipitation of vices affects everyone else and the common home: Earth. Avarice leads to the unequal distribution of resources and systemic issues such as socioeconomic class and political corruption. Identifying against one another on the basis of appearance, culture, or trade shifts the interpretation of value and people are subsequently treated as though they are worth less than others. Frivolous divisions driven by primal tendencies to survive plague the human being, for when the population is living individually and not as communities, nations, and a world, important values of protecting the planet, ensuring the pursuit of happiness is available for all people, and promoting the development of the human intelligence are lost.

Thomas More died in the 16th century, however Utopia lives on five hundred years later as a testimony to the fact that these problems can be managed, can be solved, and can be reversed. While More could not have anticipated the intricacy and scope of the contemporary issues of a globalized planet, he anticipated many factors of success accurately, including the equitable distribution of resources and maintaining truth and justice in relation to all good. While Utopia is not a real place, and will likely never become a reality, it provides a scaffolding to analyze, from above, the core issues within society today and how they might be managed.

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