

Negative Utopia

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Abstract:

Fear of utopia stems from the fact that Utopia is becoming increasingly realisable. No one is worried about utopia as long as its ideas and images remain ideals and exist merely on parchment and paper. As long as a Plato remains a philosopher without becoming a man of action, no one is afraid of him. But unfortunately, as the poet has its "The Plato of my time is not a philosopher" 1

That is, the philosopher is threatening to become a man of action, translating his dreams of the ideal into the realm of the actual. As Read says the moment you try to make utopia actual, it fades losing all glamour. In his anxiety to make his dreams real, the wise philosopher would impose on the fluid, shifting nature of life a rational and logical frame-work. The will in him is very apt to become first, the will-to-order and later the will-to-power.

Keywords: Utopia, rational

The history of mankind offers a number of frightening examples of power corrupting and absolute power corrupting absolutely, and always. Hence the need to be wary of centralised rule of the elite, however good their intentions and programmes of welfare may, be. Welfare tyranny' is far more dangerous than ordinary tyranny. Shakespeare's scathing irony becomes very relevant here.

"Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds" 2

In referring to the 'totalitarian temptation' to which the wise philosopher is a prey, it would be appropriate to note the distinction that Isaiah Berlin draws between what he calls negative liberty and positive liberty. The notion of positive liberty implies unfettered freedom, rejecting any interference with individual liberty. Negative liberty implies that man must have individual or personal liberty but it should be minimum, in keeping with the total harmony of society. Also, it implies that individual liberty should be curtailed in order to safeguard the freedom of others. But the advocates of positive liberty maintain that negative liberty offers no scope for originality and spontaneity. But Isaiah Berlin feels that the notion of positive liberty is a treacherous invitation to servitude, and that only negative liberty is worth defending.

"Perversion of the notion of positive liberty into its opposite -- the apotheosis of authority has for a long while been one of the most familiar and depressing phenomena of our time. For whatever reason or cause the notion of negative liberty, however disastrous the consequences of its unbridled forms, has not historically been twisted by its theorists as often or as effectively into anything so darkly metaphysical or socially sinister or remote from its original meaning as its positive counterpart. "3

The concept of utopia rests on 'positive liberty'. It is invariably elitist in orientation. The self-justifying morality of the Grand Inquisitor is a frail defence against the ironic glance of the writers of negative utopia. No apology would exonerate the all-wise philosopher from the charge of hubris and ultimate corruption. An examination of an episode from Dostoevski's *The Brothers Karamazov* would clarify the moral dilemmas involved in the exercise of positive liberty.

THE GRAND INQUISITOR

The Grand Inquisitor' is one of the chapters in *The Brothers Karmazov*. The passage runs as a dialogue Between the Karamazov brothers Ivan and Alyosha.

Barring a few questions raised by Alyosha, the entire dialogue is actually a monologue by Ivan himself. In fact, the passage is a poem written in prose by Ivan. Ivan describes the poem as a "senseless poem by a senseless student" 4. Of late, this senseless poem of Ivan has acquired immense importance because it offers a summation of the disasters peculiar to our times. So, before stressing further the importance of the poem, a brief account of the episode is in order.

The writer of the poem Ivan is rational. He is very much concerned about harmony and peace in the lives of human beings. He considers man base and weak by nature who doesn't know how to make use of the freedom bestowed on him by God. has paid a high price for a useless He feels humanity thing which god has given to them. His 'revolution' against God, he expresses in a poem, a prose-poem.

Ivan sets the scene of Christ's return to earth, the Second Coming, in the fifteenth century during the days of inquisition. Ghrist returns to redeem the waning faith in God. He performs the miracle of renewing the life of a dead child, a miracle frowned upon and castigated by the clergy. The Cardinal who is the Grand Inquisitor in Ivan's poem puts Christ in jail, lest he should do further damage to the Chruch and its tenets.

The dialogue between Christ and the Grand Inquisitor deals with fundamental problema of freedom and happiness of man. The Grand Inquisitor feels that man is incapable of carrying the burden of freedom, a gift which he accuses Christ of having bestowed on man without realising the consequences. Instead, he says, man longs for peace, contentment, happiness and bread. So why not offer these to poor man in place of freedom.

The intolerable burden of freedom, of the ability to choose, will be borne by the wise guardian a of the Church. It is to them knowledge of good and of evil will be vouchsafed. And it is these few who would suffer the curse of freedom and knowledge for the sake of the rest of humanity, all others would be happy in the wholeness of unfreedom.

Under the elite rule, the elite would shepherd the innocent flock (that had gone astray under the rule of God), they would give them the quiet humble happiness of weak creatures such as they are by nature. "Oh, we shall persuade them at last not to be proud, for Thou did lift them up and thereby taught them to be proud. We shall show them they are weak, that they are only pitiful children, but that childlike happiness is the sweetest of all," says the Inquisitor 5 to the Prisoner. The men will huddle elite in fear, as chicks to the hen. close to the "They will tremble impotently before our wrath, their minds will grow fearful, they

will be ready at a sign from us to laugh and rejoice; in their leisure hours, we shall make their life a child's game." 6 Inquisitor. asserts the

The argument of the Grand Inquisitor is un-answerable. Christ does not answer the questions but merely kisses the Inquisitor on his "bloodless, aged lips. The kiss is his answer. "The kiss glows in his heart but the old man adheres to his idea"7

If, Dostoevski's dramatization of the moral dilemmas of the problem of freedom and happiness provides ideological substance, Zamyatain's *We* offers the framework of a scientific fantasy to all writers of negative utopia.

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