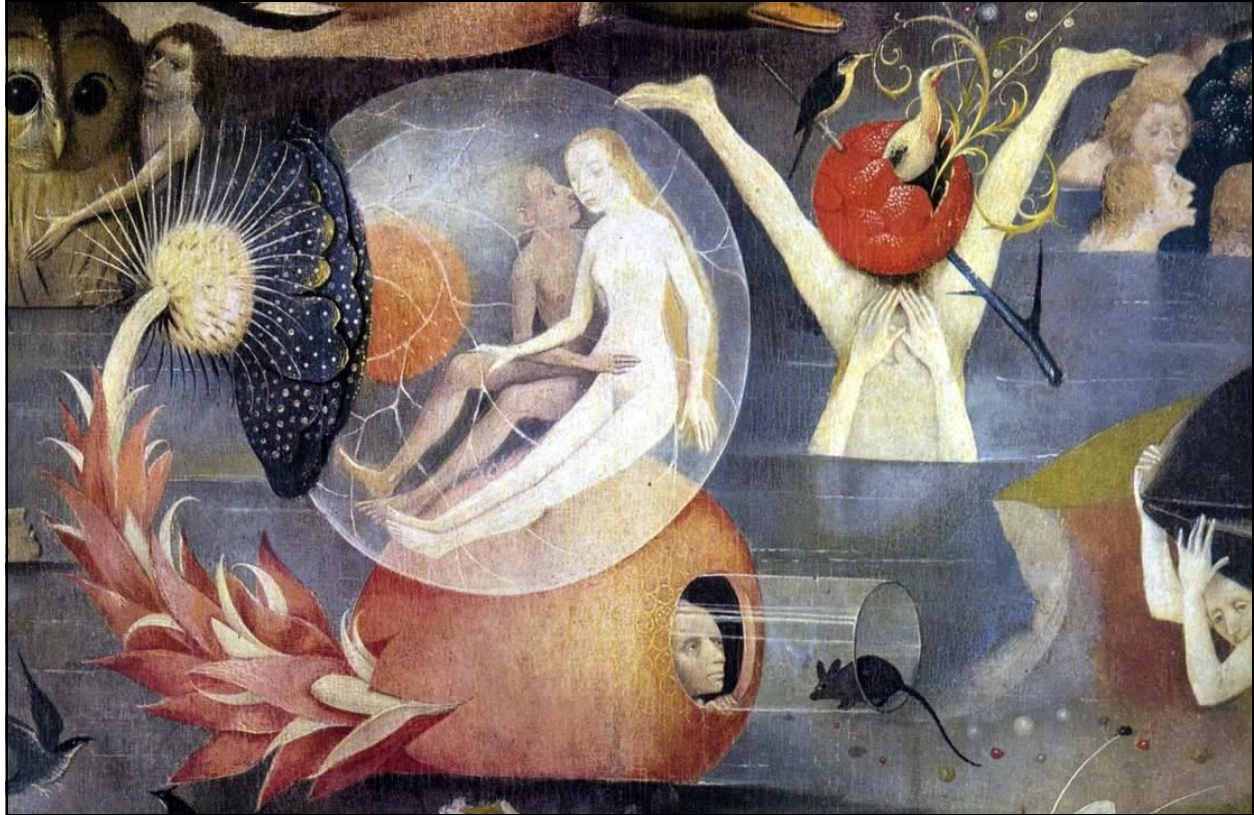




Utopia: In Search of the Perfect World

From our earliest days, humans have sought a better world—where the things we need are plentiful, where people are kind and fair, and where we have time and a place to enjoy our short time on Earth.

Of course everyone wants a better world. Who wouldn't? But the idea of utopia goes well beyond minor improvements to society. When it comes to utopia, we're not talking about minor makeovers that improve health care, provide more aid to the poor, or build a covered mall in the suburbs. We're talking about changing the fundamentals of society; shaking things up; casting aside competition and privilege; and finding peace and prosperity through cooperation and reason. The problem is there is no common agreement about what utopia might look like. And there's strong resistance from those who are doing quite well as it is, thank you.



The illustration on page 1 is from a painting by Hieronymus Bosch, the 15th century Dutch painter. It is titled “The Garden of Earthly Delights.” Although at first it looks like a fantasy land designed for a Disney amusement park, a closer look suggests not only caution in paradise, but caution with the very idea of paradise. Bosch’s concern is that humans can mess up even the best of worlds. This is a problem for utopians as well.

The Utopian Dream and Our Future

“Utopia” is the name for an ideal society.

Paradise By and By

Christians have Heaven and Muslims have Jannah (paradise). These are the promised places for the worthy of each religion where they will find eternal peace and freedom from pain and want—something like utopia. The problem is one has to be dead to get there.

Utopians are focused on the here and

now. They want to figure out how people might live together in peace, with freedom from pain and want, while they’re still alive.

The idea of utopia was raised before the New Testament and the Qur’an. In around 360 BC, Greek philosopher, Plato, wrote a book called *The Republic*. It is an imaginary dialogue between Socrates (Plato’s teacher and

mentor) and other residents of Athens. The men discuss what it means to have a just society. Although ancient Athens is credited as being the first democracy, Plato has little faith in the masses and clearly favors rule by “philosopher kings.”

The actual word “utopia” was first used as the title of a book written in 1516 by the English writer Sir Thomas More. More’s *Utopia* is based on Plato’s *Republic*. It is not clear whether More actually believed in the society he describes or was simply criticizing the English society in which he lived. The idea of criticizing current society by suggesting another became a common writer’s tactic.

The Utopian Movement in Action

During the 19th century, a number of groups (often religious) in U.S., Canada and Europe sought to form utopian societies. In 1901 a group of Finnish settlers sought to create a utopian socialist society in Sointula on Malcolm Island in British Columbia. “Sointula” means “Place of Harmony” in the Finish language. Unfortunately, they found anything but harmony. A fire destroyed much of the community. Members went broke after two years working for free on the Capilano Bridge Project. Then the group disbanded, though many of the groups descendants still live there.

Looking Backward

Any number of other utopian communities came and went during the 19th century. While many people thought the utopians were dangerous “European socialists,” others hoped for

a better future and supported their cause.

Looking Backward: 2000-1887 is a utopian novel written by Edward Bellamy in 1887. In the U.S. it was the third best-selling book of the 19th century. The story is about a man who falls asleep in the year 1887 and wakes up in the year 2000. He spends most of the book talking about the wondrous changes that had occurred in the previous century. This is one of the few books that actually created a political movement. It captured the imagination of a population looking forward to the 20th century with great concern.



The Montreal Biosphere designed by Buckminster Fuller, 1967 offers a futuristic vision of a better world led by science and technology

Looking Forward

Today, in the beginning of the 21st century, people are also concerned about economic security, peace, and the survival of the planet. But the hope for a better world focuses more on science and technology and less on social change. However, if history is our guide, science alone will not ensure a better world.

Utopia | Key Terms

dialogue	A written or oral conversation between two or more people.
just society	An ideal strived for by advocates of social justice. Also a phrase used by Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau to describe his vision for the country.
New Testament	The name given to the second major division of the Christian Bible. All parts of the New Testament were written after the death of Christ.
philosopher king	A concept proposed by Plato in which the brightest and most educated (philosopher kings) would rule, rather than democracy.
Qur'an	The central religious text of Islam. Muslims believe the Qur'an is divine guidance given to Muhammad over a period of 24 years. It was written after Muhammad's death in 632.

Discussion Points

1. The concept of utopia has been around for a long time. Do you think it's just wishful thinking or do you think a much world can be created?
2. If you were to invent a utopian society for you and your friends, what would it look like?
3. The word "utopian" is sometimes used to describe an idea that is naive and unachievable. Are there ideas being promoted today that you think sound good but are unachievable? Could you call these naïve or utopian?