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# Cognitive Function of Utopia

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Reading a utopian literature is the best way of reflecting our image of today. In this paper, I will show the reason why. I investigate the ontological status and the epistemological role of Utopia and then I show the way how Utopia reveal our reality.

## Anachronistic utopianism

There might be numerous interpretations on the exact meaning of Utopia. However, there is no dissent with regard to its etymology. The word was coined by Thomas More in a novel with the same title in 1516. Unfortunately its exact etymology does not help to make its meaning clear because ambiguity inheres in the word itself. Utopia stems from greek word and it could be elided from *eutopia* (eu+topos-happy place) and/or *outopia* (ou+topos-no place). Furthermore topos can also mean a space and a state (itself ambiguously hovering between, for example, French *etat* and condition).<sup>1</sup> These ambiguities might be intended by More as a joke, but it caused everlasting confusion about the meaning of Utopia.

Thomas More's Utopia is important not only because it established the term but also because it initiated Utopia as a literary genre. Two points should be noted with regard to More's Utopia; it suggested a very realistic image of ideal society for the first time, and marked a ground for a literary genre. This two factors are very important because the former is the indispensable element of epistemological function of Utopia and the latter is related to its ontological status. Before dealing with the main argument of this paper, I will shortly mention the utopian thinking prior to More's Utopia.

One might insist that there were utopian thinking way before Thomas More wrote Utopia and coined the term. From ancient times regardless West and East, people have dreamed of perfect world in which their cherished wishes come true. Let me name a few ancient ideal societies: Golden age in Greek myth, the Pure Land of the West in Buddhism, Garden of Eden and the

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1. Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. 37

millennium in Christianity, I will call these mythical ideal societies or countries as anachronistic utopian because they exist before the coinage of the term utopia. Davis categorized the ideal countries prior to More's Utopia into Cockayne, Arcadia, the perfect moral commonwealth and the millennium according to its form. And he argued that all of these are not proper utopia because they are unrealistic. According to him, "The utopian is more 'realistic' or tough-minded in that he accepts the basic problem as it is: limited satisfactions exposed to unlimited wants." On the contrary, anachronistic utopias are unrealistic mainly for two reasons; first, they make the fixed motivation from changeless societies absolute, and second, they describe these state superficially. Thomas More's Utopia is the classical work which satisfy these conditions of utopia.<sup>2</sup>

Davis's definition of utopia might seem to oppose to Engels's criticism on utopian socialists such as Saint-Simon and Fourier. Friedrich Engels criticized in "Socialism: Utopian or Scientific" such system builders as Saint-Simon, Owen, and Fourier with not sufficiently taking actual historical conditions or the process of revolutionary change into account.<sup>3</sup> Should utopia be realistic or unrealistic? If the unrealistic is the utopian feature as Engels's criticism, this criticism might be returned to Marxism itself. The fall of socialism could be the evidence that marxists failed to take the reality of capitalism and the vision of socialism into account.

However Socialism's failure does not necessarily entail Marxism's failure. Even though socialism failed because of its insufficient considering reality, Marxism can remain intact. Moreover Marx could be evaluated as the greatest of utopian philosophers in a realistic sense. As Bloch mentioned "The zero point of extremest alienation which the proletariat represents now at last becomes the dialectical point of change; Marx teaches us to find out All precisely in the Nothing of this zero point" (Principle of hope 3:1358) This quotation from Bloch shows clearly the relationship between utopia and reality in Marxism. The zero point in reality means All in utopia. Understanding reality is the presupposition of understanding utopia. "All in Nothing" but All is not Nothing. Reality presupposes utopia and they can coexist in a different mode of existence though. Utopia cannot be realized in this actual world, because utopia presupposes reality, utopia cannot exist without reality. If utopia is realized, it means utopia becomes reality, that is not possible. Utopia exist in the world of imagination which cannot be realized. Marx failed because he thinks of himself as a scientist not as an artist. Utopia does not belong to Science but to Literature. The role of utopia cannot be providing a blueprint for better world let alone for perfect world. Utopia exists in the unreal world and reveal the hidden aspect of reality. The proper area of utopia is imagined worlds, that is literature.

Sometimes utopia is considered an ideology or an impulse. However I claim utopia is literature and it can only exist as literary form. For Bloch, utopia exists in the dimension of future and it is collective impulse. The future in this context does not mean temporal dimension but future as an object of hope. Blochian conception of utopia is well described by Freedman as below.

2. Davis, "Chronology of nowhere", p. 11.

3. Tom Moylan, Demand the Impossible, p. 5.

For Bloch, the central truth of utopia is paradoxical. On the one hand, utopia is never fully present in the here-and-now, and necessarily eludes all attempts to locate it with complete empirical precision. It depends upon what Bloch calls the *Novum*, that is, the radically (though not purely) new, which by definition cannot be exhaustively or definitively mapped. Utopia is to be found in the Not-Yet, or the Not-Yet-Being, or the In-Front-of-Us, or simply the Front, as Bloch variously designates it. Utopia can never be fixed in the perspective of the present, because it exists, to a considerable degree, in the dimension of futurity: not, however, in the future as the latter is imagined by mere chronological forecasting, or in mechanistic and philistine notions of bourgeois “progress,” but rather as the future is the object of hope, of our deepest and most radical longings. These are longings that can never be satisfied by the fulfillment of any individual wish (say, for personal wealth) but that demand, rather, a revolutionary reconfiguration of the world as a totality. Utopian hope or longing, in other words, possesses an inherently collective character and at bottom has nothing in common with individualist impulses like greed....utopia, which in one sense is always elsewhere, always escaping our actual horizons, is in another and no less important sense inscribed in the innermost core of our being.<sup>4</sup>

Utopia as collective hope, not as individual desire or greed, cannot be a mental state of an individual. The most proper mode of existence of Utopia, which cannot exist in actual world and cannot be a psychological state, is literature. Literature is a locus for imagined world in which imagined creatures live. It's not a new idea to define utopia as literary genre. Kumar put: “utopia is closer to the novel than to any other literary genre; is in fact a novel.” Suvin defined utopia as below.

Utopia is the verbal construction of a particular quasihuman community where sociopolitical institutions, norms and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community, this construction based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis.<sup>5</sup>

Literature itself is a place for imagination, but Utopian literature demands much more aggressive imagination. Utopian literature could be distinguished as special genre by its demanding extreme imagination. In the next section I will explain the perspective which consider utopia literary genre in detail and investigate the function of utopia as literary genre.

## Utopia as Literary Genre

More's Utopia itself is a great literary achievement, but the importance of More's Utopia increases because of its contribution to establishing utopian literature as a literary genre. It was enormous influence on his contemporary readers and gave inspiration to produce utopian literature modeled on it. As More's contemporaries who read Utopia, Francois Rabelais wrote *Gargantua*

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4. Freedman, p. 64

5. Suvin, p. 49

and *Pantagruel* (1532), in 17<sup>th</sup> century Johann Valentin Andreae created *Christianopolis* (1619); Tommaso Campanella, *City of the Sun* (1623); Francis Bacon, *The New Atlantis* (1627); Gabriel Platt, *A Description of the Famous Kingdom of Marcaria* (1641), and in 18<sup>th</sup> century Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), in 19<sup>th</sup> century Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (1888), William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (1890) to name a few representative utopian successors.<sup>6</sup>

In 20<sup>th</sup> century, utopian literature was inherited by Science Fiction. Suvin claims, “utopia is not a genre but the sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction.”<sup>7</sup> In this quotation, he emphasizes that even though Science Fiction succeeded utopia, it is much wider concept than utopia. Freedman also evaluates Science Fiction as the ideal form of utopia. For him Science Fiction is an unattainable utopia of utopia.

A purely science-fictional text would not only estrange our empirical environment absolutely but would do so in such a perfectly cognitive fashion that the utopian alternative to actuality would not merely be suggested but delineated in complete and precise detail. The project of composing such a text is thus impossible not only in the sense that no asymptote can ever be actually attained, but also in the sense that the situation of such a project is inherently self-contradictory. For the perfected knowledge of utopia required to compose a purely science-fictional text could only be obtained by the kind of residence in utopia that would leave one without a nonutopian actuality to be estranged.<sup>8</sup> (72)

SF is a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interactions of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.<sup>9</sup>

The important features of SF as utopian literary genre, as Suvin and Freedman emphasizing, are ‘estrangement’ and ‘cognition.’ Brecht defined this attitude, estrangement, as “a representation which estranges is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar.” Estrangement includes both cognitive and creative aspects in that it let us know something new through unfamiliarization. Generally estrangement effect in literature is made by unnatural text in order to reveal its subject. However, estrangement in SF works by way of vividly showing the fictional world with naturalistic text. In other words, estrangement in SF is a unfamiliarization not with respect to form but with respect to content. The fictional world of realistic novel represents actual world, but the fictional world of SF represents new world which is totally different from actual world. Utopia is no-place which does not exist in this world, so SF is the ideal utopian literary genre which vividly shows totally different world.

According to the quoted passage, Freedman claims SF is the ideal literary genre in which utopia could be fully realized, however, at the same time, it cannot be realized because of its own utopian

6. Phillip E. Wegner, ch. 5 “Utopia”, *A Companion to Science Fiction*, p. 84

7. Suvin, p. 61

8. Freedman, p. 72

9. Suvin, p. 7

character. The pure science fictional text, in Freedman's idea, should be a text which describes absolute fictional world in detail which perfectly estranged from actual empirical world. It may be logically impossible to satisfy the condition of absolute estrangement, because estrangement presupposes actuality from which it is estranged. Even though pure SF is impossible, we can still talk about SF as utopian genre not in an absolute sense but in a relative sense. There are two conditions which SF should meet, that is estrangement and detailed description. You can consider some text SF in case it sufficiently satisfies these two conditions relative to other texts which describe sufficiently different world by unnatural way, naturally describe empirical world, and unnaturally describe empirical world. Compared to utopian literature before 20th century, contemporary SF satisfies these two conditions well. Prior to 20th century, utopia was described as locating somewhere in this world and coexist with actual world. But contemporary utopia is temporally detached from actual world and independent of actual world. Related with this feature, traditional utopia was a country-state, but contemporary SF settled in the world that absolutely excludes the possibility to coexist with actual world.<sup>10</sup>

Even though SF takes naturalistic style it does not give impressions to describe actual world, because it creates fictional worlds remote from actual world. The more detailed the fictional world is described, the more the estrangement effect increases. This estrangement effect highlights the fact that this fictional world is composed of language and exists as a text not as a world. And this text does not assert and does not require belief. This text just show a world and what happens in it. The SF — distinct from other texts which assert, argue and correspond to facts in actual world — might be considered the purest literary text.

This is the reason why the purest utopia cannot but exist as SF literary genre. Literature does not assert the fact on the actual world but insinuates an aspect of this world by way of showing another world. If we admit that utopia is a collective hope unattainable individually, there could be no utopian fact corresponding to this world and it is impossible to assert that fact directly. It is impossible to express utopian hope with asserting and arguing language. The best way to express utopian hope is showing instead of asserting and this method could be ideally realized in literature. Realistic literature tends to give an impression or illusion to read a text which asserts facts about actual world. However SF blocks the possibility of this illusion by way of showing totally different world and this estrangement effect reveals its textuality. Utopia should not only show another world but also reveal its textuality, it is necessary that utopia exist as literature. Among many literary genre utopia should be a novel, because utopia should describe the fictional world in detail and novel is more proper than poet when it comes to detailed description.

Text itself plays a role of bridge between fictional and actual worlds. Utopia cannot be accessed without having recourse to text. And the text gives us a way to understand the unfamiliar world with respect to actual world, because language cannot totally free from the order of actual world and

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10. Wegner, p. 88

inherently reflect it. The text works two-way; on the one hand, we can understand utopia through the text and, on the other hand, we can see the actual world through the utopian perspective thanks to the text. Utopia is connected to actual world by the existence of text, its author and implied readers.

Now we can see the close relationship between utopian fictional world and actual world, that is estranged but interconnected through the text. Then we are ready to move to the next question. How can we understand actual world through utopia? What is cognitive mechanism of utopia? Let me investigate utopian cognitive function with regard to the logic of impossibility.

### Logic of utopian cognition

Utopia fulfills its critical role by way of showing a world in which the impossible in the actual world is possible and through which we can see the actual world in a new way. In this section, I will investigate the critical role of utopia through the logic of impossibility. Logics is an academic field which formulates the argument within the logical possibility. So it might sound absurd to investigate the logic of impossibility. However many people argue that the logics of impossibility is necessary and possible. There are studies which apply the logic of impossibility to epistemology and I will argue that its epistemological usefulness could also applied to utopian epistemology.

Possible world is used in many fields with various meaning, but generally it loosely means an imaginable spatio-temporal world. For example, Dolezel defines possible World as macrostructure (mereological sum) constituted by a finite number of possible particulars. And he assumes fictional worlds in literature as a kind of possible world. Fictional world is a small possible world shaped by specific global constraints and containing a finite number of individuals who are compossible. He stresses the role of fictional text which create, conserve and convey fictional world.<sup>11</sup> As a kind of fictional text, utopian literature plays the same role. Fictional world as literary possible world can contain everything conceivable.

On the contrary possible world in logics means logically possible world. Logically possible world does not permit self-contradictory concepts like round square. In contrast, fictional world accepts everything conceivable including round square and knowledge on impossible knowledge. Bearing in mind this difference, let me investigate how the logic of impossibility contribute to explaining cognitive role of utopia.

Some people might worry about accepting impossible world within the area of logic because they think this could make the classical logic weakened. However Daniel Nolan argues that accepting impossible worlds does not necessarily weaken classical logic and impossible worlds are useful and necessary. Nolan takes the example of logics, mathematics and metaphysics which sometimes need to deal with incompatible systems. In logics, in case there are genuine

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11. Dolezel, *Heterocosmica: fiction and possible worlds*, 1998

disagreements among rival incompatible logical systems and if at most one of the parties can be correct, then the other parties are reasoning about impossibilities. Each logical system should be logically possible, so if there are logically incompatible systems and one is correct and others are not, then the incorrect systems are logically impossible. Mathematics and metaphysics likewise.

Logical impossibility is also useful when we deal with epistemological problem. Epistemology should be able to deal not only with states with or without information but also with changes of information. Some object can be created and destroyed. It means non-existence becomes existence and vice versa. And when existence becomes non-existence, the knowledge on it should also change. For example, before Neptune was discovered, the belief in Neptune was not knowledge but after its discovery this belief became a knowledge. In order to deal with this change of knowledge, the incompatible propositions ‘Neptune exists’ and ‘Neptune does not exist’ are required. This example shows that in order to explain changes of knowledge, both existence and non-existence are required in an epistemological system and coexistence of both is logically impossible. Therefore logical system for dealing with changes of knowledge requires logical impossibility.<sup>12</sup>

When we need to understand the relationship between utopia and actual world, the logic of impossibility can be applied to logical, physical and epistemological impossibility. Utopia requires logic of impossibility in ontological level, in that the existence of utopia relies on logical, metaphysical and physical impossibility. And its epistemological function relies on its ontological impossibility. Utopia makes us see the actual world in the perspective of impossible world and find new possibilities in the actual world. The acquisition of new knowledge presupposes impossibilities.

## Conclusion

In this paper I argued two theses. Utopia cannot but exist as literary text, and utopia can contribute to the knowledge on our world through the logic of impossibility. I think utopia is very powerful cognitive tool and its power comes from the imagination of the impossible.

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12. Barteld Kooi, “Information Change and First-Order Dynamic Logic”, p. 34

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