

## Evading Nuclear Destruction: An Ambiguous “Understanding” of Utopia

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*The Task of Utopia: A Pragmatist and Feminist Perspective.* Erin McKenna. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001, pp. vii + 179.

The horror of our memories of pogroms, nuclear bombs, and colonization breed deep fear of the perfectionist ideologies that manifested them: Truth/Grand Narrative, unilateralism, utopian theories. In her book, *The Task of Utopia: A Pragmatist and Feminist Perspective*, Erin McKenna argues that a new understanding of utopia will show it has been mistakenly connected to these destructive ideologies. Utopia, McKenna argues, should constantly engage in a process of evolution with optimization, not perfection, as a goal.

McKenna first outlines the two forms of utopia as it has been commonly understood: end-state and anarchist. In her examination of end-state utopia, McKenna draws from a number of theories, such as Plato’s Republic, Rousseau’s method of education, and Sheri S. Tepper’s science fiction novel, *The Gate to Women’s Country*. McKenna concludes that end-state utopias have the following characteristics: One or a minority of individuals lead the majority into a totalitarian regime. The regime leaders claim to know the perfect end society must strive for. Any means to that end are considered valid. Thus violence and oppression are “understandable” methods. For example, McKenna states:

End-state utopian visions have provided a variety of alternative methods for attempting such engineering of human nature. The possibilities include the use of coercion (subtle and otherwise), terror, legal punishment, education, eugenics, morality, inducements, drugs, indoctrination, and psychological conditioning (p. 28).

Since diversity threatens this “harmonious” regime, it is therefore unacceptable. In the end, dreaming and progress will cease, because foresight rests solely on achieving the end posited by the regime leader.

While McKenna envisions end-states as horrifying theoretical utopias, her argument that horror must follow from the proposition: “end-state” is ultimately

unconvincing. If the goal is postmodernism/open-ended acceptance of truths, then totalitarian regimes, violence, manipulation, lack of diversity, etc., need not follow. Gandhi is another “tangible” example. He proclaimed freedom and equality for Indians and successfully worked peacefully for this end. In the final analysis McKenna’s claims about end-states remain unsatisfactory because she does not *argue* for them. Instead, McKenna lists final conclusions of unnamed critics who are used as omniscient, omnipresent authorities. Finally, to make her point, McKenna relies heavily on excerpts from science fiction. While this exegesis does re-invigorate the reader’s critical interest in utopia, which is one of McKenna’s goals, it serves as a glimpse into the theory of *only* the author whose book is discussed. This again leads one to question the limited perception McKenna has of end-state utopia.

McKenna prefers the anarchist to the end-state model because she finds it potentially less destructive. In theory, an anarchic utopia will cleanly divorce itself from its previous society, give freedom and equality to all its citizens, and remain in evolution void of dogmatism. However, McKenna is skeptical whether this ideal can be actualized. She finds three fatal probabilities: First, in order for the anarchic society to bloom, it must cleanse itself of all previous unwanted laws, goals, values, and authority. This, McKenna thinks, will likely happen only with violence. Further, she believes a society rooted in violence must inherently have violence in its ground, which could pop up at any time. Second, anarchy may ask too much of its citizens. McKenna believes the freedom that ideally comes with anarchy can be maintained only by active participation of all citizens in the community which is unlikely. Third, diversity may threaten the stability of the anarchy, and citizens may oppress or expel citizens with “other” characteristics.

McKenna suggests that her process model of utopia lacks the problems of end-state and anarchist utopia, and is one we can bring safely into our contemporary culture. The process model encourages citizens to work within existing democracy. Isolated individuals should shed their garments of passivity, and action-oriented citizens must emblazon a reinvigorated democracy. This avoids violent revolution and reminds us that democracy is meant to be run by citizens, not mainly elected officials. Once citizens realize their responsibility to actively create a world they want to live in, by means of democracy, they are encouraged to work in community to solve common problems. Working in community should also serve to teach citizens about each other—fear of difference is expected to be overcome, and citizens should begin to understand how they are

all interconnected. The lesson of interconnection is that what every citizen does at every moment impacts every other citizen. For example: if a citizen does not pay taxes, other citizens may have less food to eat that year because less money might go to social programs. Once citizens realize this, they will pay their taxes and want to do good to their neighbor, because former isolation and misunderstanding will hopefully disappear as citizens work in community and actively shed their passivity.

McKenna draws from John Dewey's vision of democracy to form her process model; they both argue we must realize that the future is what we make it, and the future grows out of the present—so we must embrace the present and shape it as we see fit. However, first we must learn to see fit. Education is a lifelong road which should take us through the minds of all people we pass, and because this is a global economy and technology reaches all destinations, we must weave through the minds of all. In so doing, we will understand the interconnectedness of all life and realize that we are active drivers who impact everything we touch. This theory does not require altruism; it relies solely on self-interested behavior—"do unto others as you would have done unto you." McKenna believes that while we are not currently all experts in the field of interconnectedness understanding, education and the realization that we live in community will lend its self to her contemporary culture utopia.

While promising, there yet remain weak points in McKenna's theory. First, while the process model does not hope for perfection in its practice, it still leaves a great burden on the minority of citizens who embrace the interconnectedness model to educate those who do not. Second, while I *want* to endorse interconnectedness understanding because I see it as perhaps the last glimmer of hope, I do think it is an ideology, an end. McKenna, drawing from Dewey, wants to differentiate between "ends-in-view"/goals and ends. She wants to say: final ends are bad; ends-in-process are good. Even if a differentiation can be drawn, I think it is ambiguous. Further, the process model definitely has an end: the *end* is educated community oriented citizens who understand interconnectedness. Third, even if we accept that education is not dogmatic in itself, I do not know that educators can be trusted to leave dogmatic ends behind. Finally, the process model stipulates democracy which itself becomes another dogmatism if we look only to the United States and those with related forms of democracy to form our utopian community.

These concerns notwithstanding, the process model of utopia is hopeful in that it encourages its community to practice experience as a further form of education. If our eyes are open, first hand experience of other cultures can rid our minds and hearts of the blinders we often carry. Perhaps experiential knowledge and process utopia will serve us better than the Enlightenment logic that led to the Holocaust and Hiroshima.