Historical Small Events and the Eclipse of 
*Utopia*: Perspectives on Path-Dependence 
in Human Ideas and Thought

Lenin was carrying a bouquet of roses when he arrived at Saint Petersburg’s Finland Station in the night of April 16th, 1917. He stepped off the train. His comrades welcomed him with tears on their cheeks. He addressed the crowd from the balcony of Khesinskaya Palace which was at the time captured by the Bolsheviks. “On the journey here with my comrades,” Lenin said, “I was expecting that they would take us straight from the station to Peter and Paul. We are far from that, it seems. But let us not give up the hope that we shall not escape that experience” (Wilson 1953: 472).

It was the early days of the Russian Revolution. Lenin was trying to flee from Switzerland where he had been in exile. He took the train, and entered Russia. He was not caught by the police on the border. Such a small event was very important because its consequences, Lenin had known, would dominate the world and cause important political and intellectual movements in the twentieth century. It was a small event that functioned as “the key of a philosophy of history [that] fit to an historical lock” (Wilson 1953: 467).

In *To the Finland Station* Edmund Wilson portrayed a prophecy of the inevitability of socialist revolution as a human phenomenon (See also Murphy 1992: ix-xv). He did not write about iron laws of history but how the execution of Lenin’s brother by the Tsar when Lenin was 17 affected Lenin’s views on social revolutions. He did not write about necessities in human history but how Lenin was not allowed to reenter the University of Kazan, and subsequently started by chance reading Marx. He did not write about abstract principles of nature but concrete events, historical small events as many
economists have come to know them, such as that it was only by chance that
Lenin had not been caught and arrived at the Finland Station. He wrote about
small events that had big consequences for the future. In fact, in 1989 another
small event happened – a wall fell. The event put a full-stop to all the
prophecies about the historical path that was thought to construct heaven on
earth.

“Marxism is in relative eclipse,” Edward Wilson wrote later in 1952 long
before the collapse of the Russian empire. “An era in its history,” he said, “has
dended. It may be worth while at this moment to look back and try to see what
has happened.” Today, however, it is not only Marxism that is in relative
eclipse. It is, for instance, Samuelsenian economics, the analytical tradition in
philosophy, and numerous technologies such as Beta video systems, too, which
were once smart inventions but are now in relative eclipse. Eras in their
history have ended. It may be worthwhile at this moment to look back and try
to see what happened. If we are able to detect such small events as Lenin’s not
being caught, we may be able to see – if not fix – the problem that caused such
grand theories as Samuelsonian economics, analytical philosophy, or Marxism
to drag along an eclipse-kind of path that ceased to provide what they had
once promised.

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The idea of path dependence in the historical evolution of social institutions – also
the central point of the present paper in the context of the historical evolution
of intellectual institutions – has in fact long been well known by economists.
Paul David, an economic historian at Stanford and Oxford, published an article
in 1985 – entitled “Clio and the Economics of QWERTY” – which has come
to be the first of the sequel of articles on path dependence in economics. The
article was a short one, and soon became a “famous fable” in economic
science. Following David, economists such as Brian Arthur, from Santa Fe
Institute, and Douglass North, the winner of the Nobel Prize in 1983 (with
Robert Fogel), among many others, have contributed to the research on path dependence, and the notion has thus turned into a celebrated one in social sciences (Arthur 1994 and 1996; North 1990).

The notion was originally applied to the historical evolution of typing machines. During the times of mechanical typewriters, David argued in the paper, the principal problem was the clashing and jamming of the mechanical parts of typewriters. The solution was shortly found, and the keyboard of the machine was designed in such a way that the machine reduced the speed of the typist so that the amount of clashing and jamming was less. The solution was initially a smart one because it efficiently generated a working solution to a practical problem. It, however, turned out to be “inefficient” when digital keyboards were introduced. For the problem of clashing and jamming in digital keyboards was no more, and yet the keyboard design was the same. The typist, therefore, was now using the keyboard, the fable of the keys goes, at a slower speed than she could although her speed could have been increased if another keyboard had been introduced. The new digital technology didn’t allow clashing and jamming but the institution – that is, the keyboard itself – has persisted, in that the problem was conveyed to next generations.

The way David, Arthur, and North, among many others, applied the notion to the evolution of mechanical typewriters was heavily criticized by economists (See for example: Margolis and Leibowitz 1995). Despite the debate on the fable of keyboards, the significance of path dependence in the evolution of human institutions was nevertheless acknowledged by many social scientists. The notion has thus become a well-known metaphor among sociologists, political scientists, historians as well as natural scientists like physicists and biologists.

“Qwerty-nomics” – as David likes to call it – points at a specific problem in the historical evolution of human institutions: that historical small events can have big consequences in the future. The basic idea behind the story is
that the evolution of institutions may \textit{lock in} to specific paths in history because of some unforeseen small events, in that humans and societies may have to confront with undesirable – “inefficient,” as economists have called it – outcomes in the future as a consequence of individual preferences in the past. Switching to another path of evolution, under such circumstances, may be difficult or – economically speaking – costly, because it is sometimes impossible or unwise to, say, get rid of old habits or develop new behavioral strategies under conditions of uncertainty or imperfect information.

“Toggling” between paths might be difficult also because, say, old technologies may not allow – like in the case of keyboards – to develop new technologies that would operate more “efficiently.”

I argue in the present paper, in a nutshell, that the historical evolution of intellectual institutions, too, is subject to similar “lock-in processes.” That is to say, in philosophy, sciences, and arts we have been dependent upon specific paths which keep generating undesirable outcomes for today’s problems. There are several examples to the case – and I mention some of them below – such as “The Coase Problem” in economics and the concept of truth in philosophy. The problematic I am interested in point at a phenomenon called path dependence in intellectual history caused by historical small events: small events, the argument goes, may cause the evolution of institutions to lock in to specific paths. Economists have long dealt with questions like “What if such small companies as Hewletts and the Varians had not been established in Santa Clara County in California?” or “What if Q-type keyboards had not been invented?” I now would like to apply such skeptical views in economics to human ideas and thought in general? And I ask: What if Greek philosophy had not been interested in “essences” and “foundations?” What if Kant had not invented the “thing-in-itself”? Nature and society, according to some Platonic philosophers, can be known only if it can be shown that events are governed, regulated, and characterized by “forms,” which are immutable, complete, and perfect in their nature. But is there an “essence” that makes a man 100%
male? Was there really a “foundation” in history that caused a proletarian revolution in Russia? What if we had pushed aside the rhetorics of utopian ideality? What if we had a worldview different than the one depicted by Thomas More in his *Utopia*? The essay points at the possibility of such skepticism in human ideas and thought.

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Since numerous social scientists have used path dependence within different narratives, its meaning may now be ambiguous. We first have to see that the “path” in the metaphor of path dependence, like many other metaphors, has never been a “reality” – in other words, there have never really been a “path.” There has never been any “geography” upon which an economy, society, or intellectualism would practice human abilities such as walking or running. Social scientists have chosen to use the metaphor of path dependence in order to express their dissatisfaction with the present state of the evolution of an institution. Path dependence is used in order to communicate a complaint about the historical condition of such institutions as Q-type keyboards, Samuelsonain economics, or analytical philosophy. It has become a figure of speech representing an economy – and, too, societies, technologies, sciences, and arts – as if an economy is a mover on a landscape where no destination has been set in advance, or at least, known by the passenger. The important point about the theory of path dependence is that a technological design and such notions as “truth” may stop functioning well although they may have been useful within certain contexts in the past.

That is to say, the metaphor of path dependence is only a naming (Dewey and Bentley 1999: 136-143), and it could have also been something else – such as a cube or labyrinth. In fact, in the movie *CUBE* (directed by Vincenzo Natali, Darkyl New Media / Tri-Mark Pictures, 1997) a group of people are trapped in a cube-cell where the only condition of survival is to move continuously to different cube-cells, because there is no final cell – a perfect
cell, in other words – where security and stability are ideally sustained. In *Alice in Wonderland* Alice travels in a world where norms and conventions are radically altered. And further similar metaphors can be developed. Path dependence, among them, is another textured product of imagination aiming at telling the reader the undesirability of the historical condition which leads social institutions (such as Q-type keyboards or the vocabulary of analytic philosophy) to underachieving results. Speaking in terms of pathologies, scientists have thought, they would be more able to express their dissatisfaction with computers or VHS video systems. It has, therefore, become a true figure in the history of successive metaphors because the placeholder “path,” not something else, was the winner of the battle of talking.

The story of path dependence, in Rortyean terms, is “[an attempt] to re-interpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions” (Rorty 1980: 360). It is a way of showing how small events (such as Quine’s view on two dogmas of empiricism) can turn big events (such as the end of positivist philosophy of the Vienna Circle) into ironies of history (detachment of a once-leading figure of logical positivism from analytic philosophy to American tradition of pragmatism) (Borradori 1991: 27-39). The story of path dependence offers another perspective upon dissatisfactions and disappointments in the evolution of intellectual institutions.

**What is a small event anyway?**

Writing the history of such important events as the Russian Revolution is writing “one damn thing after another.” Let’s now consider another important event – the Industrial Revolution – in order to reflect on the character of the events that are supposed to have played significant role in history. History books report the Industrial Revolution by telling stories about population increases (Toynbee 1956), technological advancement in the eighteenth century (Landes 1969), and organizational successes at the end of nineteenth century (Chandler 1990). Such stories communicate to the student of the Industrial
Revolution the problems that the Englishmen or Americans faced and solved at the time. And they do it, as John Hicks once wrote in his *A Theory of Economic History*

in the way that the great eighteenth-century writers did, as part of a social evolution much more widely considered. I have tried to indicate the lines that connect the economic story with the things we ordinarily regard as falling outside it … There are threads that run from economics into other social fields, into politics, into religion, into science and into technology; they develop there, and then run back into economics (Hicks 1969: 167).

Historians have pointed out some events that have dramatically changed the course of happenings in exceptional manners. Such events somehow attract more attention nowadays than “the iron laws of history” and mysterious “forces behind the appearance regulating the economic behavior in global markets.” Some events hardly fit the general picture drawn by historians, and their consequences accumulate in a noticeably different fashion. They are *casual* events of history that have *causal* significance for today.

It is not a surprise for history students to hear that the amount of production is closely related to how efficient the inputs are employed by the industry. And therefore it is not an amazing event for them to read that steam engine caused a tremendous increase in the amount of industrial production. True, for the readers to understand the history of Industrial Revolution it is necessary to see the “causal connections” in the course of events. It is easy to do: steam engine increased the amount of industrial product *because* machine tools were able to work with metal objects of great size at high speeds, which made technically possible and commercially profitable what workmen once couldn’t perform (Hicks: 145-148). But, there are some events that make a big difference in an unaccustomed fashion. And I, following the writings of Arthur, David, and North, will call them historical small events.

Historical small events are those the effects of which multiply in an unforeseen and unexpected manner when neglected or overlooked in scientific experiments. Such events are sometimes the errors that researchers overlook. Von Neuman, for instance, who built the first computer with the intention of
controlling weather, Gleick reports, “had overlooked the possibility of \textit{chaos},
with instability at every point … \cite{Gleick1987} beyond two or three days the world’s best
forecasts were [thus] speculative, and beyond six or seven they were worthless … [because] the errors will have multiplied to the ten-foot scale, and so on up
to the size of the globe” \citep{Gleick1987:19}. Robert White, a fellow
meteorologist at M.I.T., gave the answer to von Neumann’s problem later on.
His idea was that “small modifications, well within human capability, could
cause desired large-scale changes” \citep{Gleick1987:22}.

In effect, the consequences of such events are usually against intuition.
They surprise the researcher as multiplication of the consequences of neglected
events is never expected. Small events can create a similar effect to the crises
that cause “paradigm shifts” in the Kuhnian sense. James Gleick, once again,
writes,

\begin{quote}
In science as in life, it is well known that a chain of events can have a point of crisis
that could magnify small changes. But chaos meant that such points were everywhere.
They were pervasive. In systems like the weather, \textit{sensitive dependence on initial conditions} \textit{was} an inescapable consequence of the way small scales intertwined
with large. \citep{Gleick1987:23} \textit{Italics added.}
\end{quote}

Friction, for instance, is a factor the effect of which is often neglected in
physics – as well as in economics, for that matter, in the form of transaction
costs where transaction costs are seen as market friction or “frictional costs”
\citep[see, for instance,][]{JacobidesWinter2003}. But friction is something that
depends on speed – and vice versa – and with friction and speed things can get
complicated. Neglecting one small factor – that is, friction – an equation or a
system can generate unforeseen or unexpected consequences. This can be why
an economy doesn’t reach at equilibrium. And this can also be why, we don’t
reach “general equilibrium” in the economy, and why, as I argue below more
thoroughly, the truth doesn’t reveal out in philosophy.

We can resemble the accumulation of the consequences of some small
events to the way the probability of drawing the same colored balls in the so
called Polya-urn processes increases. The process runs as follows: suppose
there are initially equal numbers of red and black balls in an urn. We randomly draw a ball. Then we return the ball to the urn, with another ball of the same color. That is, if the ball that we draw is red we return the red ball with another red one. If there were initially one red and one black ball in the urn, there would now be three red balls in the urn – two reds and one black. We draw another ball. We repeat the game. The consequence of the process is that, as we make further draws, the probability of drawing the same colored ball increases. The process, in other words, is reinforced by the small event of drawing a red ball from the urn.3

A possible objection for the role of small events in the evolution of social institutions is that they are not easily detectable. No event, after all, is small or big, wide or narrow, and dry, black, or brute. “Small event,” however, is only a naming – just like path dependence is. And the adjective “small” might metaphorically refer to many things in diverse contexts. This makes it difficult for us to produce a standard definition of the term – just like path dependence does. “Small events,” in the broadest sense, are the events, as demonstrated above, that are usually neglected, sometimes overlooked, and erroneous or contingent. They in most cases are the causes of path dependence in the evolution of human institutions. They occasionally bewilder the researcher – and they do it in such a way that consequences are in general ironic and underachieving.

Small events in operation: The “Coase Theorem” in economics and the issue of truth in philosophy

Let’s take an example in order to make the case more concrete: the “Coase Theorem” in the history of economic thought. In the third addition of The Theory of Price George Stigler writes that “[t]he Coase theorem thus asserts that under perfect competition private and social costs will be equal. It is a more remarkable proposition to us older economists who have believed the opposite for a generation, than it will appear to the young reader who was never wrong,
here” (Stigler 1966: 113). The quotation may seem bizarre to economists who have carefully read Ronald Coase, Nobel Prize winner in 1991, especially his “The Nature of the Firm” (1937). His point in the article was that we were not living in the best of possible worlds but in a world of transaction costs. In other words, when God created the world, metaphorically speaking, she also created transaction costs, so that there are many problems in the “real” world today that neither Jesus nor general equilibrium approach can solve. Contrary to what Adam Smith said, Ronald Coase argued, we are living in a world where markets sometimes do not clear off.

The naming of the “Coase Theorem” was then basically wrong. In fact Ronald Coase raised the issue in his The Firm, the Market, and the Law (1988: 15). He said

> [w]hat my argument does suggest is the need to introduce positive transaction costs explicitly into economic analysis so that we can study the world that exists. This has not been the effect of my article. The extensive discussion in the journals has concentrated almost entirely on the “Coase Theorem,” a proposition about the world of zero transaction costs. This response, although disappointing, is undesirable.

The “Coase Theorem” was introduced by George Stigler in 1950s, and has since become an important topic to investigate for economists. A small event, that is Stigler’s misreading of the writings of Ronald Coase, has generated a different path in the evolution of economic thought – a path dissimilar to Ronald Coase’s argument in 1930s. Stigler’s “Coase Theorem” was not in Ronald Coase’s “The Nature of the Firm.” Neither was it in “The Problem of Social Cost” (1960). A chance element – namely, Stigler – that didn’t belong to the intellectual capacity of Ronald Coase influenced the way his contribution is construed by economists today.

Some events in history are in such causal environments that we cannot easily eliminate their consequences. In the case of the “Coase Theorem” the small event was an error that lasted until today. But for an error to be counted as important, the historians think, the error should be reinforced. That is to say, it should persist in the face of correction. Many errors in human ideas and
thought, however, are usually trivial, because they are sometimes corrected. In other words, it is not always the “errors” that cause undesirable consequences for the future. Consider, for instance, the issue of “truth” in philosophy.

The issue of “truth” in philosophy has so far been one of the most complicated and time consuming issues for thinkers. The solution to the question “what is truth?” is as much problematic as the origin of the question. Whenever the debate has started, and wherever it goes, Steven Shapin in his *A Social History of Truth* (1994) put his finger on an important small event in its history that has played a “big” role in the establishment of the concept.

Steven Shapin argued that the establishment of the concept of truth in Europe has much to do with a small event: the emergence of “gentlemanly society” in England in the seventeenth century. Englishmen in the seventeenth century were looking for reliable knowledge to such questions as “whom to trust?” and “who has the right to speak for those who didn’t speak for themselves?” A working solution was created by way of transporting the virtues of gentlemanly society into the new practice of empirical science. That is, “[c]ultural practices linking truth to honor in gentle society,” wrote Shapin (1942: 42), “were adapted and transferred to provide substantial practical solutions to problems of credibility.” The truth, therefore, was constructed not by “discovering the hidden substance of the universe” but by appealing to a concrete event – emergence of gentility – which worked as a “massively powerful instrument in the recognition, constitution, and protection of truth” (p.42). Such a small event thus determined the conception and definition of truth.

The moral economy of premodern society located truth within the practical performances of everyday social order. Truth flowed along the same personal channels as civil conversation. Knowledge was secured by trusting people with whom one was familiar, and familiarity could be used to gauge the truth of what they said … Seventeenth century commentators felt secure in guaranteeing the truthfulness of narratives by pointing to the integrity of those special sorts of men who preferred them (Shapin 1994: 410).
Path Dependence underlines pathologies in the economy. There are pathologies in human ideas and thought, too.

Such events are abundant in history. And their significance and consequences in the evolution of human ideas and thought have so far attracted the attention of many philosophers and scientists. The issue is important for economics. And it is important for the history of human ideas, too. For disappointments with “the advance of technology,” such arguments maintain, have some common elements with the disappointments with “the advance of knowledge” as well (David 1990). “I am unable to find any compelling reasons,” David writes in regards to economic science, “why economic analysis should remain ‘locked in’ to an ahistorical conceptual framework, apart from the unfortunate hysteresis effects of ‘intellectual sunk costs’ … [S]ome injection of further, intellectual ‘energy’ is likely to be necessary in order for our discipline to free itself from the logical region of ‘low potential’ in which it has too long remained trapped” (David 2001).

The circumstances that small events can cause are those that happen – and never “un-happen” (David 2001). One of the undesirable consequences of the names and metaphors belonging to the current path of thought – that is, Samuelsonian equations in economics and the modernist philosophy of Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza, and many other Baconian thinkers – is that they are hindering the attempts to grow beyond what we have inherited from earlier times. We are locked in, so to say, to a particular rhetoric of science, philosophy, and arts. Many of the formulations in sciences such as “2+2=4” are necessarily true, and they have proved to be useful, too. Pythagoras’s theorem, for instance, made engineers able to build The Tunnel. Men navigated around the world by virtue of Ptolemy’s astronomy. Ptolemy’s view, however, was “foundationally” flawed. “The Earth [was] at rest,” he thought, “[that] it [was] in the centre of the Universe, and that fixed stars move[d] together as a sphere” (Field 1981: 349). His astronomy nevertheless worked well, and it
helped navigators produce land and sea maps using measurement and observatory techniques.

Despite the virtuous pasts of numerous sciences, some of the scientific figures of speech today produce more problems than solutions. Old vocabularies put a stop to “playing the new off against the old,” as Richard Rorty says. Since we couldn’t develop better rhetorics, many issues are still taboos – such as homosexuality or transgender or racial, regional, and cultural differences. This is the reason we try not to want something which stands beyond history and institutions… [A] belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance. My picture of a liberal utopia [has been] a sketch of a society in which the charge of “relativism” has lost its force, one in which the notion of “something that stands beyond history” has become unintelligible, but in which a sense of human solidarity remains intact (Rorty 1999: 189-190).

Richard Rorty thinks that one’s aim in philosophy should be to extend the “repertoire of alternative descriptions” rather than the “One Right Description” (Rorty 1999: 39-40). The metaphor of “depth” of “insight,” for instance, can be useful in better understanding the Bible or Friedrich Nietzsche, but it hardly makes sense while talking on such topics as the football match between England and Germany. By 2005 eight European countries will have ratified the European Constitution via referenda. The Constitution that the Europeans will vote about is more than 400-pages. Whatever the consequences of such an important event are going to be, it is still a big mystery for those who drafted the text how many people read it in a non-trivial manner. This doesn’t mean there is no depth to the discussion of the European Constitution or football matches, nor that people never read the Bible or Nietzsche superficially. It means rather that “depth” and “insight” are only figures of speech that we have long lived by (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).
Thomas More’s *Utopia* is another small event which caused human ideas and thought to be dependent on the idea of perfection.

Path dependence helps us understand why we can’t switch from one set of metaphors to another. The theory of path dependence maintains that we live with, in Nietzsche’s words, “illusions which we have forgotten are illusions, … metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, [and] coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal no longer as coins” (Nietzsche, 1873). Path dependence offers a richer and “gayer” scientific conversation, *à la* Nietzsche, about our dissatisfaction with many social institutions and such metaphors.

One of the metaphors that the thinkers of twentieth century have utilized, over-utilized, and mis-utilized is the metaphor of Thomas More’s *Utopia*. The metaphor implied that it was possible to build perfect structures. It was possible, for instance, to create or discover a “perfect language,” that is, a world of one language, and of one speech. Perfect language means that we name objects in such a way that we unambiguously communicate their inherent properties when we talk about them. It implies there should be one name for a tree, and the name should represent the essentials of the object. Names in languages would then have definite meanings. “The dream of a perfect language,” as Umberto Eco once said, “did not only obsess European culture. The story of the confusion of tongues, and of the attempt to redeem its loss through the rediscovery of invention of a language common to all humanity, can be found in every culture” (Eco 1995: 1).

The *will to perfection* in human ideas and thought is like the desire to erect a tower to reach heaven. The metaphor of *Utopia* had implied that it was possible to discover the ideal thinking systems such as atomic individualism or historical materialism. We were told that we could engineer the most efficient society in which we did not have a problem of scarcity. Yet designing social institutions was not always like designing tea-pots and Airbus A-380 airplanes.
As Eco writes, the story of the query for a perfect language – and the thinkers’ adventure of perfection in general – is the story of a “dream” and failures (p.19). In fact, the dreams of a perfect language, like the Tower of Babel, have collapsed repeatedly with catastrophic consequences – the collapse of Berlin Wall and the Soviet Empire being only two among other examples.

Thomas More provided one of the most significant constitutive metaphors in human thought. More, a “man for all seasons,” has had many admirers, from the Catholic Church, which canonized him as saint in 1935, to the Politburo of the USSR, where a sculpture of him was erected by the order of Lenin after the revolution of 1917. His *Utopia* has influenced almost every text written on such social and philosophical issues as justice, poverty, social order, and, of course, truth.

One can read the book in countless ways, underscore a variety of its aspects, and criticize or praise its conclusions and implications. The book inspired changing the world with a faith in human perfection. “Despite More’s religious feelings,” says Scott Gordon,

> his *Utopia* is not notably a portrait of a perfect social order built upon religious foundations or governed necessarily by priests. In fact it was the forerunner of the form of social perfectionist writing that rose to dominance in the eighteenth century: the vision of a secular utopia … [S]ocial science and social philosophy underwent a profound transformation from a religious to a secular orientation during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This was also true of that branch of social thought most intimately connected with religion, the concept of a social order: paradise, in effect, was brought down to earth (Gordon 1991: 160).

Many writers, as Gordon also underlines, have read *Utopia* from the view of religious freedom and secularization in political and intellectual life. In fact, *Utopia* has been influential on such diverse issues as secularization, communism, and liberalism (see, for instance, Hexter 1961; Pienas 1964; Nendza 1984; and Engeman 1982, and more recently Carey 1999: xi-xxvi and Hodgson 1999: especially 1-14). There are, however, other aspects of More’s work, too, especially in regard to the character of the evolution of human thought after its publication, which I here like to focus on more. Surely, the
book has extremely been important in the process of reforming the state–church relations – it has perhaps been the first attempt to provide a comprehensive religious freedom (Kessler, 2002). But what I think is missing in the literature of philosophy and literary studies – as far as I could follow – is that the book has not been seen as the formulation of a specific type intellectualism in Europe – namely, as the formulation of the will to perfection.

Thinkers have long been interested in imaginary good places (for an inclusive survey see Frye 1966 and Carey 1999). In fact, there is an obsession among the writers in the modernist era – an obsession of thinking about worldly matters in terms of perfect categories such as perfect concepts, perfect technologies, perfect economies and societies, and so forth. And *Utopia* assumes that answers to such fundamental questions are possible.

The book is rhetorically powerful. It is not a theory connecting the facts, but instead an expression of an idea – an idea of perfection. I argue, however, that the condition of our age suggests us thinking many things differently: computers, digital technologies, separation of software from hardware, and so forth, have changed the ways in which we do daily work such as communicating with others, shopping, or “fixing” the equipment. It was presupposed in More’s book that in the long run we could bring resolving answers to such fundamental questions as “what is the nature of human beings?” or “what is the reality behind the appearance?” In many cases today, however, such as in the studies of race and gender, we are not interested in such questions anymore, nor do we believe that the answers would make a difference in the slightest.

“Fundamentals” and “essentials” of ages old ideas, which were to be used to build such perfect structures, were basically symbolic figures. The problem was that we used them literally. We have assumed that there were fundamentals that structured the human nature. We have assumed that there were essential features to human races. We have assumed that reality was
always behind the appearance. Such figures of speech were chosen arbitrarily, mostly with references to religious and transcendental doctrines – such as the theological argument that this world was not “real” and “the reality” was behind the appearance. Such metaphors aimed at forming an imaginary, balanced construction in human ideas and thought. “Beneath the surface of economic theorizing,” as Robert Nelson writes it in his *Economics and Religion*, “economists are engaged in an act of delivering religious messages. Correctly understood, these massages are seen to be promises of *the true path to a salvation* in this world – to a heaven on earth” (Nelson 2001: xx).

“We have flocks of words of respectable appearance,” as Dewey and Bentley noted in their last published book in 1949, “that spring from this source: such words as ‘substance,’ ‘entity,’ ‘reality,’ ‘actor,’ ‘creator,’ or ‘cause,’ and thus, indeed, the major part of the vocabulary of metaphysics” (Dewey and Bentley 1999: 134). For avoiding the pre-knowledge of “the notions that do not have birth certificates,” Dewey and Bentley especially stressed, we should inquire into the knowns in the way in which

systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to “elements” or other presumptively detachable or independent “entities,” “essences,” or “realities,” and without isolation of presumptively detachable “relations” from such detachable “elements” (Dewey and Bentley 1999: 133).

Essences, upon which such truths were “founded,” have always been “out there.” Thinkers have so long used them although forms of essences have changed at different times. While Heraclites thought it was fire that was intrinsically stable and certain, Plato thought it was the rational spirit. St. Augustine thought it was love of God that was fixed and final in nature, and Spinoza thought it as emotion and affection. Marx thought it was class struggle that determined the course of social and economic history. Few thinkers have been willing to sacrifice the idea that it is possible to get to the heart of natural phenomena – that is, the essence of human nature or foundations of economic science.
Solutions to the artificial problem have varied, but the pathological idea that there are essences and foundations lingered. “Some have sought the good in self-realization,” as Dewey said, “some in holiness, some in happiness, some in the greatest possible aggregate of pleasures. And yet these schools have agreed in the assumption that there is a single, fixed, and final good. They have been able to dispute with one another only because of their common premise” (Dewey 1950: 132). Isaiah Berlin wrote that the originality of Machiavelli was his belief in an ideal state of affairs. “Machiavelli ... undermines one major assumption of Western thought,” said Isaiah Berlin, “namely that somewhere in the past or the future, in this world or the next ... there is to be found the final solution to the question of how men should live ... [But] the very search for it becomes not merely Utopian in practice but conceptually incoherent” (Berlin 1953: 72-76).

**Human ideas are not independent from utopias. But Utopia is only one among many others.**

The argument of path dependence in human ideas and thought suggests that reaching at the ideals of Utopia may be impossible because some small events might prevent us from achieving perfection. The metaphor should nevertheless not suggest that we should not have ideals or any kind of motivation for reaching at what we may consider the perfect being, the best society, or the most efficient technology. The point, on the contrary, is the exclusion of what is not in human form from the world of humans. What we need is more responsible thinking. Obviously people have ideals in life, and they morally feel better when they preserve in their mind the idea of the perfect being or desire for the just society. People believe in God, and people pray for their beloved, and people think it is important to be virtuous citizens. These are all human needs. That they refer to a world beyond facts and experience is refreshing and progressive, insofar as there is enough space for the others to think through alternate metaphors within various paradigms.
Thinking through utopias, in a similar fashion, is likewise crucially important. They are similar to sacred texts and other secular convincing stories that tell us that things could have been different. Utopias are, in a sense, free exercises about free worlds where constraints are loose and sometimes nonexistent. They are after all constructed worlds – the worlds that thinkers make for themselves. That we have already passed the calendar year of nineteen-eighty-four and coming close to the second half of the first decade in the second millennia should not reduce the significance of 1984 or 2001: A Space Odyssey.9

There is no question that what we can achieve in our daily life and in our intellectual world has much to do with what we can imagine. And the images we create are mostly the products of fairy tales, religious theory, folklore, and so forth. The intellectual’s faith in such fictions, however, is bound up with the responsibility of her actions which are out of her beliefs. The quality of beliefs is what makes the difference. Knowers, doers, and makers of this world are responsible for their actions, no matter what sort of belief precedes or causes them – religious or secular. As James wrote in his Pragmatism (2000: 198-219), beliefs are not there only for the behavior’s sake. Whenever we are to change public life by virtue of our passions – e.g. hope, love, and faith – “the principle concern must be the extent to which the actions of religious believers frustrate the needs of other human beings, rather than the extent to which religion gets something right,” says Rorty in his critique of William James. And he concludes:

[A]lthough your emotions are your own business, your beliefs are everybody’s business. There is no way in which the religious person can claim a right to believe as part of an overall right to privacy. For believing is inherently a public project: all we language users are in it together. We all have a responsibility to each other not to believe anything which cannot be justified to the rest of us. To be rational is to submit one’s beliefs – all one’s beliefs – to the judgment of one’s peers (Rorty 1997).

Belief in the idea of the possibility of a perfect world, as it is argued in Utopia, has been one of the tales that have influenced the way we have thought. It has worked so well that there has been considerable scientific and philosophical
progress. We now can do open heart operations, travel around the world in much less than eighty days, and build bridges and dams. Indeed, Boulding posed the correct question (Boulding 1971): After Samuelson, who needs Adam Smith? It is not a coincidence that our journey to the perfect state of things has – although interrupted – brought the consequence that many things have gotten better. The idea of reaching at the perfect state of things, therefore, involves “progress,” too, that betters human life in comparison to the preceding stages of development. The argument of path dependence in human ideas and thought suggests, however, that the metaphor of Utopia, like all other metaphors, has not been inevitable – and neither has it been sufficient. That is to say, humans could think about the world even if they did not believe in perfection or even if they did not talk through such metaphors as “essences” or “depth.” Like the Egyptian artists who created elegant paintings without any conception of depth (see Deleuze 1989: 79-92), we could understand the world in different ways: “we can read,” for instance, as Deirdre McCloskey put it, “the depth and the surface of the text at the same time” (McCloskey 1998: 5).

This is also the reason why utopias are the scenarios to which one should consult to see what counterfactuals there could be: “what if there was no war in Iraq?” or “what if Quine had not changed his mind?” or “what if Kant had not developed the idea of ‘thing-in-itself?’” The possibility of changing the actual is the proof that the actual is incomplete and imperfect. We can produce fine art even if we do not have any conception of depth; then, what if we try to make a picture of “reality” as if, say, there were a fifth or eleventh dimension? Forgetting that no perfection has ever actualized in the world of humans (such as 100% manhood), but mysteriously in the world of thought (such as general equilibrium in economics), we were told to believe in the “perfect ideality in concepts that express the opposite of those things which make life unsatisfactory and troublesome,” as Dewey once argued (Dewey 1950: 141).
Utopia is a special utopia, then, in which there is one unalterable world and no alternatives at all. It is a world of perfection – a world in which everything desirable is thought to be attained. It was one of the utopias that demonstrated one of the worlds that many thinkers such as Léon Walras and Karl Marx were inspired by. And it was also the world that many others such as the citizens of Soviet Republic hoped to be in. It was, however, not a factual demonstration – it was a story about a country that had never existed, for “utopia” meant “the place that did not exist.” Obviously, after such disappointments as the collapse of the Soviet Russia and the war in Iraq, we have started to think that we might have started incorrectly and we should consider the assumptions and preconditions again. This amounts to getting concerned with small events in history – events that resulted in path dependent circumstances in human ideas and thought.

To Conclude: Giving up addictions is hard, but overlooking the problem is even worse.

One can certainly ask the question: Human ideas have been dependent upon Utopia. So what? Isn’t a perfect world good for everybody? John Dewey has a remarkable answer for the question. “It is perhaps dangerous,” Dewey says, “to attempt to follow the inner workings of the processes by which truth is first identified with some superior type of reality, and then this Truth is taken as the criterion of the truth of ideas” (Dewey 1910: 142). The reason is simple: the explanation is constructed by the condition that satisfies the requirements of the case. But explanations are not discovered. They are created and constructed by humans.

Our habits of thought, according to the idealists of perfect clarity – that is, the followers of Utopia, analytic philosophers’ and Samuelsonian economists – could have really taken us to the promised ideal of human society. Within a human outlook, however, this does not seem to be possible in “human, all-too human” world. The presence of intrinsic excellence (that is, human nature) is
simply non-physical (unlike other humans) and therefore non-experienceable (unlike getting hit by a car or getting sick because of malnutrition). The writings of Dewey and Rorty, among others on the matter, have shown us that the more we are free from this agenda of research the more likely we are to get ourselves free. The more we are free from “tough-minded” philosophy and economics, in other words, the less we are content with the consequences of path dependence.

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**Word Count:**

Without references and endnotes: 8400

Without endnotes: 8500

Total: 8800
1 See also Spulber, (2001: 90-109).

2 Compare, for instance, the metaphor of path dependence with Arjo Klamer’s metaphor of “conversations” in his forthcoming book, *Speaking of Economists*. Path dependence asserts that breaking free from the past course of events may be impossible. Klamer, in a similar fashion, but from a different point of view, rightly argues that getting out of the course of the events (that is, “conversations”) can be difficult, but getting into it (it being “conversations”) can also be as tricky, and even impossible.


4 For further argumentation, see also McGloskey 1997.

Despite Rorty's elegance in writing philosophy, his attack on "realism" and "analytic philosophy" is nevertheless far from being controversial. His "edifying philosophy," to many philosophers, begs a certain number of questions, and has therefore been heavily criticized. Among his critics are Bhaskar (1991), Bernstein (1995), Dworkin (1996), and Putnam (2000). While I take for granted the flows in his broad-brush treatment of analytic philosophy, I, for the present paper, find attractive and relevant Rorty's views of "irony" and "solidarity" as well as his critique of "objective truth" and "foundationalism." Rorty, according to my view, is among the group of contemporary thinkers who, in a "post-Nietzschean" fashion, have succeeded in drawing the intellectuals' attention, especially in epistemology, with an accessible language, to the virtues of pragmatist thinking. His writings, I think, have re-granted the
prestige of such philosophers as John Dewey and William James, whose works are now more influential in scientific and philosophical inquiry.

7 For a reassessment of Thomas More as a public and private figure see, for instance, Guy (2000).

8 For a detailed account of the attempts in modern philosophy that has been dedicated to unearthing the essentials of nature, see John Dewey (1960), especially the third chapter, “Conflict of Authorities.”

9 For further argumentation see McKenna (2001).