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Aristotle's Critique of Plato's Ideal States

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Aristotle's Critique of Plato's Ideal States

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Aristotle's portrait of an ideal aristocracy in *Pol.* 7-8 is coeval with the texts in *Pol.* 2 in which Plato's efforts to construct ideal states are severely criticized. Both texts appear to date from Aristotle's early maturity, often associated with his sojourn in Assos¹. In view of this fact, it is surprising that scholars have not used the two texts to throw light on each other. My suggestion is that the principles Aristotle employs to guide his own reflection on ideal political conditions — principles clearly enunciated in *Pol.* 7.1-3 — deeply inform not only his own concrete picture of an ideal *polis* in the remainder of *Pol.* 7-8, but equally closely underlie his criticism of Plato's ideal state in *Pol.* 2. One result of my inquiry will be to show that there is much greater unity and focus than has been commonly discerned in Aristotle's objections to Plato's ideal states, which at first glance look like a heterogeneous, and often uncharitable, collection of complaints. Another outcome will be the suggestion that the true relation between these texts cannot come to light so long as interpreters are antecedently committed to the axiom that what Aristotle says will always be more empirically realistic than what Plato says. For, on the view I will defend, Aristotle's central objection to Plato's ideal states is, in point of fact, not that they are too utopian, but that they are not utopian enough. This claim also has a certain relevance for contemporary efforts to construct utopias that I shall not fail to point out. For many modern utopias appear to have similar defects to those that Aristotle ascribes to Plato. In this paper, I will restrict myself to Aristotle's criticisms of Plato's *Republic*, putting aside for another occasion his equally severe strictures against the *Laws*, which Aristotle thinks shows the same underlying defects that are evident in the *Republic*.

Pol. 7-8 is divided into three parts. There is an introductory argument (*Pol.* 7.1-3) in which Aristotle tries to articulate the principles he will use in constructing an ideal state. This is followed by a treatise on

the socio-economic substructure of the ideal state, what Aristotle calls its «necessary conditions». This in turn is followed by an incomplete treatise on the way of life of the «proper parts» of the ideal state, that is, its citizens. This way of life is to be a life of leisure (*scholē*). Aristotle's main focus in this section is on the education that will fit his citizens for a leisured way of life. In it he gives much attention to the various roles of traditional Greek *mousikē*.

I begin by proposing an interpretation of the introductory argument. Aristotle's strategy here is to assume that

(1) an ideal state is a happy state (132b 30-31).

and that

(2) individual and political happiness are exactly parallel (132b 40-41).

Given these assumptions, Aristotle is free to transfer the principles of individual happiness from the *Ethics*² to a consideration of what makes a state happy. These principles are the following:

(3) No one can be happy who does not cultivate virtue for its own sake (1323b 18-30).

(4) The happy life is constituted by a life-time of virtuous activity (1323b 30 - 1324a 2; 1325a 31-33).

(5) External goods are required for a happy life in amounts adequate for performing virtuous actions and as proper desserts for virtuous activity (1323b 40 - 1324a 2).

Aristotle goes on to remark that two recognized ways of life seem sufficiently conformable, on their face, to (3) to merit attention as a model for the way of life of an ideal state. These are «the practical or political life» of the statesman and «the free life of the stranger» devoted to «thoughts and contemplations» (1324s 25-34). Should the ideal state be modelled on the *bios politikos* or the *bios theoretikos*?

Aristotle concludes that when taken as mutually exclusive alternatives neither of these ways of life is in full conformity to (3)-(5), and thus that neither is a completely correct model for either the individual or the city. The exclusively political or active man insists on (4) and (5). But the political life has two components: the performance of noble deeds for the sake of their inherent worth, and the performance of a host of unavoidable instrumental acts centering on acquisition and disposition of the external goods, such as health and power, requisite to performing virtuous actions (cf. NE 1177b 12-19). These two kinds of good acts are easily confused and their order of importance readily reversed. Aristotle suggests that if the self-defined «political

man» does not recognize the worth of the inherently good activities pursued by the man of theory, his own grasp of the distinction between inherently good and instrumentally good actions will grow weak (1324a 39-b4). This will lead in practice to a serious reversal of values, in which virtue comes to be regarded as a means to the efficient acquisition and disposition of external goods, the command of which comes to be thought of as constituting happiness. That is why in practice political men regard domination as the goal of their life, undermining their commitment to (3) (1324b 2-22). Aristotle spends most of the introductory argument attacking these views.

The alternative, however, is not a rejection of the political life, such as that which tempts the self-defined theoretical man, but recognition that «The majority of those engaged in politics are not correctly called 'politicians', since they are not truly political. For the truly political man is one who purposely chooses noble actions for their own sake, whereas the majority engage in that mode of life for the sake of money and power (*pleonexia*)» (EE, 1216a 23-27). To internalize this distinction the truly political man must, as we have seen, cease thinking of the theorist as one «who does nothing» and is therefore worthless (1324a 21-23). But for this to occur the theorist must himself stop thinking of his own way of life as «inactive» and «impractical» (1324a 31-33). Self-defined theoretical men recognize the reversal of values into which conventionally political men fall. They also recognize its inconsistency with genuine commitment to excellence. But they are inclined to react to this situation by dismissing the political life and its constitutive virtues altogether. Moreover, they typically concede that the political life is the active life (1324a 25-29). Consequently they tend to define their own devotion to the inherently worthwhile in terms of inactivity. But on Aristotle's view this attitude is inconsistent with the true conditions for happiness as stated in (4) and (5), once it is assumed that the intellectual virtues are truly virtuous.

The antidote, Aristotle concludes, is for both parties to recognize that «*theoria* is an activity» (1325b 16-21). When this is acknowledged, the similarity between noble deeds and contemplation becomes apparent. Both are engaged in for their own sake, and both contrast vividly with instrumental activities of all sorts. Indeed, because instrumental actions are done for the sake of something beyond them, they are burdened by dependency and passivity, the opposite of activity. By contrast, enterprises, such as *theoria*, that are engaged in

for their own sake are more properly called activities. The similarities between the practice of moral-political and theoretical virtues entitles the latter, then, to be called «practical» in the same sense as the former. The happy life, on this account, will be one that minimizes all instrumental deeds and maximizes the pursuit of *both* noble moral actions and *theoria*. This view alone permits consistent adherence to (3)-(5) under the conditions laid down in (1) and (2). It is, moreover, uniquely consistent with the «inclusive ends» view of happiness now commonly acknowledged to be Aristotle's considered doctrine³.

The state portrayed by Aristotle in the substantive parts of *Pol.* 7-8 conforms closely to these principles and stipulations. A state is less than ideal, on this view, in proportion as instrumentally good actions predominate over actions pursued for their own sake. In a state dominated by artisans, traders and free laborers, this reversal of values is inevitable, since the way of life of such persons is based on regarding what are means to mere life as the *de facto* end of their activity. Indeed, even in a state where the vulgar are subordinated to timocrats, or conventionally political warrior-citizens, this ideological distortion will appear. For the inherently base and instrumental values of the vulgar will intensify the ambiguity to which timocrats, because of their temptation to conflate politics with domination, are inherently prone. Aristotle blocks this consequence by insisting that artisans, traders and free laborers are to be regarded not as «proper parts» of the city but merely as «external conditions», like the land itself (1328a 21-38; 1329a 20-22, 34-37).

To envision a condition in which this might occur Aristotle engages in a thought experiment that bids him to imagine truly ideal circumstances, circumstances that may be highly improbable but are not impossible or mutually inconsistent (1265a 18-19). An ideal state for Aristotle is a highly unlikely combination of genuinely possible circumstances which then serve as a paradigm case, in terms of which we can investigate, rather than condemn, more common political arrangements. The result of this thought experiment is to wish for a condition in which the work of artisans, traders and laborers is done by foreigners living in a port some distance from the *polis* (1327a 12-28; 1326a 17-24). The citizens import sufficient luxury goods from these people to enable them to live a good life. But they will not have to share power with the vulgar or defend themselves against this possibility, because the vulgar, being *metics*, are not in a position to make claims of citizenship for themselves. Exchange with these people is to

be established at a commercial, as distinct from the political, *agora* (1331a 30-b3; b11-13). It is based on agricultural surplus from the rich, but equitably distributed, land owned individually by the leisured citizens, and worked for them by slaves and *perioiki* (1329a 25-26).

Under these conditions the citizens will be free to create and cultivate a life devoted to excellent activities in all forms. Political activities will be based on a defensive rather than an offensive foreign policy and on stable recognition that peace is the end of war (1334a 5-16; 30-b5). This stance will be made possible by the general contempt for vulgar values on which identity as a citizen is built. This fosters contempt not only for commercialism but for military domination. Leisure activities will be cultivated, including a host of traditional musical and religious engagements, including epic recitation and tragic performances, the pursuit of sophisticated conversation and banquets, and, perhaps, at least for some, the engagement in theoretical activities (1338a 23-31)⁴.

We may now go on to ask in what ways the views that underlie Aristotle's ideal state are inimical to Plato's. Let us first turn to the basic claims asserted by Plato in the *Republic*. The focus of Plato's attention in the *Republic* is on refuting Thrasymachus, under the description presented by Glaucon's challenge. In responding to this challenge — what is there about virtue that makes it worth cultivating for its own sake? — Plato shows that a man devoted to commanding external goods, and identifying happiness with that command, could not be happy. Only virtue cultivated for its own sake can have happiness as its outcome. For lack of devotion to virtue prevents a man from stably acquiring and disposing of those external goods that are necessary for happiness. But Plato does not argue a symmetrical set of propositions for the virtuous man. The man of virtue will be in a better position to get and dispose of such external goods as are required for happiness, and under those conditions can be said to merite or deserve both the happiness and the external goods that he gets. But such a man may still be deprived of external goods. Under those conditions he would not said to be happy, but only to have lived a life more worthwhile than that of the tyrant — more deserving of happiness, as Kant would put it. There is for Plato no automatic guarantee that virtue will produce happiness, nor *a fortiori* does he incline toward the (possibly) Socratic and (certainly) Cynic and Stoic view that virtue is sufficient for happiness⁵. Devotion to virtue for its own sake, then,

Plato concludes, is necessary, but not sufficient, for happiness, and is sufficient for being worthy of happiness. These conclusions are adequate to meet Glaucon's challenge without lapsing into silliness of the Stoic or Cynic type.

In the light of these considerations it would be wrong to see Plato as intending straightforwardly to deny any of the propositions that Aristotle uses as criteria for reflecting on ideal states. His deepest insistence, like that of Aristotle, is that without cultivating virtue for its own sake we cannot be happy, either individually or collectively. Nor does he believe that the best way of cultivating virtue is to adopt an exclusively *bios theoretikos*. On the contrary, Plato holds that political life is essential for a properly human life, and that political life cannot be led without a positive and proper relation to external goods. This proper relation is provided by the pursuit of virtue as an intrinsic good in the sense that one must never trade off virtue for any quantity of external goods.

Where Plato and Aristotle begin to diverge is that the former believes that only the man who is oriented toward the theoretical virtues, in contrast to political engagement, can reliably and stably produce long range happiness for the city. Plato's paradoxical idea is that only the man who is not overtly devoted to politics can be politically effective. Plato's rulers, let us reiterate, do not have the same attitude toward politics as conventionally theoretical men. They internalize a sense of responsibility to and identity with the city that nurtured them, and with whose fate they are linked as citizens. But they regard the effectiveness with which they can carry out the responsibilities they have toward the city as a function of their theoretical ability, not of their political identity. Political engagement results in effective policies, and in that sense the happiness of the city as a whole, only when it takes the form of «applied *theoria*».

Aristotle, on the other hand, entrusts this function to the man of practical wisdom, the *phronimos*, whose political self-definition itself is perfected by a specifically practical and political form of intelligence, *phronesis*, that enables him «to care both for others and for himself» (NE 1140b 4-11). Doubtless a state governed by Aristotle's men of *phronesis* will create conditions that enable at least some citizens to pursue *theoria* whenever that is possible within the framework of social and political life (1333a 21b4). But that *nisus* toward *theoria* is oriented toward the delights of contemplation for its own sake only. *Theoria* does not take on the double role of achieving a political effec-

tiveness that cannot be left to political men themselves. Rather, it is on the contrary the finest expression of the leisure that good political practice affords⁶.

But this crucial difference about *theoria* and *praxis* might make it impossible for Plato consistently and coherently to abide by propositions (1)-(5) as he goes about devising his ideal state. If *theoria* is prized for its political effectiveness, virtuous political activity will be seen as *instrumentally* good activity. But regarding the efficient and effective technical application of theoretical insights as a paradigm of theoretical *activity* will reinforce the ambiguities about the notion of activity endemic among both the vulgar and the military, ambiguities that make it difficult for these persons to keep from confusing the inherently good and the instrumentally good. For where one important dimension of the inherently good — engagement in *theoria* for its own sake — is not recognized by the theorists *themselves* as active, the vulgar and the military will certainly retain a tendency to identify all actions, and hence good actions, with what are in fact merely instrumentally good actions. No one in the society, that is, will recognize what Aristotle regards as crucial, namely that «Those processes of thought that come about for the sake of things that result from the doing are not the only ones that are *active*. Much more active are contemplations and thought processes that have their *end in themselves* and are *for their own sake*» (1325b16-20).

If these suspicions are well placed, theorists, whose primary obligation is to block the tendency in society to prefer the instrumentally good to the inherently good, will identify their own happiness not with activity, but with the inactive contemplation to which they are by nature and training drawn. This attitude will reinforce the original problem for which the ministrations of theorists was supposed to be the cure. The result will be a state in which individual and political happiness tend to pull away from each other on every front. The vulgar and the warriors will long for an individual happiness that is externally constrained by the ruler's better judgement about what is for their own good. Theorists themselves will have to sacrifice their own «inactive,» «apolitical» happiness in order to make the state a happy one. But the happiness of a state that is established independently of the happiness of its citizens is illusory, as Aristotle's (2) implies; nor, according to Aristotle's (1), could such a state be an ideal one. In fact, where the underlying conceptual basis of the state implies the necessity for trans-political agents who operate on and intervene in the

political order after the fashion of master craftsmen, to keep it from degenerating into instrumentalism, the attendant condescension and begrudged time of the rulers, together with the dependency and resentment of the ruled, would condemn both parties, and thus the state as a whole, to a far from happy existence and to a way of life that is not even a candidate for being considered ideal.

What I want to show now is that it is precisely these defects that Aristotle ascribes to Plato's *Republic* in *Pol.* 2 and 4.4.

The state portrayed in the *Republic*, it will be recalled, is initially constituted by an association of craftsmen, businessmen, farmers and military men in pursuit of material sufficiency. Plato takes pains to show that a state with such an origin will generate dialectical self-contradictions that must lead either to its destruction or its reformation. Reformation requires a consistent and stable foreign policy, leading to actual security. This will require turning the military from an offensive to a defensive force. It will also require training a theoretically competent ruling class to ensure this posture by restraining the aggression of the military auxiliaries and containing the expansionist materialism of the artisans and traders. Thus in the *Republic*, the vulgar tendencies of the lower classes, as well as the intensified aggression that an instrumentalist ethic tends to unleash among traditional timocrats, are checked by granting to each of these groups a monopoly on the good it dominantly prizes — wealth in the first case, honor in the second — while the right to rule is exclusively ceded to a class that combines capacity to rule with willingness to forgo these other goods more or less entirely in favor of the pursuit of *theoria* interrupted by occasional periods of political engagement. The consequences of such an arrangement are, however, according to Aristotle, quite negative. This arrangement will produce its intended effect only if the material constraints to which philosophers are accustomed, indeed which they actively embrace, are to some degree internalized by the entire population by such measures as the «myth of the metals» and other educational devices. But such a state could not be a fully happy one. For the active cultivation of *all* the excellences that constitute happiness would have been reduced to the cultivation of temperance alone; and temperance itself would in these conditions tend to be construed not as an activity that is partially constitutive of the happy life, but as a restriction on the many instrumentally good activities to which the citizens of this state would still be inclined by their own form of life. One of Aristotle's complaints about the Cretan city of the *Laws* would then

also be true of the *Republic*: it would be a temperate but hardly a happy state (1265a 27-36).

Reflection on this very fact suggests, moreover, that not even this limited ideal of temperate restraint is likely to be attained. For the fact remains that the craftsmen and traders and farmers who «constitute the majority of the citizenry» (1264a 11-13) are not really party to any contract that would mitigate their natural propensity to acquire and consume, and to bend the political system to their interests (1264a 27-35). To block the bad consequences of this the auxiliaries must serve as an «occupying garrison» (1264a 27) over these people. But this will exacerbate the latent class conflict endemic in the state (1264a 26) and will, in the process, intensify the tendency of the military class to identify political virtue with domination, as they rule over their vulgar subjects by the threat of force. This tendency will result in a demand on the part of the auxiliary guardians to have a share in policy formation, losing their own temperance, since the very qualities that would make them relinquish this claim are those the lack of which prevents them in the first place from having been chosen as potential policy makers, namely philosophical and scientific ability (1264b 6-9). Meanwhile, these frustrations will intensify among the philosophical rulers themselves a sense that real happiness is inherently apolitical (1254b 16-25), thus putting internal strains on the ethic of loyalty and duty that underlies their willingness to combine *theoria* and *praxis*.

Who, then, is happy in this city? No one, Aristotle replies. «Socrates... destroys the guardians' happiness» (1264b 15-16) by his own admission when he makes them rule rather than theorize. The auxiliary guardians are forced to forego a private life the desire for which is awakened in them by the instrumentalism implicit in their policing relation to the lower classes. And «the artisans and the multitude of the vulgar surely are not» happy because their way of life never makes them candidates for happiness in the first place (1264b 22-23). Nor will it do, Aristotle writes, to speak of «making the city as a whole happy» (1264b 16) even if individuals and classes as parts of the city are deprived of it. For «Happiness is not the same kind of thing as evenness: this can exist in the whole but in neither of its parts, but happiness cannot» (1264b 18-20). This tactic violates the elementary reasons that lead Aristotle to postulate that individual and political happiness must be exactly parallel, a principle to which Plato subscribes in theory — indeed on which he predicates the whole thought experiment of the *Republic* — but abandons in practice.

Now it has long appeared to commentators that these arguments are unfair to Plato; and it is, in fact, undeniable that Aristotle does take a very jaundiced view of the *Republic*. But the fact remains that if the principles Aristotle lays down in *Pol.* 7-8 for reflection on ideal states are consistently applied, the view of the *Republic* that Aristotle arrives at is to be expected and is justified. Moreover, this analysis shows that Aristotle's attacks on the *Republic* are not an *ad hoc* collection of nasty remarks, but form a fully and coherently developed critique undertaken from a single point of view. That point of view, I believe, has its source in *Pol.* 7.1-3.

What these reflections show, moreover, is rather ironic. We are accustomed to think that Plato is more idealistic than Aristotle. From this conventional expectation we would expect to see an Aristotelian ideal state that tempers the alleged utopianism of Plato. But the fact is that Aristotle's argument is not that Plato is too utopian, but rather that he is not utopian enough. Plato begins from a condition in which farmers, craftsmen, businessmen and day workers not only have a claim on participation in the state, but actually found it. While the purpose of the *Republic* is to mitigate the consequences of this original condition, the fundamental claim of the vulgar classes to citizenship is never contested and, given this beginning point, never could be. Aristotle writes that «In the *Republic*, Socrates makes the bulk of the citizens the multitude of the people» (1264a 11-19; cf. 1291a 11-19). It is inevitable that under these conditions restraint on the destabilizing effects implicit in the initial situation is the best one can do (1264a 26-40). If Plato had started by imagining truly ideal conditions, such as those Aristotle has placed at the foundation of his own state, he would be entitled to speak of a best state, a state that is genuinely happy because its citizens are happy. That can be done, Aristotle says, only by regarding craftsmen and merchants as necessary conditions rather than proper parts of the city, by imagining them as metics who have no *prima facie* claim on political participation and then creating political institutions that reinforce this original situation.

The general lesson to be learned from this analysis is that utopias premised on the intervention of theorists into the normal and natural shared life of political communities do not truly deserve to be called utopian. For they concede at the very outset that social life contains tendencies that make the realization of its true potentials difficult to attain; and then attempt to devise forms of social engineering or «applied *theoria*» that compensate for these defects. This characteris-

tic is prominent in many Enlightenment utopias and in their twentieth century descendants, such as the utopias proposed by B. F. Skinner. That accounts in turn for why one person's utopia is another's dystopia; and why utopian thinking has come to have negative associations. Utopian thinking is at its most powerful and suggestive, however, when it envisions communities that allow the autonomy of all their consociates to be the principle both of founding the state and developing its potentials. Such genuinely utopian thinkers are the true descendants of Aristotle; and the challenge for modern Aristotelians is to ascribe this potential for self-realization to all human beings rather than to only a few.

NOTES

¹ Jaeger's defense of this dating is weakened by his tendency to see in this period too many remnants of Aristotle's early Platonism. His main point can be sustained by recognizing, with G. E. L. Owen, that this early mature period corresponds to Aristotle's most anti-Platonic period. This anti-Platonism is abundantly evident in *Pol.* 7-8. Cf. W. JAEGER, *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development* (Oxford, 1934); G. E. L. OWEN, «Logic and Metaphysics in Some Earlier Works of Aristotle», in I. DURING and G. OWEN, *Aristotle and Plato in Mid Fourth Century* (Göteborg, 1960); «The Platonism of Aristotle», in P. F. STRAWSON ed. *Studies in the Philosophy of Thought and Action* (London, 1968).

² The Ethics in question appears to be the *Eudemian Ethics* (EE) and not the *Nicomachean* (NE), since the recapitulation of the doctrine of happiness and virtue laid out in *Pol.* 7-8 is textually close to EE. Thus, against Kenny, I subscribe to the priority of the EE. Cf. A. KENNY, *The Aristotelian Ethics* (Oxford, 1978).

³ The interpretation of the argument in *Pol.* 7.1-3 that I have given needs detailed defense. It develops suggestions about the «inclusive ends» view of happiness that Cooper and Keyt see especially well articulated in the EE. According to this view, a happy life includes the cultivation of *theoria* within the constraints of an ineliminable commitment to political life as proper to man. Cf. J. COOPER, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975); D. KEYT, «Intellectualism in Aristotle», *Paideia*, ..., 1978; J. COOPER, «Contemplation and Happiness: A Reconsideration», *Synthese* 72 (1987), 187-216, retracts his previous view.

⁴ Whether the leisure activities Aristotle ascribes to his ideal aristocracy include the pursuit of *theoria* is controversial. There has been a tendency of late to deny it. Cf. F. SOLMSEN, «Leisure and Play in Aristotle's Ideal State» in SOLMSEN, *Kleine Schriften II* (Hildesheim, 1968); C. LORD, *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle* (Ithaca and London, 1982). But cf. D. J. DEPEW, «Politics, Music, and Contemplation in Aristotle's Ideal Aristocracy», forthcoming.

⁵ The view that Socrates holds that virtue, apart from virtuous activity, is sufficient for happiness has been defended by G. Vlastos, but is open to dispute. Of the Cynic,

and later the Stoic, claim to this effect, Aristotle says that one could hold it only for the sake of trying to maintain a paradoxical argument.

⁶ It is worth noting in this connection that Aristotle disagrees with an initial assumption that Plato shares with Glaucon: that of the three classes of goods — the exclusively instrumental, the exclusively inherent and the mixed — the mixed class is the best. To Aristotle's mind the inherently good alone is better than the mixed class.

More's Utopia and English Medieval Traditions

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«Fie, fi, fo, fum. I smell the blood of an Englishman». While the giant may have had no difficulty sniffing out Englishmen, recent scholars of Sir Thomas More have not been as successful. While More's English concerns are obvious in Book I of his *Utopia* they are less so in Book II. The sources of Utopia in the classics and in Christian humanism have often early 16th century. The most recent book on to the England of the early 16th century. The most recent book on *Utopia*¹ sharply reduces the humanistic and English antecedents in favor of the ideal commonwealth methods of Plato and Aristotle.

R. W. Chambers² first analyzed the medieval/monastic assumptions behind More's communistic utopia, an argument generally accepted by modern historians³. What is needed now is a determination of the specifically English elements in this medieval legacy. The ecclesiological dimension of this heritage, I submit, was at least as influential as was the monastic and the ascetic. More's own reworking of received traditions can reveal much about how the new humanism became mingled with the old Catholicism on the eve of the Reformation. I suggest that English utopianism down to the 18th century always retained the national character given it by Thomas More.

I will argue that More's utopia integrated two late medieval semi-utopian traditions: 1) the historical perspective, itself mixed with quasi-nationalist, millenarian, and apocalyptic tendencies, and 2) the reform efforts of Lollards and other Wycliffites.

The Venerable Bede was the first to give England an identity. Through Bede's historical and exegetical works⁴, several semi-utopian ideas found their way into later English historiography: England as a distinct entity, with its own geographical characteristics; the English as a chosen people with a mission to convert Europe; the English church as synonymous with the English people; England as a pro-