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“Fay ce que voudras.” The ideal community and the problem of evil, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment.

Most of the contributors to this series in honour of Klaus Mayer have been 16th Century scholars, whose connections with him dated from his long and distinguished career at Bedford College and the University of Liverpool. I am not a 16th Century scholar, and I first met Klaus in my final undergraduate year at University College, Southampton, as it then was. In fact, he later became a friend, particularly when we both served on the Committee of the Society for French Studies, he as Secretary and I as Treasurer. And he also introduced me to one of his research students who eventually became both a distinguished 16th Century scholar and my wife.

More relevantly though, it was Klaus who opened my eyes to the enormous interest of 16th Century thought, principally through some inspirational seminars on Rabelais's *Gargantua*. I was and remain struck by Klaus's discussion of the Abbaye de Thélème, Gargantua's reward to the doughty warrior Frère Jean after the victory over the wicked Picrochole. What, I remember, fascinated me, was the wonderful contrast between the apparent permissiveness of “Fay ce que voudras” and the small print that follows:

FAY CE QUE VOULDRAS, parce que gens liberes, bien nez, bien instruietz, conversans en compaignies honnestes, ont par nature un instinct et aguillon, qui tousjours les poulse à faictz vertueux et retire de vice, lequel ilz nommoient honneur. Iceulx, quand par vile subjection et contraincte sont deprimez et asservis detournent la noble affection, par laquelle à vertuz franchement tendoient, à deposer et enfreindre ce joug de servitude; car nous entreprenons tousjours choses defendues et convoitons ce que nous est denié.

(Rabelais, *Gargantua, Œuvres Complètes*, Garnier, i, p.204)

I don't want to tackle the question of how far Rabelais's replacement of the religious ideal by a secular one implies a denial of original sin; still less do I want to enter into the theological niceties and arguments about whether or not he was inspired here by St Paul or St Bonaventure, was or was not Lutheran.¹ The significant thing for me is that the society of Thélème is based on some kind of belief in human goodness, if only for a limited few.

Now all attempts to construct the ideal society have to face up to the problem of the wrongdoer. Rabelais does it by his strict entry requirements: the Thelemites are “libres” and “bien nés”, noble in every sense of the word. Hence total freedom for them is safe. But what about the possibility of anti-social behaviour among the humble workers who, we are told, are there to cater for their material needs? Workers who have been admitted to the community, we must suppose, without any special qualifications, and who, being humble, neither “libres” nor “bien nés”, presumably have no natural sense of honour. So even in Thélème there is a potential problem, however much Rabelais ignores it. I want to look at a variety of discussions of the ideal society, concentrating on their attempts to deal with this problem. As we shall see, most idealistically assume that their reconstruction of the material conditions of

¹ For a helpful discussion of these issues, see M. A. Screech, *Rabelais*, Duckworth, 1979, pp.190-4.

society will, if not eradicate, at least minimize, anti-social behaviour, as well as make people happy, though they rarely avoid relying on an ultimate recourse to more or less traditional penal laws.

This is not the place for a discussion of the conflicting claims of modern ideologies, of socialism, capitalism and the free market, none of which, it seems to me, comes even close to offering a satisfying solution to the problem of constructing the ideal society. In this connection, I cannot resist the temptation to quote Alexei Sayle's delightfully ironic comment on the facile expectations of the idealistic reshaping of Britain in the 1960s:

Through road traffic management, hygienic plumbing, massive programmes of demolition, flyovers, underpasses and town planning the war-like and aggressive nature of human beings would be tamed. Never again would the ignorant masses want to take up arms against other nations, or indulge in racism or xenophobia, because instead they had a nice flat with a balcony and underfloor heating.

(Alexei Sayle, *Stalin Ate My Homework*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2010, p.119.)

Of course, there is another approach to the problem: if it is impossible to create the ideal society, leave society as it is and modify the individual. More than two centuries after *Gargantua*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in Book 2 of *Emile*, was to state as a maxim what was almost the exact opposite of Rabelais's "Fay ce que voudras": "Ô homme, resserre ton existence au dedans de toi, et tu ne seras plus misérable. [...] *L'homme vraiment libre ne veut que ce qu'il peut* [...]" (*Œuvres complètes*, Pléiade, iv, pp.308-9, my italics). In other words, not "Do what you want", but "Want only what you can do". Now of course this kind of self-limitation echoes the stoic wisdom of the Ancients, which had been wonderfully expounded by a 16th Century writer very different from Rabelais, Montaigne. In contrast to Rousseau, whose aim in *Émile* is to create a man who can be happy living in society, no matter what form of society this may be, Montaigne, at least in his early essays, really evades the problem altogether, by recommending solitude, a moral and even physical withdrawal from society.² But in his later essays, he addresses the question differently. In "De la Vanité", he goes so far as to adopt the totally conformist position of satisfied acceptance of the *status quo*, the best society is always the one in which we live.³ And in the 18th Century, one might well see Robinson Crusoe's island (1719), which removes the conflict between individual and society by making them one and the same (at least until Friday comes along), as an exercise in putting into practice Montaigne's stoic philosophy of self-sufficiency.

However, to get back to those who were not content with society as it was and who did seek ways of reconstructing the world around them, many of the discussions

² E.g.: "Il est temps de nous desnoüer de la societé, puis que nous n'y pouvons rien apporter." (Book I, ch.39, "De la Solitude", *Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, Pléiade, 1950, p.280.) It must be pointed out, however, that by the time he wrote this, Montaigne had devoted many years of his life to honourable public service. And if Rousseau, at the end of his life, seemed to be celebrating solitude in the *Rêveries du Promeneur solitaire*, it was because he believed that persecution had left him with no other option.

³ "Non par opinion mais en verité, l'excellente et meilleure police est à chacune nation celle sous laquelle elle s'est maintenuë. Sa forme et commodité essentielle despend de l'usage. Nous nous desplaisons volontiers de la condition presente. Mais je tiens pourtant que d'aller desirant le commandement de peu en un estat populaire, ou en la monarchie une autre espece de gouvernement, c'est vice et folie." (Book III, ch.9, "De la Vanité", *ibid.*, p.1071.) Cf. III, ch.13, "De l'Expérience", *ibid.*, p.1203, where Montaigne argues that the laws should be obeyed not because they are just but just because they are the laws.

of the ideal society, especially in the 18th Century, are just facetiously satirical. One of the best examples is Swift's account in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) of the wild proposals for political reform made by the professors at the Academy of Lagado in the kingdom of Laputa. There are schemes, for instance, for "teaching ministers to consult the public good", for "rewarding merit, great abilities and eminent services", or for "choosing for employments persons qualified to exercise them" – all "wild impossible chimeras", thinks Gulliver (*Gulliver's Travels*, Penguin, 1967, ch. 6, p.232). He concedes though that not all the professors were mad, and describes a "wonderful contrivance" by one of the less visionary ones: take 100 leaders of each party, arrange them in similar sized couples, saw their heads in half and divide the brains equally, then exchange the half brains, so that "two half brains being left to debate the matter between themselves within the space of one skull, would soon come to a good understanding" (ibid., p.234). A tempting allegory of government by coalition, perhaps.

Of course, Swift's evocation of an allegedly ideal society is just a way of identifying by opposition the ills of the society around him. A similar function was surely fulfilled by the traditional nostalgia for an imagined golden age, or at least some kind of ancient ideal society, which had, from the end of the 15th Century, been fuelled by the great new explorations and discoveries, mainly by the Portuguese and Spanish.⁴ Especially in the West Indies, primitive communities allegedly without political structure or private property, appeared to be preserving the pre-civilisation golden age – though needless to say, most of the accounts of them were considerably idealized. Perhaps the most striking expression of the enthusiasm for these apparently idyllic societies was Montaigne's splendid account in "Des Cannibales" (1580). These are peoples among whom the evils that pose all the problems for the European legislator simply do not exist:

Ces nations me semblent donq ainsi barbares, pour avoir receu fort peu de façon de l'esprit humain, et estre encore fort voisines de leur naïveté originelle. Les loix naturelles leur commandent encores, fort peu abastardies par les nostres [...]; il me semble que ce que nous voyons par experience en ces nations là, surpasse [...] toutes les peintures dequoy la poésie a embelli l'age doré [...]. C'est une nation [...] en laquelle il n'y a [...] nulle cognoissance de lettres; nulle science de nombres; nul nom de magistrat, ni de superiorité politique; nul usage de service, de richesse ou de pauvreté [...]. Les paroles mesmes qui signifient le mensonge, la trahison, la dissimulation, l'avarice, l'envie, la detraction, le pardon, inouies. (Book I, ch.31, pp.243-4.)

In the 17th and 18th Centuries, there are numerous similar and often very extensive accounts, many of them first hand by the travellers themselves (though these were frequently unreliable), and rather more embroidered versions by moralists, historians, and of course novelists. The public were particularly fascinated by the example of Tahiti, where Bougainville and his men had spent two idyllic weeks in April 1768 in the course of their voyage round the world. Of course, it was the welcoming sexual freedom of the Tahitian women that was the principal focus of attention, but quite apart from this, the island was seen as providing the perfect confirmation of the myth of the noble savage. Even before Bougainville's own account of his voyage appeared in print (*Voyage autour du monde*, 1771), the *Mercure de France* (Nov. 1769) published some remarks on Tahiti by the expedition's naturalist, Commerson, who described it as a "utopie", "le seul coin de la

⁴ Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope at the end of 1487 or beginning of 1488, opening up the route to the East Indies, and in 1492 Columbus arrived in the Caribbean.

terre où habitent des hommes sans vices, sans préjugés, sans besoins, sans dissensions”. And Bougainville himself, usually a balanced and judicious observer, admitted: “Je me croyais transporté dans le jardin d’Éden” (*Voyage autour du monde*, Folio, 1982, p.235).

To students of literature, Bougainville’s *Voyage* is no doubt rather less well-known than Diderot’s fictional *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (1773), which is the nearest Diderot came to imagining an ideal society, even if the work is partly ludic. His Tahitians are good and happy, or rather had been before the arrival of the Europeans; they had no notion of private property, and the venerable *vieillard* who speaks for them, tells Bougainville to go and leave them in peace. In short, Europeans go home!

Diderot’s *Supplément* is of course echoing the primitivism usually associated with Rousseau. But to link primitivism with Rousseau is considerably to oversimplify the latter’s thought. Starting from a conviction that all was far from well in modern society, his *Discours sur l’origine et les fondemens de l’inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755) is a serious attempt to analyze the origins of its ills. The golden age for Rousseau was not the so-called state of nature, in which man living in isolation was morally neutral, “ni bon ni méchant” (*Œuvres complètes*, Pléiade, iii, p.152). The happiest period in the development of man is “la société naissante” (ibid., p.170), the earliest form of society. The destruction of this ideal state was the result of the invention of private property, and it was this rather than eating the forbidden apple that was the original sin:

Le premier qui ayant enclos un terrain, s’avisa de dire, *ceci est à moi*, et trouva des gens assés simples pour le croire, fut le vrai fondateur de la société civile. Que de crimes, de guerres, de meurtres, que de misères et d’horreurs, n’eût point épargnés au Genre-humain celui qui arrachant les pieux ou comblant le fossé, eût crié à ses semblables. Gardez-vous d’écouter cet imposteur; Vous êtes perdus, si vous oubliez que les fruits sont à tous, et que la Terre n’est à personne [...]. (Ibid., p.164.)

As we shall see, the absence of private property was a frequent feature of blueprints for ideal societies, just as it was of accounts of supposedly ideal primitive peoples. It must be remembered, however, that the safeguarding of private property was an essential feature of the thought of most political thinkers of the 18th Century who were seriously addressing the problems of their own society. It is relevant to quote Voltaire’s savage comment on this celebrated passage in Rousseau’s *Discours*: “Il faut que ce soit quelque voleur de grand chemin, bel esprit, qui ait écrit cette impertinence.” (*L’ABC*, Voltaire, *Dialogues philosophiques*, Garnier, 1966, p.281).

To get back to Diderot, the idyllic portrait of life on Tahiti is used in the *Supplément* as the starting point of a debate about the conflict between the nature of man and the demands of the morality of civilised society (i.e. the society of Christian Europe). In the real world, as opposed to Tahiti and Rabelais’s wishful-thinking Abbey, society worked because of restrictive laws, and perhaps even more important, as many believed, because of fear of divine punishment. Many years before the *Supplément*, the problem had become a very real one for Diderot once he had become seriously tempted by atheism. He was not alone. With the development of free thought in the 17th Century, the question of the morality of the atheist had already become a burning issue. For instance, the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*, dating from 1669, and almost certainly by John Locke, the great apostle of religious

toleration, had barred atheists from even living in the province. Yet a few years later, in 1682, Pierre Bayle's *Pensées sur la comète*, an attack on superstition, had argued that a society of atheists was perfectly conceivable.

As far as Diderot was concerned, the critical turning-point in his thought is neatly represented by an episode in the *Promenade du sceptique* (1747), a satirical, allegorical account of the three alternative paths men follow through life, significantly named the "Allée des Epines", the way of the Christians, the "Allée des marronniers", the way of the philosophers, and the "Allée des fleurs", the way of the seekers after worldly pleasures. Athéos, an atheist philosopher, one day hears a Christian blundering about among the thorns in the neighbouring pathway; they get into conversation, and Athéos tries to convince the Christian of the error of his ways. Later, returning home after a philosophic stroll with his philosophic chums, Athéos finds his children murdered, his wife stolen and his house burnt down; the perpetrator was of course the now ex-Christian, who had been convinced by the atheist's arguments and acted accordingly... One is reminded of Voltaire's witty take on the moral dangers of atheism (less light-hearted than it sounds): "Je veux que mon procureur, mon tailleur, mes valets, ma femme même, croient en Dieu; et je m' imagine que j'en serai moins volé et moins cocu" (*L'ABC, Dialogues philosophiques*, p.344).

Once, however, Diderot had not only rejected belief in God, but gradually come to adopt a form of determinism, the problem of finding a basis for morality grew increasingly critical for him. If all our behaviour is determined by the past, by a series of causes and effects over which we have no control, how can we talk of virtue and vice as if we were free agents? This is exactly what Jacques le fataliste (in the novel of that name) believes: "Jacques ne connaissait ni le nom de vice, ni le nom de vertu; il prétendait qu'on était heureusement ou malheureusement né." (Diderot, *Œuvres romanesques*, Classiques Garnier, 1962, p.670). You might think, says the narrator, that this made Jacques resigned or indifferent to whatever happened. Not so. Inconsistent though this might seem, he recognized that people's behaviour could in practice be modified, and thus recognized the efficacy of punishment: "Il se mettait en colère contre l'homme injuste; et quand on lui objectait qu'il ressemblait alors au chien qui mord la pierre qui l'a frappé: «Nenni, disait-il, la pierre mordue par le chien ne se corrige pas;»" ... and then the punch-line: "«l'homme injuste est modifié par le bâton.»" (p.671).

Now, Diderot argues, since people's behaviour can be modified, and since they will always seek their own interest, the key to the avoidance of wrongdoing in society is not so much to *punish* the wrongdoers, as to anticipate and forestall their anti-social behaviour by ensuring that it is in their interest to contribute to the general good. In *Le Neveu de Rameau* (written about 1761), a confrontation between the "virtuous" MOI (more or less Diderot) and the unscrupulous, materialist, egotistical LUI (also in part Diderot), Rameau's nephew makes the point succinctly. He would have behaved virtuously if it had been in his interest to do so: "Si par hasard la vertu avait conduit à la fortune, ou j'aurais été vertueux, ou j'aurais simulé la vertu comme un autre." (Diderot, *Œuvres romanesques*, p.449.) Diderot was much attached to this idea, and some years later, the "Diderot" of one of his dialogues formulated it as a fundamental political precept:

[F]aites que le bien des particuliers soit si étroitement lié avec le bien général, qu'un citoyen ne puisse presque pas nuire à la société sans se nuire à lui-même; assurez à la vertu sa récompense, comme vous avez assuré à la méchanceté son châtement; [...] et ne comptez plus sur d'autres méchants que sur un petit nombre d'hommes, qu'une nature perverse que rien ne peut corriger entraîne au vice. (*Entretien d'un philosophe avec la Maréchale de ****, 1774, *Œuvres philosophiques*, Classiques Garnier, 1961, p.539.)

I want to focus for the moment on the last few words of this quotation, on the small number of incorrigible wrongdoers. Diderot accepts that even in the ideal society there will still be people like that. Nearly twenty years earlier, in a well-known letter, and speaking this time unambiguously in his own name, he had made clear what he thought should be done about the problem they posed: "il faut détruire le malfaisant sur une place publique." (Letter to Landois, 29 June 1756.)

But since the death penalty had long been a nearly universal practice, Diderot's recommendation does not go very far towards changing matters for the better, except perhaps to minimize its use. Many writers did, however, propose often elaborate recipes for a reorganization of society (though I don't imagine any of them thought they could ever be realized). Note that Diderot, like Voltaire, implicitly accepted that belief in God (whether or not false) was at least a partial guarantee of virtuous behaviour, and as far as our problem of evil is concerned, most of these speculative ideals continue to rely on Christian morality. But the one fundamental change that most of them also rely on to reduce the incidence of crime is the rejection of private property: if the absence of *mien* and *tien* is the most striking characteristic of the happy primitive societies that everyone seemed to admire, why not get the best of both worlds by combining all the benefits of civilised society with the advantages obtained by the removal of private property?

Many of these proposed societies, like Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), were situated on islands. There's an old joke about desert islands: two shipwrecked sailors adrift in the ocean finally catch sight of an island. "But what is that strange structure?", one asks the other. "It's a gallows", is the reply. "Thank goodness," says the first sailor: "Civilisation!"⁵ Perhaps surprisingly, in view of his own political career, More has reservations about capital punishment, and on his utopian island it is used only as a last resort (though for a second conviction for adultery). But he does confront the problem of the anti-social wrongdoer, and there are tough penal laws (if not as severe as in England under Henry VIII). The most usual punishment was "slavery", consisting of community service, working publicly for the public good, which also acts as a public deterrent. But where *Utopia* is truly revolutionary is in its reorganization of society in such a way as to minimize crime by eradicating injustice. In the preliminary framing dialogue, Raphael, the European recently returned from several years' stay in Utopia, sounds extraordinarily modern when he expounds his practical remedies for the ills of English society:

Reduce the number of people who are kept doing nothing. Revive agriculture and the wool industry, so that there's plenty of honest, useful work for the great army of unemployed – by which I mean not only existing thieves, but tramps and idle servants who are bound to become thieves eventually. (More, *Utopia*, Penguin, 1965, p.49.)

⁵ I am grateful to Christine Rees, in her *Utopian Imagination and 18th Century Fiction* (Longman, 1996, p.1) for reminding me of this joke.

Raphael goes on to affirm his conviction that “you’ll never get a fair distribution of goods, or a satisfactory organization of human life, until you abolish private property altogether” (p.66). Now at this point, More himself, as a participant in the dialogue, expresses his scepticism:

I disagree. I don’t believe you’d ever have a reasonable standard of living under a communist system. There’d always tend to be shortages, because nobody would work hard enough. In the absence of a profit motive, everyone would become lazy, and rely on everyone else to do the work for him. (p.67.)

Again extraordinarily modern-sounding. There have been many conflicting interpretations of Utopia: it has been seized on by Marxists, while their opponents have attempted to explain away the communism (claiming, for example, that it is meant to be taken as metaphorical). There is too the problem of translation of the Latin original. I am using the Penguin Classics translation by Paul Turner, who makes clear in his introduction that it is deliberately racy and modern, and he is clearly sympathetic to seeing the work as a communist text. Even so, I do not think that his choice of anachronistic vocabulary distorts More’s meaning, though his renderings are occasionally a bit suspect.⁶ Despite the difficulties of interpretation, though, it seems clear, I believe, that the detailed description of Utopia which follows is intended as a serious rebuttal of More’s objection. Whereas, Raphael claims, the prevailing system in the modern European world is founded on injustice, “a conspiracy of the rich to advance their own interests under the pretext of organizing society” (p.130), the Utopians have got rid of both riches and injustice by getting rid of private property and of money. They have created a just society in which virtually everyone works – though not so much as to be oppressive, just a six-hour working day, with plenty of breaks (p.76). But there’s no excuse for idleness, and in a rather jarring note, More continues: “Everyone has his eye on you, so you’re practically forced to get on with your job [...]” (p.84). However, the gain is material as well as moral: not only are they all too busy to misbehave, but as a result of everyone working hard, there is plenty of everything in Utopia.

Among More’s successors in the 17th Century, one of the most frequently mentioned is Cyrano de Bergerac’s *L’Autre Monde*, often known as *Voyage dans la Lune*⁷, though his description of lunar society, in which there is neither private property nor poverty, is largely satirical rather than constructive. From the point of view of utopias, a far more interesting work is the remarkable *Histoire des Sévérambes* by Denis Veiras (or Vairasse), published in the late 1670s, a work which was much read and commented on at the time and during the following century. Though Veiras’s book has been described as the first utopian novel in French, some of it was first published in English (1675) (which is why I shall be quoting it in English). The story of its publication is too complicated to go into here, but there are some curious differences between the French and English versions, some of which I shall be referring to.

⁶ At one point, More had written: “At apud Utopienses compositis rebus omnibus: et constituta republica [...]” (*Complete Works of More*, 1965, iv, p.132). This was translated in 1923 by G.C. Richards, correctly, I think, as: “But among the Utopians, now that everything has been settled and the commonwealth established [...] (ibid., p.133). Paul Turner’s dubious rendering is: “But in Utopia, where everything’s under state control [...] (p.78).

⁷ *L’Autre Monde, ou les estats et empires de la lune*, first published posthumously in an expurgated edition in 1657. The full text was only published in the 20th Century (various editions).

A party of several hundred castaways have ended up in an apparently deserted land somewhere in the southern Indian Ocean, and after some months they make contact with the extraordinary society of the Sevarambians. The main part of the work is an account of that society. There is a superficial similarity to Thélème in the beauty of the inhabitants, achieved in this case by exiling the physically imperfect (Vairasse, Denis, *The History of the Sevarambians*, Albany, SUNY, c.2006, p.40). But they are also morally beautiful, which is more difficult to manage, and in the English version, this is done partly by magic: evil spirits are kept out by the vigilance and magic spells of special guards, as well as by an “aromatick Tree, which the Devils cannot endure” (p.78). There is particular emphasis on preventing sexual misdemeanours, and if the Sevarambians do “forget themselves”, the air of the country brings them out in disfiguring pustules and tumours (p.68) (which leads, incidentally, to the occasional use of make-up to hide the tell-tale evidence).

But even without these magical elements, the narrator explains in some detail how the Sevarambians cope with the problem of maintaining the ideal society. In contrast to Rabelais’s depiction of the noble souls of the Thelemites, the nation’s great lawgiver, Sevarias (anagram of the author’s name), recognizes that man is naturally inclined to vice (p.253). And the first, and no doubt the most important way of combating this, is by the institution of strong government. The Sevarambian state is an enlightened totalitarian autocracy, and ensuring submission to the rule of law was Sevarias’s highest priority. Even when a ruler is unjust, rebellion is “not only the most detestable of all Crimes, but also the greatest of all Follies”; since, whichever side wins, the rebels often end up subjected to an even worse form of slavery than before (p.241). But at the founding of the state, Sevarias made sure that its authority – and his own – was guaranteed by the state religion of sun-worship, which all must accept, for religion is “the only tie upon conscience” (p.235). The contrivance he makes use of is clearly admired by the narrator. In the course of a religious festival, the people assembled in the temple hear a mysterious voice apparently from heaven, in reality someone concealed in the roof, announcing that the speaker had been sent by the sun, their King, to instruct them to appoint Sevarias as his deputy. He thus becomes Viceroy as well as High Priest of the sun. And in this way, he is protected against any kind of rebellion; for “who would be so rash as to revolt against the Sun and his Ministers?” (p.252).

Sevarias realized that “the Misfortunes of Societies derive principally from three grand Sources; which are Pride, Avarice, and Idleness” (p.232). As a result, the Sevarambians have no money, “the root of all Northern evils” (p.77), and no private property. And as for idleness, they all work eight hours a day, so they have no time for “the Projection of Evil” (p.233); there is voluntary retirement at 60, though few people avail themselves of it (p.264). Sevarambian society is very hierarchical, but social position cannot be inherited and there are no hereditary distinctions. Appointments to all offices are based strictly on merit; so the humble ordinary citizens apparently accept without murmur the fact that the magistrates enjoy certain privileges – they have more wives and slaves for a start (p.248). (Yes, they do have slavery, which Veiras seems to take for granted.)

But after the good organization of society, the principal protection against man’s potential for evil is education, “Because on the good Education of Children, the safety of the State, and, indeed, that of the whole Nation greatly depends.” (p.247). So

from the age of 7, the education of all children is taken over by the state; they are put in the care of “skillful Persons chosen for that purpose”, who instil in them a hatred of vices and a love of virtue (p.253). Of course this doesn’t always work. There are minor punishments, such as whipping, for first offenders. As for the incorrigibly wicked, they are not put to death, but excluded: they are deported to appropriate outlying regions, such as the Provinces of Knaves and Fools (p.77), or the Island of the Fornicators (p.75). At least, that is what happens in the English version; in the more sober French version, criminals are sent to prison or to work in the mines (p.260) – and even, if only very occasionally, executed.

There is much in this account of Sevarambian society that is relevant, *mutatis mutandis*, to modern society, more so, perhaps, than in most of the utopian projects that proliferated in the 18th Century. The model of society proposed by what has become one of the most well-known of these, Morelly’s *Code de la Nature* (1755), a work long attributed to Diderot, is little more than a pale echo of More’s *Utopia*, though it has a much more elaborate theoretical foundation (which no doubt explains why it has attracted the interest of Marxists). It is all based on the alleged “Laws of Nature”, but turns out to be naïvely idealistic. The one fundamental vice is avarice, from which all others stem. So the solution is to get rid of property, the root of all evil (much as in *Utopia*): “Rien dans la société n’appartiendra singulièrement ni en propriété à personne que les choses dont il fera un usage actuel, soit pour ses besoins, ses plaisirs, ou son travail journalier.” (Morelly, *Code de la Nature ou le véritable esprit de ses lois*, Classiques du Peuple, Éditions sociales, 1970, pp.127-8.) From the age of 5, children are brought together, away from their parents, all to receive the same education (though boys and girls are kept separate); they are taught obedience to the law, to their parents, and to everyone in authority (p.147). And to ensure the efficiency of the teachers, any who allow one of their charges to contract an anti-social vice or habit are suspended or fired (p.154). There are savage penal laws (though not the death penalty), the worst crimes being murder, or the attempt to reintroduce “la détestable propriété” (p.152), and there is no possibility of appeal (p.155).

However, the most important and influential proposal for political reform in the 18th Century was surely Rousseau’s *Contrat social* (1762), whatever he may have said in *Emile*, published just a couple of months later, about reforming the self rather than society. Like the *Code de la Nature*, the *Contrat social* gets rid of private property: while, theoretically, everything belongs to the state, in practice all citizens are entitled to the necessary, though also, crucially, to the product of their labour. But like Morelly, though with considerably greater incisiveness and originality, it is Rousseau’s theoretical underpinning of his proposals that is the most important. As an attempt to solve the problem of the ideal society, the *Contrat social* offers a beautifully neat theoretical solution (however terrifying its implementation might seem). The “pacte social” involves the total subordination of the individual to the whole political community:

Chacun de nous met en commun sa personne et toute sa puissance sous la suprême direction de la volonté générale; et nous recevons en corps chaque membre comme partie indivisible du tout. (*Du Contrat social*, Livre I, ch.6, *Œuvres complètes*, Pléiade, iii, p.361).

As for the problem of dealing with deviants, Rousseau argues that in a well-governed state there are few criminals. But he uses characteristically tortured logic in a justification of capital punishment:

D'ailleurs tout malfaiteur attaquant le droit social devient par ses forfaits rebelle et traître à la patrie, il cesse d'en être membre en violant ses loix, et même il lui fait la guerre. Alors la conservation de l'Etat est incompatible avec la sienne, il faut qu'un des deux périsse, et quand on fait mourir le coupable, c'est moins comme Citoyen que comme ennemi." (Ibid., Livre II, ch.5, p.376.)

To be fair to Rousseau, though, he does, like More, have laudably humane reservations about capital punishment: "On n'a droit de faire mourir, *même pour l'exemple*, que celui qu'on ne peut conserver sans danger." (ibid., p.377, my italics). The exclusion of the deterrent argument for the death penalty is noteworthy.

Up till now, I have focussed only on attempts to imagine a society that would function efficiently and with justice. But how much attention do the authors of these attempts pay to the happiness of the individual within their proposed societies? They can hardly have been unaware that the freedom and happiness of the individual were at least partly incompatible with the demands of society.

In the 16th Century, More's aim does appear to be the happiness of the individual, though the happiness he envisages for his Utopians sometimes seems close to the self-sufficient independence of society proposed by Montaigne and by Rousseau in *Émile*:

[T]he main purpose of their whole economy is to give each person as much time free from physical drudgery as the needs of the community will allow, so that he can cultivate his mind – *which they regard as the secret of a happy life*. (p.79, my italics).

One notices *en passant* that this seems to be a rather more negative view of work than elsewhere in the book. The Thelemites are of course free and happy doing what they want (at least the ones Rabelais is concerned with are), though their form of happiness seems distinctly sybaritic beside the austerity of Utopia.⁸ Morelly at least shows his consciousness of the problem with his laudable aim of finding "une situation dans laquelle l'homme soit aussi heureux et aussi bienfaisant qu'il le peut être en cette vie" (*Code de la Nature*, p.125), though we might think he is a little optimistic in assuming this can be achieved merely by the removal of private property and thus of avarice.

Diderot's approach in the *Neveu de Rameau* is a very different one. His message seems to be that there are different kinds of happiness for different men. Both MOI and LUI are hedonists – in their different ways. "Je ne méprise pas les plaisirs des sens", confesses MOI, and he proceeds to give some juicy examples; but he then goes on to assert that he vastly prefers behaving virtuously: in other words he is actually happy conforming to the conventional moral code (*Œuvres romanesques*, p.431). LUI, on the other hand, finds people like that "des êtres bien singuliers" (p.432), and argues that in reality most people practise all the so-called anti-social vices regardless of official morality: "On loue la vertu, mais on la hait, mais on la fuit,

⁸ Christine Rees is perhaps going a bit far in her witty characterization of the contrast between the two societies:

If Utopia resembles the monastic ideal in aiming at simplicity, the anti-monastic Abbey of Thélème anticipates a modern luxury hotel, with its elegant apartments including full-length mirrors and daily replenished perfume caskets, its excellent service and superb sports facilities. (*Utopian Imagination and 18th Century Fiction*, p.11.)

mais elle gèle de froid, et dans ce monde, il faut avoir les pieds chauds.” (p.433.) He himself is just more honest, and makes no pretence of praising virtue. He can find happiness easily enough, he says, “par des vices qui me sont naturels” (ibid.), though, as I pointed out earlier, he would have behaved virtuously “si par hasard la vertu avait conduit à la fortune” – and would presumably have been happy so doing. Rameau’s argument is developed in the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, where Bougainville’s French chaplain sheepishly admits to the Tahitian Orou that in practice people in Europe flout all the sexual restrictions imposed on them. Furthermore, the Tahitians’ joyful celebration of sexual intercourse emphasized the folly of stigmatizing the very action which created the population needed for the prosperity of the society (as everyone then believed). Diderot is clearly here toying with the idea that really the problem of reconciling the happiness of the individual with the general good scarcely exists, since our natural instincts are not as opposed to it as Christian morality would have us believe. The Tahitians contribute to the general good merely by behaving naturally, recalling the thesis of Bernard de Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees, or private Vices Public Benefits* (1714), which had argued that both individuals and the whole hive did very well out of behaviour based on self-interest. But Diderot never seriously engages with the problem of extending the principle beyond sexual intercourse.

Rousseau’s solution in the *Contrat social* involves another of his bits of specious logic. The total subordination of the individual to the whole political community is a totally willing one. The participant in the social compact is a part of the whole to which he has given himself; so when he obeys the general will, he is in fact obeying himself. Social man thus ends up being as free as isolated pre-social man, and presumably as happy! And if a citizen refuses to obey the general will, he must be forced to. As Rousseau puts it unambiguously, “on le forcera d’être libre” (p.364) (in which case, the reader may suspect, he may not be quite so happy).

But even without Rousseau’s compulsory freedom, are we convinced that this subordination of the individual to the community can really produce the happiness of the individual? Some of Diderot’s most important thoughts on political matters are to be found in the *Histoire des deux Indes* (1780), a history of European colonization of the East and the Americas, ostensibly by Raynal but containing contributions by various other writers, and most of all by Diderot. In one of these, he makes use of a discussion of the controversial Jesuit missions in Paraguay as an opportunity to attack some of the standard characteristics of the projects of the political dreamers. He acknowledges that the Jesuits had created an apparently ideal society for the Guarani Indians, in which they were looked after with paternal care. But Diderot suggests that the Indians were surely bored, and among the reasons he gives are precisely the absence of private property, and the lack of competition in their lives because of their total equality with one another:

L’égalité à laquelle ils étoient réduits & dont il leur étoit impossible de se tirer, éloignoit entre eux toute sorte d’émulation. Un Guaranis n’avoit aucun motif de surpasser un Guaranis. [...] La privation de toute propriété n’influoit-elle pas sur ses liaisons les plus douces? Ce n’est pas assez pour le bonheur de l’homme d’avoir ce qu’il lui suffit; il lui faut encore de quoi donner. Un Guaranis ne pouvoit être le bienfaiteur, ni de sa femme, ni de ses enfans, ni de ses parens, ni de ses amis, ni de ses compatriotes; & aucun de ceux-ci ne pouvoit être le sien. (Livre VIII, ch. 17.)

Voltaire too seizes on boredom as the enemy of happiness. At the end of *Candide*, where after all their misadventures the little band of travellers end up in their garden overcome with boredom, the old woman asks herself which is worse, to experience “toutes les misères par lesquelles nous avons tous passé” – and she lists them in picturesque detail – “ou bien de rester ici à ne rien faire?”. And the solution is of course WORK: “Il faut cultiver notre jardin.”⁹ Although it was widely believed that glorious, happy indolence was a feature of most of the newly discovered primitive communities, the authors of proposed ideal civilized societies like Utopia and the Severambians all emphasized the moral and material benefits of work. Explicitly or implicitly, indolence was seen as a source of unhappiness.

Now mention of the old woman in *Candide* may have drawn your attention to the fact that women appear to have played virtually no part in my discussion of ideal societies – apart perhaps from the reference to the number of wives owned by Sevarambian magistrates. To what extent did the authors of all these fantasies and projects (all male) include women in their ideal societies?

The monks and monkesses of Thélème share equally in its delights; but what about the workers’ wives? Did they just do housework, or did they work alongside their husbands (as well as doing housework)? The role of women in other utopias is not encouraging. In Utopia itself, they do have some rights, and can even (occasionally) become priests (though presumably not bishops). But their husbands “are responsible for punishing their wives” (p.104), who are required at the end of each month to “kneel down at home before their husbands, [...] to confess all their sins of omission and commission, and ask to be forgiven” (p.126). Women in the *Histoire des Sévérambes* are generally treated as chattels to be distributed among the men, and barren wives, much despised, may be replaced after five years (p.256). There are lots of slave girls, many of them received as tribute from elsewhere, and they are distributed freely: an ancient law decreed the provision of “Female Slaves to be kept in all Towns and Cities for the Use of Strangers” (p.245). To be fair, women soldiers make up a third of the Sevarambian army (though there is no mention of woman officers). As for the *Code de la Nature*, Morelly requires all citizens to be married “sitôt l’âge nubile accompli”, and the marriage is initiated by the boy choosing whichever girl he fancies, though this is at least dependent on her consent (p.144).

In the accounts of the newly discovered primitive communities that were so much admired, there was little mention of the women – who must have had to work pretty hard to keep their menfolk in the glorious indolence to which they were accustomed. In the *Histoire des deux Indes*, Raynal admits that the idealized Caribs “regardoient leurs femmes plutôt comme leurs esclaves que comme leurs compagnes” (Livre X, ch.6). And in Diderot’s version of Tahiti, Orou treats his wife and daughters as his possessions when he offers them to the chaplain.

⁹ Whether Voltaire’s garden in *Candide* is large or small is a moot point. Does he mean we should actively look after our own interests and not worry about society/mankind as a whole, following the example of the “bon vieillard” who cultivates his small-holding with his sons and daughters and is happy knowing nothing of what happens in the capital (*Candide*, ch.30)? Or that we should be concerned with this world rather than the next?

Raynal's comment on the Caribs obviously implies that he does not think this is how women *should* be treated. Even so, it is hard to find in all this utopian literature, all written by men as I have said, any example of women being accorded an equal place in society with men. I propose now, however, to turn to a pleasing exception, provided by a not very well-known book by a little-known author, who was even a woman. *The Description of Millenium Hall* (1762) is not a wonderful novel. Yet at the same time it is a remarkable book, in which Sarah Scott presents us with a miniature utopia, run by women. Like Thélème, it is a limited community within a normal society, occupying only a small part of a much longer work, which is devoted to the (rather banal) histories of the group of ladies who have come together to manage this country estate.

Like all utopias, the estate is situated somewhere utterly remote – in this case Cornwall (almost as remote as Cyrano de Bergerac's moon for 18th Century Londoners). As in Thélème, the little society is profoundly aristocratic, and the ladies who rule it are all good, and mostly wealthy and remarkably good-looking. True, several of their servants are crippled or otherwise physically handicapped – the cook cannot walk without crutches, the kitchen maid has one eye, the dairy maid is deaf, etc. – but this only serves to emphasise the practical charity of the good ladies, which is the keynote of the society, very different in this respect from Thélème. Their principal activity is caring for the poor of the neighbourhood, setting up schools, and providing jobs by creating a textile mill in which hundreds of villagers (aged from 6 to 60) joyfully sing and whistle while they work. They are all suitably grateful to their benefactresses.

The hierarchical nature of this utopia is in a sense the whole point of it, whereas in Thélème it is simply taken for granted; but in both cases it is a *sine qua non* of the society's existence. The group of ladies are as much an élite as the Thelemites, and they are both virtuous and happy. But their virtue consists of doing good works, of caring for others, and they experience "the infinite satisfaction of being beheld with gratitude and love" (Sarah Scott, *A Description of Millenium Hall*, Broadview, 1999, p.246). And as for the problem of evil, if some of the beneficiaries of their charity should be so ungrateful as to step out of line, the good ladies would not presume to punish or even censure them, though there is much emphasis on preventing idleness and dissipation... As for more serious problems, the laws of the society are the laws of Christianity, and due punishment will be meted out elsewhere:

[A]s whoever lives in England must submit to the laws of the country [...], so whoever lives in a Christian land is obliged to obey the laws of the Gospel, or to suffer for infringing them; in both cases, therefore, it is prudent for every man to acquaint himself thoroughly with these ordinances, which he cannot break with impunity. [...] The laws against robbery are not rendered either less just, or less binding, by the numbers that daily steal, or who demand your purse on the high-way. Laws are not abrogated by being infringed, nor does the disobedience of others make the observance of them less my duty. (pp.166-67.)

The contrast *Millenium Hall* presents with the grandly ambitious attempts of Thomas More *et al* to reorganize the totality of society so as to create an ideal world is striking, all the more so when we remember that it was published in the very same year as the *Contrat social*. The modern reader may perhaps criticize Sarah Scott precisely for the limited nature of her aims, even perhaps smile at the detail she goes into of financial income and outgoings, just as we may jibe at the patronizing benevolence of the good ladies, or at the child labour in the textile mill. But this

would be both anachronistic and insensitive as a response to her little utopia. Scott is giving an example of the way in which the society of the world she lived in could really be improved. The practical needs of this caring, matriarchal community are addressed by a combination of social welfare and the provision of employment; and the financial details are intended to demonstrate the feasibility of the project. And however remote Cornwall is from London, it was a deliberately chosen real location.

It is true that the magnificent proposals I have been discussing, *Utopia*, the Society of the Sevarambians and even the *Contrat social*, however brilliantly inventive and intellectually coherent they may be, are none of them intended to provide a realistic recipe for the improvement of society, certainly not in any foreseeable future. In which case, it might be argued, they are hardly less exercises in wishful-thinking than Thélème. Or at the very least, their all-or-nothing schemes could only ever be implemented by revolution. Judged as literature, or even as an intellectual achievement, Sarah Scott's modest ideal can certainly not bear comparison with such works. But from a social point of view it is surely worthy of our admiration. Indeed, it may well have had some practical influence on society, in the creation, for example, of some of the model communities such as New Lanark that sprang up in the late 18th Century. Whereas it can be argued that whatever influence the *Contrat social* had it was largely harmful¹⁰, even if we exculpate Rousseau from the often repeated charge of being responsible for some of the more unsavoury aspects of the French Revolution.

¹⁰ See for example J.L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, 1952.