Visionaries

R.F.J. Seddon

In this exploration I suggest that the visionary imagination can be understood as a specific mode of philosophical practice. If More's *Utopia* and Bentham's *Panopticon* qualify as philosophical writings, perhaps we could read the very environment around us as a massively collaboratively authored philosophical work; and, given this conjecture, it follows that an imaginative project which envisages possible environments can be read as a kind of speculative metaphilosophical reflection in dialogue with concrete practice. I present an interpretation of the visionary individual as someone imaginatively opening up possibilities for engaging philosophically with ideas embedded into the world.

Christian Waldvogel's proposal for creating a better world could not have been published in a journal of moral or political philosophy. This is not because it was speculative (a problem for political science but not for us), or because it was too practical (few proposals having more *im*practicality). It is because Waldvogel addressed the intractable frictions of human coexistence not through a discussion of rights and duties, or through examination of virtues, or through critique of ideologies, or through analysis of the distribution of utility. Taking an engineer's eye to the matter, he recommended renovating the spheroid called Earth by extracting the raw materials composing the planetary interior, and from them constructing an enormous hollow sphere in space to surround the remains of the planet and offer a new home for humanity: not only a home with abundant and equitably distributed resources, but one in which to look upwards was not to see the stars and the vastness of space, but to behold the lands of other human beings, people like oneself on the other side of the shell.[1]

One must admit that here we encounter what might politely be called an optimistic view of what happens when people encounter other humans and their lands; and we should further observe that for all his diagrams and detailed calculations (average structural density 827 kg/m^3; total mass 5.976 x 10^{24} kg...), Waldvogel accepted that Globus Cassus was more speculative fiction than realistic proposal. Think of it, we are told, as a thought experiment: just imagine a different world, a radically different Earth, and reflect on the possibility of a different way of living on the one we've got.[2]

To imagine a utopian world is not necessarily to be doing philosophy; to write what resembles science fiction likewise, though philosophers have at times taken an interest in that genre;[3] but I want to show you how the visionary imagination exemplified by Waldvogel can be interpreted as doing something philosophically rather interesting. Not necessarily something we should be striving to emulate, but something which might help us better understand and direct the role of imagination and speculative thinking within our own philosophical practices. In order to do this I shall need to rewind the history of utopian thinking.

The obvious first destination for philosophers is the era of Plato, and if we compare his *Republic* to such a scheme as Globus Cassus we find, it's true, a sharp contrast in approach: the Platonic philosopher-king, who needs to be dragged from lofty contemplation of the Forms to the tiresome business of kingship, no doubt has little time for the manifold concrete details of Kallipolis, for the twists and turns of her streets or the view across the marketplace; and not surprisingly the City emerges from the dialogue as a rather abstract entity (in contrast with Plato's more vivid Atlantis), a sketchy framework for an experiment in polity that could have taken root in any promising location. Yet if we fast-forward to 1516, to the book that gave us the word 'utopia', we find a different approach, in this respect closer to Waldvogel than to Plato: for More's *Utopia* is rich in its concrete sense of place. 'The island of Utopia in the middle, where it is broadest, is two hundred miles broad, and holds almost at the same breadth over a great part of it, but grows narrower towards both ends. Its figure is not unlike a crescent; between its horns the sea comes in eleven miles broad, and spreads itself into a great bay, which is environed with land to the compass of about five hundred miles...'[4] And so on in this vein: as soon as we are introduced to Utopia we encounter it

1 Christian Waldvogel, *Globus Cassus* (2004 bilingual ed., trans. Michael Robinson, Baden: Lars Müller Publishers). For images see http://www.waldvogel.com/projects.php?id=52 (2004, retrieved 13th February 2010).
2 Claude Lichtenstein, 'News From Elsewhere', included in *ibid*, pp. 113-9.

3 For example, Stephen R.L. Clark in *How to Live Forever: Science Fiction and Philosophy* (1995, London: Routledge) and elsewhere.
4 Sir Thomas More, *Utopia: Or the Happy Republic, a Philosophical Romance* (1852, London: M.S. Rickerby), p. 77.

through its geography. Fast-forward a little more to 1602, to look at Tommaso Campanella's rather alchemically tinged utopia *City of the Sun*, and one of the first things we read is how the city is laid out: 'divided into seven rings or huge circles named from the seven planets, and the way from one to the other of these is by four streets and through four gates, that look toward the four points of the compass...'[5] If we turn to Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* of the 1620s, we likewise find this kind of detail all over the place—a sample: 'The Strangers' House is a fair and spacious house, built of brick, of somewhat a bluer colour than our brick; and with handsome windows, some of glass, some of a kind of cambric oiled.'[6]

Now such texts – *Utopia* especially – have been by convention read as philosophy. They're read as literature too, of course, but so is Plato; and though they clearly do qualify as geofiction, no library is likely to shelve them alongside Tolkien. We face multiple possibilities: maybe these utopian authors just happened to parcel their treatises up in the form of fictitious travel reports, perhaps to make them palatable to a wider audience than is attracted to academic essays. On this account, all that richly detailed sense of place is merely literary sugar to help readers swallow their philosophy.[7] Or perhaps the novelistic delivery serves some persuasive function, to convince us through a sense of verisimilitude that the utopia is possible and suitable for beings such as ourselves.[8] The alternative and more interesting possibility is this: that they thought that all these details about the shape of islands and the construction of walls were themselves some form of philosophical content.

It's when one seriously entertains this last possibility that the thought may arise: if a description of a fictional place, such as a city, can be a philosophical text, then why not go outside and try to read an actual city as philosophy? Not (unless we are playing the game by Borgesian rules) as the musings of a single imagined architect, for no real city is so thoroughly laid out by a single mind, but as a massively multi-authored philosophical treatise—or perhaps even better, a philosophical dialogue?[9]

Quickly (I've tried) the answer dawns: one would have to speak the language that would let one pinpoint what to look for, and I for one lack functional literacy in town planning. (Maybe I should have stayed indoors in the library, examining what it is we're engrossed in when we browse the ordered shelves and carry books over to the reading desks placed ready for us: where we might consider that in a building designed to match enquirers with knowledge we are walking through applied epistemology.[10]) Yet hopefully I can dredge up some putative

9 Or many intersecting dialogues, or a part of one great conversation; these possibilities are compatible, much as there are multiple ways of reading Italo Calvino's suggestion that all his *Invisible Cities* are ultimately Venice.

10 'We are all familiar with C.P. Snow's famous metaphor of the two cultures that divide educated people into two camps, humanists and scientists... [The British Library] actually enshrines the notion of two cultures permanently in stone. [It] has two separate sections with two separate reading rooms, one for the humanities and one for the sciences... The humanists tend to work with a small number of books from the historic collections, while the scientists tend to work with lots of books from the current periodicals. So the architect gave the humanists a big room with lots of desks in the middle, surrounded by reference works on the four walls; the scientists got a room with lots of journals in the middle, surrounded by desks on four sides. You see, he gave the one-dimensional thing to the desks for the scientists and the two-dimensional thing to their journals, but he switched the dimensions for the humanists.' (Donald E. Knuth, *Things a Computer Scientist Rarely Talks About* (2003, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), pp. 2-3)

5 Tommaso Campanella, *City of the Sun* (2008, Charleston, South Carolina: Forgotten Books), p. 2.

6 Sir Francis Bacon, *The New Atlantis* (2008, Charleston, South Carolina: Forgotten Books), p. 7.

7 This is in fact approximately how More himself accounted for it (Krishan Kumar, *Utopianism* (1991, Milton Keynes: Open University Press), p. 24; see also pp. 88-9).

8 Anthony J. Graybosch, 'Two Concepts of Utopia' (*Journal of Value Inquiry*, 1995, Vol. 29, No. 2), p.167.

examples of how such a line of thought might play out. Depending on which historian you ask about the boulevards of Paris, you may be told either that they were an exercise in replacing pestilent, overcrowded alleys, or that they were meant to be hard to build barricades across.[11] Ideas about public health or public order, encoded in the very diameter of a street! Since the construction of the built environment involves decisions grounded in one or another normative outlook,[12] I take it to be plausible that *ideas* can be embedded in our environment; the theme of ideas being built into the development of the concrete world is in part an echo of Hegel, after all, although his treatment of objective *Geist* was meant for a global scale and weighed down with considerably more metaphysical baggage.[13] Yet the theme is in no way the private property of Hegelians: recent work by Christopher Preston credits Albert Borgmann with the insight that 'it is not just social institutions and practices that bear moral norms, but also the very material structures in which society is immersed'.[14] The geometry of a legislative chamber, for example, subtly influences the kind of debates that can take place inside, from which Preston infers that it is 'not silent relative to our moral epistemologies'.[15]

Another figure we might cite at this point is Michel Foucault, never one to limit himself to discussion of Bentham's proposal for a Panopticon[16] when he could busy himself constructing histories of prisons and clinics, tracking the development of disciplinary practices within them. Meanwhile, the Panopticon found a concrete parallel in the salt-works at Chaux, where Claude-Nicolas Ledoux installed the Overseer and Director at the centre of the zoned, orderly complex.

> Its radial lines sought to penetrate deep into the surrounding countryside, bending all to its will... Ledoux's... plan had among many other aspirations the desire to remove the temptation of 'bacchic deliriums' through garden cultivation and honest toil. His architecture was pedagogic; it taught a way of life that achieved industrial economy by constantly occupying the workers' minds with rational ideas, hints about their station in life and the fear of being seen not to be conforming.[17]

These salt-works do not, I grant, sound altogether philosophical in their rather didactic style of pedagogy; but now let's turn to wondering whether not only ideas, or interpretations,[18] but arguments too can be embedded in concrete space. Here we join the tradition of asking whether constructs outside natural and logical languages – a piece of music, say, or even a judo flip[19] – can constitute arguments. I take it to be plausible that rhetorical

11 Irene Earls, 'Streets of Paris', in *Encyclopedia of 1848 Revolutions* (2004, http://www.ohio.edu/chastain/rz/parisstr.htm, retrieved 3rd August 2009). Compare http://bldgblog.blogspot.com/2009/11/political-buffer-space-and-chinese.html (2009, retrieved 13th February 2010) on the spatialisation of political thought.
12 Maurice Lagueux, 'Ethics Versus Aesthetics In Architecture' (*The Philosophical Forum*, 2004, Vol. 35, No. 2), pp. 118-9.
13 I don't insist, however, that this is the best or the only way for a philosopher with a sense of place to find places meaningful; contrast, for example, David Cooper's treatment of atmosphere and epiphany in *A Philosophy of Gardens* (2006, Oxford: Clarendon Press).
14 Christopher J. Preston, 'Moral Knowledge: Real and Grounded In Place' (*Ethics, Place and Environment*, 2009, Vol. 12, No. 2), p. 178
15 *Ibid*, p. 179.
16 Jeremy Bentham, *Panopticon*, in Miran Bozovic (ed.), *The Panopticon Writings* (1995, London: Verso), pp. 29-95. For Foucault's discussion see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (1991, trans. Alan Sheridan, London: Penguin), pp. 200-9.
17 Neil Spiller, *Visionary Architecture: Blueprints of the Modern Imagination* (2007, London: Thames & Hudson), pp. 14-15.
18 Discussion of Siegfried Giedion and Karsten Harries in Michael P. Levine *et al*, 'Introduction: Ethics and Architecture' (*The Philosophical Forum*, 2004, Vol. 35, No. 2), p. 109.
19 Cited in G.C. Goddu, 'What Is a "Real" Argument?' (*Informal Logic*, 2009, Vol. 29, No.1), p. 3.

argumentation at least can take concrete form: the Acropolis Museum, designed in large part to house those Parthenon Marbles possessed by Greece and to highlight the absence alongside them of the Elgin Marbles now owned by the British Museum, has been met with such a description.

> Bernard Tschumi's delicate exercise in blending contemporary architecture into a weighty historical context carries a political message from the Greek government. It is an argument for bringing home the Elgin Marbles.[20]

> Everyone agrees that the New Acropolis Museum is the best argument for the return of the Marbles.[21]

> Tschumi's museum is a kind of polemic in glass and concrete, conceived as an argument by the Greek government to bid for the return of the Elgin marbles...[22]

It does not merely express an argument, then; it *is* an argument, in which to the agenda of the exhibition is superadded the entire architecture of the building.[23] Another architectural case is suggested by Berthold Lubetkin's modernist enclosures for animals at London Zoo: these have been interpreted, in offering gorillas and penguins accommodation so much more carefully fitted to its inhabitants' needs than that available to the London poor, as a commentary on society and housing at large.[24] So perhaps there can indeed be a rhetoric of place;[25] although Michel de Certeau, who looked down on a city from a skyscraper and perceived a 'rhetoric of walking' on the streets below,[26] might object at this point that I am ignoring the very entities who make it possible for a place to have any significance at all: the people moving around inside it. 'The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations... It creates shadows and ambiguities within them.'[27] Consequently the significance of a place is never pristine and separate from the contributions of 'walkers... whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it... The networks of these bustling, intersecting writings compose a

20 Nicolai Ouroussoff, 'Architectural Shifts, Global and Local' (*New York Times*, 9th September 2007, § 2, p. 98).

21 George Vardas on behalf of Australians for the Return of the Parthenon Sculptures, 2009 letter (http://neoskosmos.com/news/en/node/1617, 24th June 2009, retrieved 3rd August 2009).

22 Richard Lacayo, 2007, 'The New Acropolis Museum' (2007, http://lookingaround.blogs.time.com/2007/10/28/the_new_acropolis_museum/, retrieved 2nd September 2009).

23 Or at least, it is argumentative. In fairness we should note a dissenting comment: 'The new museum, designed in pastiche Corbusian style by... Bernard Tschumi, is not so much an argument as a punch in the face. It is big and brutal, like something flown in overnight from Chicago.' (Simon Jenkins, *Guardian*, 23rd October 2009, Comment & Debate section, p. 37)

24 Pyrs Gruffudd, 'Biological Cultivation: Lubetkin's Modernism At London Zoo In the 1930s' (in *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations* (2000, ed. Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert, London: Routledge), pp. 222-42), p. 233*ff*. I am grateful to Alex Carruth for suggesting this example.

25 Not necessarily only of materially concrete places, I should add. 'If you want to make a statement..., you could embed it in a fun virtual world... Want a world that surrounds visitors in your religious views? You can build it. Concerned that a disadvantaged group does not have access to a Very Good Thing? Make a world where everyone can get that thing for free. Have a hope for a different future if some policy were to change? Build that future. If you can craft a social world that people like, you have just made a powerful argument for the policy decisions and cultural attitudes implicit in the world's design.' (Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (2005, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), p. 142)

26 Michel de Certeau , *The Practice of Everyday Life* Vol. I (1984, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 100.

27 *Ibid*, p. 101.

manifold story that has neither author nor spectator',[28] and threatens to subvert even the most brazenly polemical of architecture.

Perhaps it's true that attempting to read a place must include reading the performances of the people who inhabit it as well as those who made it; but I suggested that we might undertake to read a place as a dialogue, and in the interactions between environment and inhabitant we perhaps have simply discovered more persons of that dialogue. It's naturally enough at this point that I turn to the conjecture that not only rhetorical but philosophical arguments can be encoded in such a concrete form—but I'm not going to argue in support of this conjecture, since for one thing that would require consensus about what philosophy is, and you know we're not going to sort *that* one out today.

Instead, I'd like to return to those texts-in-the-conventional-sense I talked about to begin with: and my argument here is that *if* a place, such as a city, can itself be philosophy, *then* it follows that imaginative geofictional playing with possible places can be viewed as metaphilosophy.

It's at this point that I finally talk directly about visionaries. I don't profess to be able to offer any exhaustive taxonomy of what we mean by the word, and if you asked me what the difference is between a visionary and a genius I confess that I'd be reduced to mumbling that perhaps a visionary is the more imaginative. The word has developed from meaning fairly straightforwardly someone who has visions, perhaps in the manner of Joan of Arc, to implying a dreamer or someone with impractical schemes. More recently it's come to suggest sheer farsightedness: this sense actually seems to be too recent to appear in the *O.E.D.*, but one can find stacks of business manuals that try to school managers to be visionary captains of industry. Not that any religious or mystical aspect has

entirely faded away: the worst management handbook title I came across was probably *Jesus C.E.O.: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership*, and maybe the word does retain a tint of the prophetic, or even of the outright imaginatively speculative. We might call Nietzsche's proclamation of a 'philosophy of the future' a visionary one without being particularly interested in whether it's conceivable as a practical proposal. Or then again there's the sheer imaginative shift of gear: what was visionary about Charles Babbage was his grasp of how calculation, an activity of the mind, could be done by machines (another realisation of mental abstractions in concrete form). In this paper, however, I largely limit myself to discussing a specific type, the utopian visionary who's convinced he's found the underlying thing that's really fundamentally amiss in the workings of human society and who, very frequently, has a plan to do something about it, so that
if only we all adopted a nice, rational, universal language with which to communicate with each other;[29] or,
if only we stopped thinking of ourselves as citizens of separate nations and started to look upon the human race as the crew of Spaceship Earth;[30] or,
if only we rejected planetary roundness and re-engineered the Earth itself into an enormous hollow sphere,
then human society would become so much nicer and more co-operative and more peaceful.

Back then to Christian Waldvogel, and my promise to explain what's philosophical about *Globus Cassus*. Waldvogel is trying, I suggested, to reimagine moral and political problems as an engineering problem. He's trying to shake up the way we look at

29 A recurring theme in Arika Okrent's popular work *In the Land of Invented Languages* (2009, New York: Spiegel & Grau) is the frequently passionate belief of the language inventor in the invention's potential to benefit mankind.
30 R. Buckminster Fuller, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (1969, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), among other works of the era to employ the term.

28 *Ibid*, p. 93.

those problems by playing with the idea that they stem from something so natural to us we hadn't even thought it could be relevant: the fact that we walk around on the surface of the planet. I don't think he's saying we ought to introduce the shape of the Earth into our theorising;[31] he's trying to *show* you a vantage point from which things look very different and less restrictive, and as such to offer a kind of liberation. A moral philosopher who believes in a strong is/ought division, with what science tells us firmly limited to the 'is' side of the fence and the domain of moral philosophy safely sequestered on the 'ought' side, may nevertheless, if he accepts the principle that 'ought' implies 'can', admit that the way human beings are discovered to be sets constraints for what ethics can demand of moral agents. In hitching ethics not to science but to megascale engineering, and thereby jogging the imagination into pushing at the boundaries of the space of possibilities in which we exist, Waldvogel is not arguing prescriptively, but rather trying to show how contingent the bounds of that space of possibilities are.

Let me clarify the point with another example: one no less outlandish, for the visionaries who succeed become conventional, and insinuate themselves into our thoughts so thoroughly that it takes a leap of historical imagination to grasp, for example, how fresh and radical the ideas of the Enlightenment once were. The enterprise which I have in mind was inescapably a product of the Enlightenment, but it remains one of the great ridiculous episodes in intellectual history: the conversion of the Positivist movement into the Religion of Humanity, which took wing with Henri de Saint-Simon's advocacy in later life of a 'new Christianity' and scientific priesthood, and in being taken to further extremes by his followers reached its apogee in the later thought of Auguste Comte.[32] Under his direction as pontiff of a sort of institutionalised scientism modelled on Roman Catholicism, with the worship of God replaced by that of Humanity, and Comte's late mistress as a kind of Madonna figure, a cult came into being equipped with a catechism, liturgy, prayers involving the touching of phrenologically significant points on the skull, a full complement of sacraments, and a calendar replete with festivals and having all the days and months named after great men in the history of civilisation. No aspect of life escaped the Positivist religion's notice: John Gray reports that they designed waistcoats 'with the buttons on the back, so that they could be put on and taken off only with the assistance of other people. The aim was to promote altruism and co-operation. Sadly, the result was to provoke raids from the police, who – taking Saint-Simon's talk of "the rehabilitation of the flesh" literally – suspected his disciples of taking part in orgies.'[33]

The Religion of Humanity was ridiculous, but there's an element in it which harked back to the ancient conception of philosophy as practice. Certainly its pieties were a far cry from Diogenes with his lantern, exiting his barrel to wander the streets for the day; but an intellectual practice they were, and one aimed at getting people to see the world in a more rational and scientific way, as per the manifestations of Reason and Science in Comte's system—not so much through argument, which already presupposes a certain shared background understanding of rationality, as through immersion in the whole cultish enterprise. (One might play with the idea that it amounted to a hermeneutic performance; although

31 In fact, it does appear in Kant as an illustration of our epistemic horizons (*Critique of Pure Reason* (1929, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, London: Macmillan), p. 606).
32 A defence of the aspirations of the Religion, glossing gently over the more lurid details of its execution, may be found in Andrew Wernick's *Auguste Comte and the* *Religion of Humanity: The Post-Theistic Program of French Social Theory* (2001, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). For a historical examination of the Religion's reception in Britain which details the practices of its adherents as well as its intellectual influence, see T.R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (1986, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
33 John Gray, 'The Original Modernizers' (in *Gray's Anatomy: Selected Writings*, 2009, London: Allen Lane), p. 267.

compared to Gadamer's fused horizons, within which reader and text are always progressively informing one another, it does look awfully one-way.) It is a kind of philosophical practice precisely in that it engages with the intellectual background upon which thinking can happen—and what could be more philosophical than that, if we are agreed that it is philosophy that enquires most deeply into the processes and practices of reasoning?

Now I'm not, of course, telling you we've got it all wrong and we ought to be busy founding religions and inventing geoengineering projects instead of writing papers like this one; and if you're thinking I'm playfully helping myself to an awful lot of wild speculation—yes. I agree with you. But I do have a serious metaphilosophical point, concerning the potential for imagination to feature not only as an object of philosophical investigation, but as an instrument of argumentation. According to Lady Warnock, only in the writings of Sartre do we find a method which 'actually uses imaginative inventions to make us accept philosophical points'.[34] Most frequently the imagination lurks offstage, inescapably present wherever philosophers muse or ponder or pursue a hunch,[35] but forbidden to contaminate our demonstrative arguments; and where we probably can perceive an author consciously exploring the imaginative backdrop upon which he writes, we are likely also to find ourselves surveying the spaces where philosophy melds into literature, perhaps encountering the *alter ego* authorship of a Kierkegaard or a Pessoa: the imaginative step into an outlook not necessarily one's own.

I don't particularly contend that a visionary in the mould of Christian Waldvogel is doing very rigorous philosophy; but what he *is* doing may point in the direction of philosophy which not only is relaxed in the presence of imaginative speculation, but actively seeks to manipulate it as part of the practice of philosophical enquiry. Philosophy begins in wonder,[36] and perhaps might end in more of it.[37]

Durham, 2010

http://rfjseddon.net/