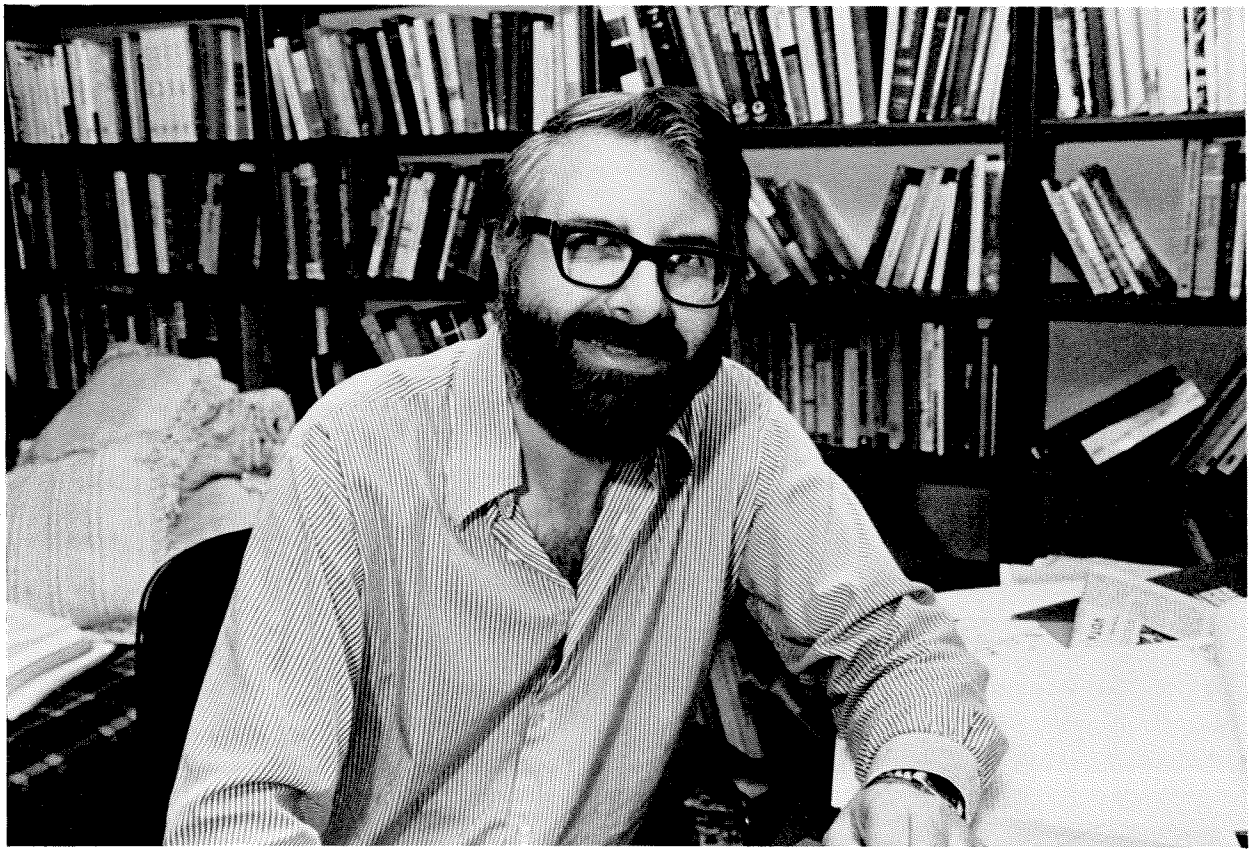

# The Question of Utopia

An interview with Brian Barry, Caltech's
Edie and Lew Wasserman Professor of Philosophy,
by journalist Mark Davidson

*Mark Davidson:* Many people today equate utopianism with Orwellianism — out of fear that any utopian dream is an invitation to an authoritarian nightmare. Do you share that fear?

*Brian Barry:* I can't see any problem about saying, "Wouldn't it be nice to have such-and-such state of affairs?" — as long as you accept the fact that your proposed state of affairs should be brought about only if enough people want it and if, once they have it, they are free to move out of it if they decide they want something else.

In other words, I can't see any reason why utopia can't be just a conceptual construction that you put forward for the sake of discussion. It may then act as a magnet that attracts people toward it.

*MD:* So you view utopian thought as a legitimate tool of political theory?

*BB:* It seems to me that utopia-making is as valid a way of doing political theory as any other. Abstract arguments about social reform are certainly useful, but I think the attempt to illustrate how society might *look* with such reform is just as important. The depiction of a coherent idea of a society may in fact be a quite powerful way of presenting a political argument. In some cases it may be a more effective way than the expression of formal propositions.

*MD:* What intellectual function does utopian thinking actually serve?

*BB:* The utopian approach may help you think about whether or not some proposed state of affairs is internally coherent. That is to say, are you assuming one thing about the economy and another thing about family life — and they don't really fit together? More specifically, are you assuming incoherent motivations in people? So it seems to me that a utopian construction is a way of trying to see if the kind of society you're holding up as good is in fact conceivable. If you could get there, would it in principle be able to maintain itself?

Also, I think utopian thinking is useful to the extent that it reminds you to clearly separate out two questions that tend to get run together: What would be a good state of affairs? And how would you in fact get from here to there?

*MD:* The word "utopian" is often used pejoratively to mean "unrealistic." How justified do you think that usage is?

*Mark Davidson*

*BB:* When something is denounced in that way as utopian, there are really two possible objections, one of which seems to be valid and the other not.

The valid objection would be the argument that you simply could never have a state of affairs like that. Obviously, if that's true, then that's very relevant.

On the other hand, I don't think it's valid to say a proposal is no good — utopian in the pejorative sense — solely because you can't see how it could be accomplished under the existing social structure and the existing constellation of political forces.

For instance, if somebody says it's utopian to talk about reforming the tax codes to get rid of loopholes, all that means is that such a reform may be impossible because of the power of vested interests under the present political system. That doesn't mean you couldn't accomplish this reform in principle, that you couldn't justifiably envision a society of ours without the loopholes.

*MD:* So the utopian approach is a useful way of thinking about the future?

*BB:* Absolutely. Utopian thought helps free us from the limitations of our day-to-day thinking. It helps produce potentially valuable ideas for the long run. History shows that there are occasions when opportunities for major reform open up — sometimes rather suddenly — and at such times we may be grateful for the existence of utopian ideas that were worked out in advance.

*MD:* As the author of books and articles on social justice and international morality, you

obviously have entertained ideas about a better world. What would you consider to be the essentials of a viable utopia?

*BB:* A full answer to that question would require a book. But I think one essential would be a fair degree of material equality. Without that, it would be very hard to arrive at what I regard as the right sort of relationships between people.

Beyond that, leaving aside obvious things like the elimination of war, I think I would attach a lot of importance to people being free to read, think, and say what they like. At the same time, there should be an awareness that some people really do know more than others and have better taste in certain matters than others. Superior ideas and taste would tend to emerge as a result of free expression, but the ideal of free expression should not be interpreted to mean that all ideas are equally good.

*MD:* Do you think humanity is giving enough thought to moving in ideal directions?

*BB:* In our society, at least, if you compare books written in the 1940s with those of the 1970s and 1980s, I think you see a shift away from idealistic speculation. I suppose that's partly a reaction against the often half-baked ideas of the 1960s. And I think a lot of it stems from the feeling that it's impossible to get governments to carry out the things they're supposed to do — which may be true at this time and place but is not true at all times and places.

*MD:* Has utopian thinking been eclipsed by the notion that people are incurably selfish?

*BB:* I think that factor may be playing a role. But I think the idea that everyone will always act in accordance with narrow self-interest is a crude notion that is being elevated to the level of absolute truth. That notion represents a simple-minded cynicism that unfortunately may sometimes be self-fulfilling.

*MD:* You feel there's more to human nature than self-interest?

*BB:* Much more. There are many examples of people acting out of higher motives. And people do sometimes vote a certain way because they think something ought to happen, not necessarily because it would benefit them.

*MD:* What's your reaction to R. Buckminster Fuller's thesis that the world has become such a dangerous place that humanity must choose now between utopia or oblivion?

*BB:* I hope Fuller's assessment was inaccurate, because I see no hope that we can accomplish a utopian transformation in the near future. To say we're going to solve the problems of preventing nuclear war or the ruination of our habitat only if we undertake a fundamental reorganization of social-political-economic relationships is really to place those problems in such a long-term framework that we would destroy ourselves before we could succeed.

*MD:* Are you saying that it would be suicidal to take Fuller's advice literally?

*BB:* Yes, I believe so. We must continue to work at short-term, incremental answers. Because even if we were able to achieve utopia, it would take too long. After all, we're talking about pretty deep-seated conditions. We're talking about systems of politics and economics that have been around for centuries.

*MD:* But you do have some hope that civilization can survive its present crises?

*BB:* Perhaps hope is a psychological necessity for individual survival. At any rate, one hopes that discussion of the issues does help. And there are some notable examples of this in the past. Civilization moved from a situation in which everybody pretty much took for granted that slavery was okay to a situation in which it became rather widely held that it *isn't* okay. And we've witnessed a similar change in attitudes about imperialism: the idea that it was perfectly okay to grab any place you *could* grab. (I realize that imperialistic activity continues today, but it's done apologetically or covertly.) And I think we've been witnessing some real change in attitudes about the rights of women.

*MD:* How do you rate current world leaders in terms of idealistic zeal?

*BB:* I'd say they tend to be much more managerial than utopian.

*MD:* Would you prefer leaders with utopian visions?

*BB:* That depends. A utopian visionary can be just as dangerous as a simple-minded cynic if the utopian is the type who ignores the problem of how you get from here to there. The world needs visionaries — leaders who are not afraid to think about new approaches to our problems. But, more importantly, the world needs leaders who are willing to subject both new ideas and old assumptions to rigorous examination.□