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Political Morality and *Utopia*: St. Thomas More and the Politics of Christian Humanism

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Director: David Walsh, PhD.

This dissertation is a reevaluation and interpretation of St. Thomas More's most famous work *Utopia* (1516). *Utopia* is a notoriously opaque work, and hence no scholarly consensus has formed around its meaning, much less around its implications for political theory. Yet, despite its opacity, the text has attained a place among the great works of Western literature and philosophy, spawning two sub-genera of literary, philosophical, and socio-political reflection, the utopia and the dystopia. While it has long been recognized that *Utopia* should be interpreted with relation to the intellectual milieu of Renaissance humanism—and the Christian humanism associated with Desiderius Erasmus in particular—the precise nature of the relationship has remained obscure and contested. Noting the vaguely unsettling character of *Utopia*, as well as the objections to the ostensibly ideal society placed in the mouth of More's character in the dialogue, many interpreters have suggested that the work is better read as an ironic criticism of the Utopian regime. A recent line of scholarship has opened a new and fruitful line of interpretation. This scholarship suggests that More's interlocutor in the work, a mysterious traveling philosopher named Raphael Hythloday, should be understood not as some aspect of More's personality, but rather as a playful and exaggerated Erasmus. If this is the case, the meaning of the work takes on a new aspect: it now can be viewed as a lively debate in which More (called "Morus" in the Latin), Peter Giles (mutual friend to More and Erasmus) and Raphael Hythloday, a pastiche of Erasmus, debate the implications of Erasmian humanism for political order. While More and Erasmus were close friends and collaborators, there is reason to believe that they differed in certain aspects of their political thinking. This dissertation argues

that the two friends represent two broad strands of Christian humanism, Stoic and Augustinian, and that *Utopia* presents a debate between two dispositions. They begin with a debate about the duties and hazards associated with philosophers becoming involved in political action. The course of the conversation leads to Hythloday's lengthy declamation in Book II in which he describes the Utopian commonwealth, an island civilization that he claims to have visited while sailing with Amerigo Vespucci. While he begins his encomium with the intent of demonstrating that a propertyless society is possible, he concludes with a peroration in which he argues that Utopia is not only the best commonwealth possible, but the only socio-political arrangement worthy of the name. Morus remains unconvinced, even after Hythloday's detailed exposition, and gives himself the final word, doubting both the desirability and the possibility of such an arrangement. While many interpreters have viewed Morus's critical arguments as ironic, not intended to be taken seriously, this dissertation argues that they are in fact the key to the political teaching of *Utopia.* Though Hythloday's words dominate the text, Morus's objections point to weaknesses in Hythloday's account, and carefully considered, the Utopian commonwealth is less desirable than it seems, suggesting that, like Morus, More (the author) doubted the ideal nature of the Utopian commonwealth. Rather, I suggest, Book II is a psychagogic thought experiment, intended to present, for consideration, discussion, and, ultimately, criticism, a political community built on Erasmus' idiosyncratic and individualistic synthesis of Epicurean, Stoic, and Christian ethics.

This dissertation by Shaun Patrick Rieley fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in political theory approved by David J. Walsh, Ph.D., as Director, and by Dennis J. Coyle, Ph.D., and Chad C. Pecknold, Ph.D., as Readers.

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For Leigh and Amelia

Introduction

In his 2000 magnum opus *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to Present, 500 Years of Western Cultural Life*, Jacques Barzun observes that a culture becomes decadent when there is a loss of "Possibility": "The forms of art as of life seem exhausted, the stages of development have been run through. Institutions function painfully. Repetition and frustration are the intolerable result. Boredom and fatigue are great historical forces."[1] A generation earlier, sociologist Robert Nisbet made a similar observation. In his 1975 book *Twilight of Authority* he writes

> Periodically in Western history twilight ages make their appearance. Processes of decline and erosion of institutions are more evident than those of genesis and development. Something like a vacuum obtains in the moral order for large numbers of people. Human loyalties, uprooted from accustomed soil, can be seen tumbling across the landscape with no scheme of larger purpose to fix them. Individualism reveals itself less as achievement and enterprise than as egoism and mere performance. Retreat from the major to the minor, from the noble to the trivial, the communal to the persona, and from the objective to the subjective is commonplace. There is a widely expressed sense of degradation of values and of corruption of culture. The sense of estrangement from community is strong.[2]

While both were primarily describing the culture of the late twentieth century, their assessment describes the condition of culture in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries as well. That time, like our own, saw a restless dissatisfaction with the institutions and patterns of life and thought that had dominated the previous era. The Renaissance—from the French meaning "rebirth"—saw a movement to reach back to the sources of Western civilization to effect renewal. The movement began in Italy in the fourteenth century, but by the late fifteenth century spread across Europe, to Germany, France, the Low Countries (Belgium and the Netherlands),

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[1] Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to Present, 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), xvi.
[2] Robert Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), v.

and England. Among those identified with the so-called Northern Renaissance, none was more prominent than Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam.   Along with Thomas More, he has come to symbolize the rebirth of "good letters" in northern Europe during the early sixteenth century. The social, political, and intellectual impact of their work has long been recognized, even if it has not always been understood. In a notable example, one prominent interpreter has argued that More and Erasmus should be understood as "on the margins of modernity," presaging the major moves in modern social and political thought and action.[3] Some have gone so far as to argue that the utopian convulsions that rocked the world in the twentieth century, in both its communist and fascist varieties, along with various other "utopianisms" both living and dead, trace their roots to More's little book.[4]

Yet, familiarity with More's general mode of thinking reveals a mind that is as pragmatic as it is pious, steeped in a reverence for law and tradition, and acutely aware of the follies and weaknesses of humanity. How can we understand this disjunction? Should Sir Thomas More, Christian humanist and saint of the Catholic Church, be understood as the source of revolutionary horrors wrought by the rise of secular-pagan ideologies of the twentieth century? While it may be true that the reception of *Utopia* eventually had some hand in opening a way for revolutionary upheaval and modern tyranny, nothing could have been further from More's intent. As one scholar has noted, "few books have been more misunderstood than *Utopia*."[5]

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[3] J.H. Hexter, "Thomas More: On the Margins of Modernity," *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1961), 20–37.
[4] See, for example, Eric Voegelin, *The History of Political Ideas, vol. 4: Renaissance and Reformation, in The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 22, ed. David L. Morse and William M. Thompson (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 129-130.
[5] R.W. Chambers, *Thomas More* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), 125.

Still, it must be conceded that, by nearly any standard, *Utopia* is a puzzling work. It is a strange blend of dialogue, pseudo-travel literature, moral philosophy, humanist commonplaces, and classical and Christian references. It begins with a dialogue—which takes place between two real persons and one fictional character—on the political and social ills of sixteenth century Europe, and the efficacy and ethics of advising kings in imperfect societies. It then proceeds into an extended description of an island called Utopia whose inhabitants are pagan but who nevertheless have founded a society which, according to one of the interlocutors, is the "best state of a commonwealth", where social harmony has been attained, and whose most prominent feature is its lack of private property. This feature, it is argued, is the source of the Utopians' happiness.

The "story" contained in *Utopia* is simple enough to recount—like a Platonic dialogue, there is little character development beyond what is revealed by the dialogue, and almost no action. More tells the reader that he has been sent in a diplomatic mission regarding "weighty matters"[6] with Charles, the Prince of Castile (soon to be Holy Roman Emperor Charles V) along with fellow humanist and statesman Cuthbert Tunstal and several others. During a lull in the negotiations, More tells us, he made his way to Antwerp,[7] where he met another humanist-statesman named Peter Giles, on the recommendation of Erasmus. One day, upon leaving Mass at the church of Notre Dame in Antwerp, he happened upon Giles speaking to another man, a stranger, who appears as a sailor, "a man advanced in years, with a sunburnt countenance and

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[6] Thomas More, *Complete Works of Thomas More Vol. 4: Utopia*, ed. J.H. Hexter and Edward Surts, S.J. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 47/10. Hereafter cited as CW 4. For pages within text of *Utopia*, page numbers will be listed first, with line numbers following the slash. References to other pages in the volume will follow standard pagination references.
[7] Ibid., 47/34.

long beard and cloak hanging carelessly from his shoulder".[8] Giles introduces the stranger as

Raphael Hythloday, a Portuguese sailor who has traveled around the world, but "his sailing has

not been like that of Palinurus but that of Ulysses or, rather, Plato."[9] They retire to the place

where More is staying to engage in further discussion, which quickly becomes a heated argument

over the relative merits of engaging in active political life—especially the courtly life—versus

living as one pleases in order to pursue travel and philosophic learning. Hythloday is a

philosopher who has abandoned all responsibilities—familial, social, and political—thereby

gaining the freedom to roam as a cosmopolitan citizen of the world. More and Giles, in turn,

take the counter position, bringing to bear arguments reminiscent of Aristotle and Cicero to

recommend that Hythloday enter the service of a king. When the conversation reaches an

impasse, with neither side seeming to gain the upper hand, Hythloday offers the island of Utopia,

which he claims to have visited in his travels, as an *exemplum* to demonstrate his point.   There,

he says, there is no private property and, therefore, all citizens attend to the public good. In

Book II, Hythloday details their political, social, economic, and religious arrangements before

launching into a peroration in which he claims that all other commonwealths are nothing but a

"conspiracy of the rich"[10] and rails against the ill-effects brought on societies by the sin of pride,

which the Utopians had eliminated through the elimination of private property. After Raphael

has finished speaking, More then turns to the reader and confesses that as Raphael spoke, "many

things came to my mind which seemed very absurdly established in the customs and laws of the

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[8] Ibid., 49/20-22.
[9] Ibid., 49/36-37.
[10] Ibid., 241/27-28.

people described"[11] but that he also will "readily admit that there are many features in the Utopian commonwealth which it is easier for me to wish for in our countries than to have any hope of seeing realized."[12]

As the sudden and indeterminate ending indicates, *Utopia*'s surface simplicity is deceptive. Just what is being recommended? How seriously should the book be taken? Which aspects are to be hoped for, and which are to be considered absurd? In short, what lessons are readers supposed to take away? Definitive answers to these questions remain elusive, despite many attempts at providing them.[13]

One of the primary sources of perplexity surrounding the interpretation of *Utopia* is the resistance to taking the fictionalized More—known in the Latin as Morus—at his word when he objects to Raphael Hythloday's positions. This resistance is, in a sense, strange. It is only necessary to presume that Morus is less than serious in his responses if we insist that Hythloday's positions must somehow represent More's genuine beliefs. But this is not necessary. Morus gives voice to objections that comport well with aspects of More's biography and with his mind as revealed in other writings. Some have suggested that this divergence reflects a dividedness in More's own personality, or a change of heart on the part of More from an earlier "humanist" phase to a later "religious polemicist" phase. Yet, recent scholarship has shown this to be unfounded.[14] A better tack for interpretation—one that does not needlessly

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[11] Ibid., 245/17-19
[12] Ibid, 246/39-247/3.
[13] See Chapter 1 for a review of the literature.
[14] See Travis Curtright, *The One Thomas More* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013).

compound complexities—seems to be found in allowing the interlocutors speak, and taking seriously their words.

A recent line of inquiry, which seeks to revive this common-sense idea that Morus represents More in a direct way, argues that Hythloday, rather than somehow representing More, is instead intended to represent More's friend Desiderius Erasmus.[15] This assertion is intriguing and contains a substantial amount of explanatory power. Interpreters have long recognized that *Utopia* should be seen in the context of Erasmian humanism, but its interpretation has proven difficult, in part because its apparent radicalism rests somewhat uneasily within the context of More's general demeanor and thinking. However, once it is recognized that More's thinking— particularly his *political* thinking—might have substantially differed from that of Erasmus, and that Hythloday bears a striking resemblance to Erasmus—at least in some exaggerated, satirical way—much else falls into place.

It is unquestionable that More shared a close association with Erasmus, the "Prince of the Humanists," and with Christian humanism generally. Yet, despite their affinities, More's life and writings represent a striking contrast with those of Erasmus. More was a man of the world, married with children and a large household, and engaged in the political life of London and Europe. Erasmus remained as unattached as his financial situation permitted, and his primary connections were the *Erasmici,* a circle of humanist scholars (including Thomas More) connected by friendship and the epistolary correspondence. Philosophically, More's divergence

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[15] See Giulia Sissa, "Familaris reprehensio quasi errantis: Raphael Hythloday between Plato and Epicurus," *Moreana* Vol. 49, (2012), 187-188 and 121-150; and Giulia Sissa, "A Praise of Pain: Thomas More's Anti-Utopianism," in *Utopia 1516-2016: More's Eccentric Essay and its Activist Aftermath*, ed. Han van Ruler and Giulia Sissa (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017, 25-69.

from Erasmus is perhaps most visible in his rejection of both Erasmus' peculiar pleasure-centered "Christian-Platonist Epicureanism," and the idea that the elimination of private property held the key to a happy political arrangement—a position for which Erasmus showed sympathy. And yet, despite More's rejection of these principles, *both* appear as prominent features in the Utopian commonwealth, praised by the travelling philosopher Hythloday.

Many interpreters have noted *Utopia*'s obvious relationship to Plato's *Laws* and, especially, *Republic*, citing in particular its critique of private property. The comparison is apt—Plato is clearly a source for Utopia—but it is in some ways misleading as well. It is most misleading in its implication that Utopia somehow represents More's political ideal in a way similar to the way Socrates' Kallipolis was apparently in some way Plato's.[16] This interpretation necessarily leaves unresolved the notable fact that More presents *himself* as Hythloday's interlocutor, criticizing Hythloday's chosen mode of life and dismissing his description of Utopia as "absurd". In short, it pays insufficient attention to the fact that *Utopia* is a *dialogue* and that More himself *takes the counter position*. Emphasizing the daylight between the "ideal" offered by Hythloday in *Utopia* and Thomas More (both the author and character) gives insight into *Utopia* that has not been sufficiently recognized.

Taking seriously the objections of Morus prompts the question: what are the sources and nature of Morus' all-too-often overlooked objections to Hythloday's ideas and mode of life?

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[16] See, for example, Thomas I. White, "Pride and the Public Good: Thomas More's Use of Plato in *Utopia*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (October 1982), 329-354; George M. Logan, *The Meaning of More's "Utopia"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); and Colin Starnes, *The New Republic: A Commentary on Book 1 of More's* Utopia *Showing its Relation to Plato's* Republic (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990).

More is known to have lectured on *City of God* early in his career. Though the content of the lectures is now lost, he is reported in Thomas Stapleton's 1588 biography to have lectured on the historical and philosophical aspects of the work, as opposed to the theological.[17] More's later writings are frequently punctuated with references to Augustine, indicating that he continued to study the Latin Father closely, and viewed him as an important authority on matters philosophical and political as well as theological. In light of this, there have been repeated calls for a study of the relationship between *Utopia* and Augustinian political thought,[18] and several scholars have offered preliminary forays into the topic.[19] Moreover, Erasmus was less than enamored with St. Augustine, preferring Augustine's acerbic interlocutor St. Jerome.

While More shared the reforming vision of his friend Erasmus—his commitment to humanist scholarship, his belief in the need for a virtue-centered politics, his confidence that the *studia humanitatis* could help to reform both church and society—his Augustinian sensitivity to the limits of human nature and of political order led him to a very different idea of what was required to bring about reform, and what could be expected even under the best conditions. For

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[17] See Thomas Stapleton, *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*, from *Tres Thomae* (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1928), 7.

[18] See, for example, Edward Surtz' comment in the introductory essay to the Yale edition of *Utopia* that "A study of the influence of [Augustine's] *The City of God* is much to be desired." Edward Surtz, "Utopia as a Work of Literary Art," in *The Collected Works of St. Thomas More Volume 4: Utopia*, ed. Edward Surtz and J.H. Hexter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), cxxv-clxxxi, hereafter cited as CW4. See also Gerard Wegemer, "The *Utopia* of Thomas More: A Contemporary Battleground," *Modern Age* (Winter 1995), 139.

[19] See, for example, Istvan Bejczy, "More's Utopia: The City of God on Earth?," *Saeculum*, Vol. 46 (1995), 17-30; Gerard Wegemer, "The *City of God* in Thomas More's *Utopia*," *Renascence*, Vol. 44, Issue 2 (Winter 1992), 115-135; Richard Marius, "Augustinianism and Carnival in More's *Utopia*," *Moreana*, Vol. 35, No. 135-136 (December 1998), 135; Martin N. Raitiere, "More's *Utopia* and the *City of God*," *Studies in the Renaissance*, Vol. 20 (1973), 144-168; and Peter Iver Kaufman, *Incorrectly Political: Augustine and Thomas More* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

More's constrained vision of human nature, the inculcation of virtue in individuals requires them to be ensconced in institutions which guide and channel naturally disordered selves into something greater. This stands in sharp contrast to Erasmus' general disdain for institutions and his focus on the subjective disposition of the individual as the mark of true virtue. More, of course, recognized that institutions—political, social, and ecclesial—are themselves prone to corruption, because they are the product of flawed human beings, but he nevertheless viewed them as essential both because of the limited ability of fallen human nature to pursue virtue on its own, as well as the necessity that the interiority of persons be mediated through objective symbols for social and political order to exist.

Viewed this way, *Utopia* emerges as an imaginative picture of the Erasmian vision in action—and a critique, both implicit and explicit, of the Erasmian propensity toward optimism about human nature as well as the tendency to focus on the interiority of the individual over against the community. In short, I contend that *Utopia* presents, for consideration, reflection, and, ultimately, criticism, the kinds of institutions—and, perhaps more importantly, social controls—that would need to be devised in order to bring Erasmian humanism to life in a political community.

More was keenly aware of the problems of sixteenth century Europe—the exhaustion of its institutions and intellectual life, the corruption in its political and ecclesial establishment, the slackening social cohesion, the rising economic exploitation of the weak and poor—and he sought ways to improve them. But he was also keenly aware—through his close reading of Augustine, as well as his own observation of human folly—of the limits of improvement in a

fallen world, and the dangers of pride and hubris, to include the pride entailed in believing that humans beings can perfect themselves and their societies.

Outline of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the current state of the literature. The academic literature on *Utopia* is vast, and contradictory: there is little in the way of scholarly consensus about the meaning of More's *Utopia*. Yet, there are certain themes and even schools of interpretation that have emerged, particularly over the past century. This chapter turns a critical eye toward several of these themes by examining some of the key studies that have influenced interpretation since the revival of More studies in the 1930s, and concludes the literature review with a discussion of the thesis put forward in recent years by classicist and political theorist Guilia Sissa, who has argued that *Utopia* is best understood as a debate between More and Erasmus over moral and political philosophy. It concludes with a brief discussion of how this dissertation fits into the existing literature landscape, as an extension of Sissa's thesis and an examination of its implications for political theory.

Chapter 2 examines the background of Christian humanism, particularly as it emerged from the intellectual milieu of late scholasticism, and Erasmus' place in its development. It then utilizes Renaissance historian William Bouwsma's distinction between Stoic and Augustinian strands of Renaissance humanism to suggest that Erasmus and More, despite their close friendship, may be seen as representing these two dispositions, especially in their respective political theories. In particular, Erasmus' eclectic Stoic-tinged Epicurean Christian humanism gives him an individualistic virtue-centric theory of morality, which presents difficulty when

attempting to translate it into a genuinely social and political morality. This includes a reduced consideration of institutions as mediators between individuals which give structure to common life, and therefore insufficient attention to the institutional prerequisites for meaningful reform. On the other hand, More's Augustinian anthropology and social theory presents an alternative vision which is genuinely social, opens space for a political order that can be understood and assessed on its own terms, and which takes seriously the institutions which constrain and channel fallen human nature into a common life. *Utopia*, then, can be read as a discussion between friends about the political implications of Christian humanism for political life.

Chapter 3 provides a close reading of More's character "Morus" in *Utopia*, and suggests—following Sissa—that Morus' character should not only be taken to represent More's own views (at least to a considerable extent), but are in fact the key to understanding the political teaching of *Utopia*. Book I contains an extensive debate between Morus and Raphael Hythloday (as well as Peter Giles) over the duty of philosophers to contribute to the common good by joining the councils of kings, the role of philosophy in politics, and the relative merits of private property. This chapter argues that, through a close reading of Morus' character and his comments—which are much more substantial than has often been recognized—a very different picture of *Utopia* emerges: one in which the statesman Morus deftly spars with Hythloday, exposing the weaknesses in his position, particularly with regard to his understanding of the nature of politics. Hythloday (the "nonsense speaker") is supremely confident in his opinions, and can broach no resistance. But Morus, the experienced statesman, subtly shows how Hythloday's self-sufficient Stoic-Epicurean ethos (not unlike that of Erasmus) is not suited for political reform or the ordering of socio-political life, because it does not take seriously enough the nature of politics as

such, the difficulties presented by the intractable weakness and viciousness of human beings, or the need for institutions that allow individual efforts—and individual virtues—to be channeled into common projects. It concludes by suggesting that *Utopia* represents a thought experiment in which More attempts to extrapolate the institutional implications of Hythloday's (and Erasmus') moral philosophy, and that, following Augustine's argument that the nature of a political community can be ascertained by examining the objects of its love, we can understand, and judge, the nature of the Utopian republic.

Chapter 4 offers an examination of the question of private property in relation to *Utopia*. The question is central to *Utopia*, as it is the issue that leads Hythloday to his lengthy description of the Utopian commonwealth, and it is, in a certain sense, the defining characteristic of the community. Hence, the question of property is a way into Utopia and is revelatory of Utopia's organizing principles, both moral and religious. In Utopia there is no private property and all things are, at least in principle, public. Hythloday insists that this socio-economic arrangement is the path—and the only path—to a just political order. Morus disagrees, citing Aristotelian-Thomist arguments against both the practicability and the desirability of communism, to which Hythloday responds by citing the case of Utopia. Yet, even after Hythloday's description, Morus remains unconvinced, calling the arrangement of the Utopians "absurd". Despite its collectivism, the arrangement flows directly from the Utopians' individualist Stoic-Epicurean moral philosophy, functioning primarily as a means to securing psychological quietude, and as a mechanism to force together individuals who are otherwise radically atomized by their pleasure-seeking moral philosophy.

Chapter 5 examines the Utopian commonwealth with a particular focus on its moral philosophy as it relates to religion and politics. The moral philosophy of Utopia is a strange combination of Stoic and Epicurean ethics: pleasure-based but rooted in an assumption that virtue is the path to *true* pleasure. Moreover, like Stoics, but unlike Epicureans, the Utopians believe in both divine providence and the immortality of the soul, but these principles function primarily as counterweights to the negative consequences of the individualist and hedonistic moral philosophy on which the social order is founded. This speaks directly to certain debates that were being had in More's own time, but it also elicits the conditions of early Christianity in the Roman Empire, in which pagan ethics intertwined with each other and with the rapidly-spreading Christian religion, illustrated in St. Paul's debate with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers on Mars Hill in Acts 17. Though these pagan philosophies had become part of the culture of the Roman Empire—Stoicism in particular, which formed a basis for much Roman law—these philosophies were both born out of the decline of the Greek *polis* and were fundamentally individualistic, aimed at helping the individual cope with a world in which self-rule through political action had become all but impossible. Augustine's political theology directly addressed these philosophies, drawing on them while also critiquing their shortcomings, particularly their ultimate inability to fulfil their own aspirations to ground the natural human desire for friendship and social life. Viewed in this light, *Utopia* can be understood as More's demonstration that these moral philosophies to which his friend Erasmus was attracted were ultimately unable to provide a framework for the social and political renewal that was hoped for. Hence, More suggests, it was only through a reconsideration and return to the Augustinian framework—taking seriously the limitations inherent in human anthropology and their

implications for social and political life in a fallen world including the building and maintaining

of institutions—could Christendom hope to find renewal.

Chapter 1

Interpreting Utopia: The State of the Scholarship on Thomas More and *Utopia*

Since his 1935 canonization, scholarly interest in St. Thomas More has gradually, but markedly, increased. The three-decades-long project of editing and publishing More's Complete Works by Yale University Press—begun in 1963 and completed in 1997—made more readily available many of More's works that had long been passed over by scholars. This availability served to rekindle debates over the famous but little-read English humanist, particularly because the volumes each included interpretative introductions to the works of More that they contained by leading scholars in the field. While More had long been of interest to Catholics as a martyr for the Catholic Church—and had even received some recognition from nineteenth century Marxists for his supposed presaging of modern socialism[1]—scholarly interest in his thought was rare prior to the 1930s. Despite this lack of access to More's broad corpus of work, however, his most famous work *Utopia* (1516) has never been out of print since it was first published over 500 years ago, and has gained canonical status in the Western literary tradition. It is a work that remains highly elusive and, as will become evident, a wide range of interpretations have been applied to the work over the past century. Moreover, as will also become evident, very little interpretive work has been done from within the discipline of political theory: engagement with *Utopia* has largely been left to the fields of literature and intellectual history. This is an oversight: More's work is one of the more important and influential works of Renaissance political thought, despite its often having been overlooked or misunderstood.

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[1] See especially Karl Kautsky's 1888 monograph *Thomas More and His Utopia*.

This chapter will provide an overview of the major interpretive strains that have dominated the scholarship over the past century, selecting one or two of the most important representatives of each for examination. It will move in roughly chronological order, an organizing principle conveniently made possible by the fact that, over the past century, various interpretative trends have dominated scholarship, and then, in turn, have been overshadowed.

An Imperfect Ideal: R.W. Chambers and Edward Surtz

Angelo-Catholic literary scholar R.W. Chambers' highly influential 1935 biography of More[2] remains a standard in the field of Morean studies and its interpretation of *Utopia* became the paradigm for a generation. In fact, it is not too much to say every subsequent interpretation was forced to contend with it, either by adopting or rejecting it.[3] It therefore provides a useful starting point for discussion.

Utopia, Chambers argues, has often been misunderstood—he explicitly singles out nineteenth century radicals and twentieth century socialists[4]—because modern, rather than medieval, categories have been applied to it. Hence, his intention is to attempt to understand it as it would have been understood by More's contemporaries: "the first step to an appreciation of *Utopia* is to understand how it must have struck a scholar in the early Sixteenth Century."[5] In attempting to gain that perspective, Chambers proposes that "to a man educated in that century, the distinction

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[2] R.W. Chambers, *Thomas More* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935).

[3] Other interpretations in this vein include P. Albert Duhamel, "Medievalism of More's *Utopia*", *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (1955), 99-126 and H.W. Donner, *Introduction to Utopia* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1945).

[4] Chambers, *Thomas More*, 125.

[5] Ibid.

was obvious between virtues which might be taught by human reason alone, and the further virtues taught by Catholic orthodoxy."[6]

Chambers' thesis rests, then, on the Thomistic distinction between the Four Cardinal Virtues—justice, fortitude, temperance, and courage—and the Three Christian (Theological) Virtues—faith, hope, and charity.[7] Because of this, Chambers' thesis has been labeled the "Catholic" interpretation by some scholars.[8] For Chambers, Utopian society displays natural justice based on the cardinal virtues—the best that can be ascertained by reason alone, and the highest that can be achieved by natural virtue alone. Though *perfect* justice would require the addition of the theological virtues—which must be infused by grace—the cardinal virtues are nevertheless viewed as real and valid, providing the material on which grace can do its work. In this More follows medieval tradition, as well as Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*, but "above all, he makes his satire upon contemporary European abuses more pointed. The virtues of Heathen Utopia show up by contrast to the vices of Christian Europe. But the Four Cardinal Virtues are subsidiary to, not a substitute for, for Christian Virtues."[9] Hence, from the standpoint of the sixteenth century, Utopia cannot be an ideal in the absolute sense, not least because it is pagan. Yet, Erasmus had suggested that the intent of *Utopia* was to "show whence spring the evils of States, with special reference to the English state with which he was most familiar."[10] Hence, Chambers argues, "When a Sixteenth-Century Catholic depicts a pagan state founded on Reason and Philosophy, he is not depicting his ultimate ideal . . . The underlying thought of Utopia

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[6] Ibid., 126.
[7] See St. Thomas Aquinas' discussion of the virtues in *Summa Theologica* I-II Questions 61-62.
[8] See Quintin Skinner, "Review: More's Utopia," *Past & Present,* No. 38 (Dec. 1967), 157.
[9] Chambers, *Thomas More*, 127.
[10] Ibid., 128.

always is, *With nothing save Reason to guide them, the Utopians do this; and yet we Christian Englishmen, we Christian Europeans…"*[11] And finally he concludes, "[In depicting a pagan society as an ideal] More did not mean that Heathendom is better than Christianity . . . He meant that some Christians are worse than heathen."[12]

The strength of Chambers' interpretation is its capacity to explain why More may have written *Utopia*, a book which seems to promote a pagan society as a kind of ideal. Utopian society, though falling short of being an image of perfection in an absolute sense, nevertheless shows how professed Christian societies in Europe fail to live up even to the natural virtues, much less the theological virtues.

Fr. Edward Surtz, S.J.—recognized as one of the leading More scholars of the mid-century and one of the two editors for the 1965 Yale Complete Works edition of *Utopia*—followed in the path laid down by Chambers, and provided arguably the most complete articulation of this position in his twin studies of Utopia, both released in 1957, *Praise of Wisdom: A Commentary on the Religious and Moral Problems and Backgrounds of Thomas More's* Utopia and *The Praise of Pleasure: Philosophy, Education and Communism in Thomas More's* Utopia.[13] Together the pair of books comprise a surprisingly comprehensive overview of the content and meaning of *Utopia..* In *The Praise of Pleasure*, Surtz enumerates his principles of interpretation, which include the assuming that: "the author of *Utopia* writes as a *Catholic* to Catholics";

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Fr. Edward Surtz, S.J., *The Praise of Wisdom: A Commentary on the Religious and Moral Problems and Backgrounds of Thomas More's* Utopia (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1957) and *The Praise of Pleasure: Philosophy, Education, and Communism in Thomas More's* Utopia (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

"Thomas More appears in his Utopia . . . as a zealous Catholic *reformer*"; "the future martyr and saint reveals himself in his reforming book, in both content and style, as a *humanist*"; "Thomas More . . . has painted for Europe an *ideal commonwealth*"; "More's ideal state is based directly upon *reason alone*"; and "most important[ly], implicit in the depiction of More's ideal state is the *distinction between reason and faith*."[14]   In his *Praise of Wisdom*, Surtz is even more explicit in his endorsement of the Chambers thesis, saying

> More . . . describes a philosophical city in order to bring Christians back to their religious principles. He plans to have Utopia culture represent the stage of civilization capable of being achieved solely by the aid of philosophy or reason, but he intends to have this thought run though every passage: If reason alone can reach such heights of morality and happiness, what shame and confusion should fill the hearts of Christian who, in spite of their countless treasures of the revelation and grace of Christ, fall far below Utopian standards of conduct! In brief, insofar as More directly builds his ideal commonwealth upon reason, he is a philosopher; insofar as he directs his admonitions, implicitly but none the less pointedly, to the reputed followers of Christ, he is a Christian teacher.[15]

In these passages, we can clearly see Surtz's indebtedness to Chambers and the "Catholic" interpretation of *Utopia.* This interpretation dominated scholarly consensus for thirty years, until the publication of Yale's *Complete Works of Thomas More Volume 4: Utopia* in 1965.

A Humanist Ideal: J.H. Hexter

In his influential introduction to the 1965 Yale edition of *Utopia* J.H. Hexter offered a lengthy interpretive essay which, though agreeing with Chambers that *Utopia* constitutes a satirical critique of a corrupt European society, differs from Chambers in arguing that *Utopia*, rather than being a description of a virtuous pagan society, is actually intended to be understood as a

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[14] Surtz, *The Praise of Pleasure*, 2-5.
[15] Surtz, *The Praise of Wisdom*, 7.

description of an *ideal Christian society*. Hexter maintains that Chambers' distinction between the Cardinal Virtues and the Christian Virtues does not, in fact, appear in *Utopia* itself, and "one vainly seeks any such distinctions" within the text.[16] The real meaning, he insists, is to be found in an examination of the historical milieu, and particularly the cultural movement known as Christian humanism, which relentlessly pursued the question of what it means to be a *true* Christian. Rather than viewing Utopia as society built on pagan (and hence imperfect) virtue, Hexter argues that for Erasmus, More, and the other Christian humanists, "To be a Christian was not first and foremost to assent to a creed, or to participate in a particular routine of pious observances; it was to *do* as a Christian; to be a Christian was a way of life."[17] And, therefore, because their political arrangements cause them to live as true Christians should—as "a single family" with all things in common—More means to suggest that it is the Utopians who should be viewed as the true Christians, and the Europeans, who profess Christ with their words but deny Him with their actions, are the true pagans. Hence, Hexter concludes, *Utopia* is *not* a last grasp at reviving the Catholic Middle Ages, but rather exists "on the margins of modernity"[18] presaging both the religious radicalism contained in Reformation's rejection of sacraments and other rituals of Catholic Christianity, as well as the political radicalism of the Enlightenment *philosophes* and eighteenth and nineteenth century utilitarians.[19]

Hexter's interpretation gained some influential followers, with Cambridge historian of political thought Quinten Skinner hailing it as "immediately compelling" and proclaiming that it

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[16] CW 4, lxvii.
[17] Ibid., lxx, emphasis original.
[18] Ibid., cxv.
[19] Ibid., cxvi-cxxiv

"gives the lie direct to the whole 'Catholic' interpretation."[20] Yet, despite their differences, both the Chambers and the Hexter interpretations shared one thing in common: they both considered Utopia to be, in some sense, an ideal society. At the same time, however, another strand of scholarship was developing, which challenged the assumption that it was to be understood as any kind of ideal at all.

Dystopian Utopia: Richard Sylvester and Harry Berger

Richard Sylvester's 1968 article "'Si Hythlodaeo Credimus': Vision and Revision in Thomas More's 'Utopia,'"[21] challenges the standard interpretation of *Utopia* as an image of an ideal republic, suggesting that beneath the surface of the Utopian idyll, there may be a dark undercurrent. Sylvester first points to the irony contained in both shortened title *Utopia* which, along with many of the other pseudo-Greek names contained in the work, indicate non-existence, "deny[ing even] as they affirm."[22] The full title as well—which he translates literally as "Concerning the best state of a commonwealth and concerning the new island, Utopia; a truly golden little book, no less beneficial than entertaining, by the distinguished and eloquent author Thomas More, citizen and sheriff of the famous city of London"[23]—also "carefully sets up a tight dichotomy"[24] between the "best state of a commonwealth" and "new island of Utopia,"

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[20] Quintin Skinner, "Review: More's *Utopia*," *Past & Present,* No. 38 (Dec. 1967), 157.

[21] *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester and Germain Marc'hadour (Hamden, CT., Archon Books, 1977), 290-301. Originally published in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Fall 1968), 272-289. References are to *Essential Articles*.

[22] Ibid., 291.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

though less careful readers tend to merge the two, simply assuming that the island of Utopia is the best state of the commonwealth. Hence, he suggests, "we will do best . . . if we view the title-page of *Utopia* as posing a question rather than offering a solution to an age-old problem. Is the best state of a commonwealth, More seems to ask, to be identified with a totally new society?"[25]

Drawing particular attention to the character of Raphael Hythloday, the mysterious interlocutor in More's dialogue (and using his Latin name) he notes that "Hythlodaeus presents himself as a grand humanitarian, one who has the fullest interests of the common man constantly before his eyes."[26] The social doctrines Hythloday illustrates in his arguments—the greatest good for the greatest number as measured by pleasure and "from each according to his talents, to each according to his needs"—appear as ancestors to later radical social theorists Jeremy Bentham and Karl Marx, and moreover, his analysis of the social problems of the 1516 is "cogently convincing".[27] He is a "man of ideas, passionately committed to what he believes in" which "draws us to him".[28] Yet, Sylvester notices, More's character and that of Hythloday do not disagree about ends: "Neither of them believes that the brutal English penal system should be maintained; both of them sympathize wholeheartedly with the poor and downtrodden; each admits that it is a very difficult thing to offer wise advice to kings who are bend on self-aggrandizement and selfish exploitation."[29]

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[25] Ibid., 292.
[26] Ibid., 296.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 295.

And yet, when the character of Hythloday is examined closely, another picture begins to emerge. The first clue, Sylvester suggests, is his name. Like other names in *Utopia*, it displays a certain ambiguity, with his first name, Raphael, indicating "healer of God" while his last name is derived from the Greek meaning "well-learned in nonsense".[30] Unable to take criticism from an interlocutor, Raphael is "a man obsessed with his own insights" who has "deliberately severed himself from both public and private obligations."[31] He is "both uprooted himself and an uprooter of others" and hence it is difficult to trust his insights about the best ways for humans to live together, namely with regard to the reformation of political order.[32] Once the dubious nature of Hythloday is recognized, it becomes easier to recognize the flaws in Utopia itself—flaws which Sylvester notes do not need elaboration, because "so many of them have become grim reality in our own century." These include Utopians' brutal drive to dominate other lands and to eradicate a race of people that they deem unworthy of life, as well as the elevation of the institutions of the system over the individuals that live under it.'[33] Yet, Hythloday fails to notice the defects of the regime, and as his tale unfolds, "he becomes less and less concerned with possible alternatives to Utopian practices."[34] Still, Hythloday is not a Utopian in the final analysis, because "the one thing a utopia citizen can never imagine is a better world than their own."[35]

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[30] Ibid., 296.
[31] Ibid., 297.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 299-300.
[34] Ibid, 300.
[35] Ibid.

In the end, *Utopia* is, for Sylvester, a kind of satire,[36] designed as "a plea for both engagement and detachment" and "if it does nothing else, it does affirm that the source of evils may well be the source of blessings. But in order to realize this fully we must be willing, at least temporarily, to appreciate how nowhere can be somewhere."[37]

Harry Berger, Jr. offers interpretations of *Utopia* in two essays, both contained in his 1988 volume *Second World and Green World: Studies in Renaissance Fiction-Making*.[38] In the first, "The Renaissance Imagination: Second World and Green World" he takes up *Utopia* as an example of the "second world/green world" dichotomy that he sees punctuating Renaissance literature. Making his debt to Sylvester explicit, he notes that "Criticism of *Utopia* has in the main recognized the ambiguities in More's presentation of Hythloday but has tended to overstress the positive side, namely, that More places many of his own ideals in Hythloday's mouth. Yet as Sylvester has pointed out, if they agree about *ends*, the important issue is *means,* and here More differs radically from Hythloday on both esthetic and moral, pleasurable and profitable, grounds."[39] He argues that, read closely, one notes subtle criticisms within the text of both Hythloday, as well as Utopia: "The very self-enclosed spatiality of Hythloday's green world is a criticism; it is womblike retreat from the outside world"; it is a "triumph of human art, an ideal system . . . totally unified and homogenous, purged of that variety—more difficult to

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[36] For an analysis of *Utopia* in the same "dystopian" vein that highlight the influence of the ancient satirist Lucian of Samosata, see T.S. Dorsch, "Sir Thomas More and Lucian: An Interpretation of Utopia," *Archiv für das Studium der Neuen Sprachen und Literaturen* Vol. 203, No. 5 (1967), 345-363..

[37] Sylvester, "Si Hythlodaeo Credimus," 301.

[38] Harry Berger, Jr., *Second World and Green World: Studies in Renaissance Fiction-Making* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

[39] Ibid., 27.

control—which springs from accidents of history and differences in individual perspective."[40]

Yet, it is not until the second half of Hythloday's descriptive monologue that "the questionable aspects of Utopia emerge into full view."[41] Hence, "More has so shaped Hythloday's account as first to draw us into Utopia, then to push us away from it."[42] For, "It appears first as exemplary or appealing and lures us away from the evil or confusion of everyday life. But when it has fulfilled its moral, esthetic, social, cognitive, or experimental functions, it becomes inadequate and its creator [More] turns us out. Those who wish to reman, who cannot or will not be discharged, are presented as in some way deficient."[43] Ultimately, "In its positive aspects it provides a temporary haven for recreation or clarification, experiment or relief; in its negative aspects it projects the urge of the paralyzed will to give up, escape, work magic, abolish time and flux and the intrusive reality of other minds."[44]

The essay "Utopian Folly: Erasmus and More on the Perils of Misanthropy"[45] (first published in 1982) continues this interpretation of *Utopia*, setting it this time in the context of Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*. For Berger, *Utopia* is a critique of misanthropy of the sort exemplified by Anaxagoras, as depicted in Plato's dialogues,[46] which demands perfections and, once disappointed by human beings as they are found in the actual world, resigns from all participation in it and satisfies itself to critique it from afar. In short, it "has given up hope that human beings can be trusted to solve their problems through the ordinary informal activity of

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[40] Ibid, 30.
[41] Ibid., 33.
[42] Ibid., 34.
[43] Ibid., 36.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid., 229-248.
[46] Berger notes mentions of Anaxagoras in *Greater Hippias*, *Cratylus*, *Phaedrus*, and *Phaedo*.

self-regulation and self-criticism, persuasion and argument, cooperation and compromise," and hence, the "means of order must be alienated from their separate wills and securely vested in the mechanisms of a coercive or cooperative system."[47] And yet, it is complicated by the fact that "utopia misanthropy is self-fulfilling: it creates the condition it contemns"[48] because its contempt for humans leads it to undermine the institutions—especially the family—in which the capacity for those informal activities are inculcated.[49] Finally, Utopia's "system of institutional reforms" aimed at social control, "routinizes, and thus preserves, the underlying distrust and disgust that mark the Utopians' hatred of life. It is a monument to their sense that their desire for pleasure is as powerful as it is base; that it is the foe of love, amity, and community; that it cherishes its narcissistic secrecy and encourages the paranoia of apprehension."[50]

Sylvester and Berger, then, provide a compelling look at the dark underside of Utopia, both the character of Hythloday its promoter and the character of the regime itself.

A Critique of Humanism: Fenlon and Skinner

In the 1970s some scholars began observing that *Utopia* can be read as critique of the idealism of humanism itself. D.B. Fenlon's 1975 article "England and Europe: Utopia and its Aftermath"[51] develops this line of interpretation: "Utopia is an imaginary projection into civic life of the virtues of the monastery and the well-ordered family."[52] Utopia is not a Christian

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[47] Berger, *Second World and Green World*, 237.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., 240.
[50] Ibid., 248.
[51] D.B. Fenlon, "England and Europe: Utopia and its Aftermath," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 25 (1975), 115-135.
[52] Ibid.

society, but taking a cue from Chambers, et al, Fenlon argues that Utopia represents "the best

form of society imaginable without Christian revelation," thereby "using the virtues of a non-

Christian society to make a point about the vices of a nominally Christian one."[53] Utopia, in

other words, more closely (though, contra Hexter, certainly not perfectly) resembles a society

based on the principles of the *philosophia Christi* as articulated by Erasmus than does the

ostensibly Christian kingdoms of sixteenth century Europe. Yet for Fenlon, *Utopia* in fact

constitutes a satirical critique of his fellow humanists, especially Budé and Erasmus, in that it

suggests that such a society might only exist *nunsquam*,[54] or nowhere:

> In publishing *Utopia* More not only called into question the feasibility of extending his own
> principles into the field of politics; he also called into question the possibility of anybody
> else doing so. The publication of *Utopia* in 1516 marks the abandonment, by one of the
> leading Christian humanists, of any firm confidence that the *philosophia Christi* could be
> invested with political or social content.[55]

If his ideal society was rooted in the monastic or domestic principle, he wrote *Utopia* to

demonstrate that it was not possible to translate them into actual public life: the appearance of

Utopia "signalized the political frailty of the Christian humanist aspiration to a godly society."[56]

The basic reason for this, Fenlon argues, is that More understood that, while Erasmus and his

circle maybe have had the best intentions, they failed to understand the "intractability of [the]

institutions" with which they were contending, including both governments and the institutional

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[53] Ibid., 124.

[54] According to letters More sent to in arranging for publication Erasmus, More seems to have originally referred to the work as *Nunsquama*. It is not known why More changed the name to *Utopia*, but some have suggested that Erasmus that it may have been Erasmus' idea. See CW 4, xv-xvi.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid., 125.

Church.[57] Ultimately, for Fenlon, *Utopia* is a kind of lamenting admission that Christianity and the world of politics may ultimately be incompatible in any serious way.

Quinten Skinner's treatment of More's *Utopia* in his highly influential 1978 *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* agrees that *Utopia* constitutes a critique by More of his fellow humanists. For Skinner, however, *Utopia* seeks not to show his fellow humanists that their political project is bound for "nowhere" as per Fenlon, but instead that *Utopia* is intended to help them understand the truly radical implications of their own assumptions. In this sense, it "embodies by far the most radical critique of humanism written by a humanist."[58] For Skinner, More shares with other humanists the idea that "one of the urgent tasks of social theory is to discover the root causes of injustice and poverty," but his uniqueness amongst humanists lies in the fact that he "he follows out the implications of this discovery with rigor unmatched by his contemporaries."[59] His description of the Utopian commonwealth in Book II "must be taken to be offering a soliton—the only possible solution—to the social evils he has already outlined in Book I," which means that "in giving Utopia the title of 'the best state of a commonwealth', he must have meant exactly what he said."[60]

Skinner expands and, in some ways, alters his view in a 1987 essay entitled "Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*".[61] He explicitly distances himself from Hexter's interpretation, which he had

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[57] Ibid., 129.
[58] Quentin Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought Vol. 1: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 256.
[59] Ibid., 261-262.
[60] Ibid., 262.
[61] Quentin Skinner, "Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*," in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 123-157. A slightly revised version of this essay also appears in Skinner's *Visions of Politics Vol. II: Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 213-244.

earlier praised, in two specific ways. First, he rejects Hexter's idea that Utopia can be

understood as a perfect Christian commonwealth. By pointing to certain limitations of Utopian

morality and religion which are explicitly acknowledged in the text, Skinner argues, that "More's

concern, as his title page tells us, is purely and simply with the best state of a commonwealth in

itself."[62] It was *not*, contra Hexter, to depict a perfectly Christian commonwealth. Indeed,

though Hythloday offers an encomium for Utopia *qua* political arrangements, he does indeed

distance himself from Utopian morality and religion at several crucial points. Their limitations

are the result of their lack of Christian revelation: "Basing themselves on reason alone, and

knowing nothing of God's purposes as disclosed in the Bible, 'they show themselves more

inclined than is right' to conclude that individual happiness must consist 'in leading as carefree

and joyful life as possible while helping others do the same'."[63] This leads them to permit things

that Christianity cannot, such as divorce and euthanasia. In these cases and others, "Their

reliance on reason alone, without the benefit of Christian revelation, leads them seriously

astray."[64] Yet, Skinner emphasizes, the fact that they have not achieved a perfectly Christian

morality does not mean that they have not found the best state of a commonwealth: "Reason and

revelation are indispensable for the first, but reason alone suffices for the second."[65] Second,

Skinner softens his agreement with Hexter's argument regarding the radicalism of *Utopia*.

Though, as we have seen, he maintains his earlier contention that More believed Utopia to

represent the "best state of a commonwealth," he qualifies that contention by focusing on the

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[62] Ibid., 148.
[63] Ibid., 150.
[64] Ibid., 151.
[65] Ibid., 152.

final words that More offers, expressing doubts the desirability and feasibility of Hythloday's

Utopian vision, especially the "absurdity" of the abolition of private property, as well as several

other of their customs. Here, Skinner concedes, More "acknowledges the impractibility of

seeking to abolish the institution of private property," though Unlike them . . . he implies that

such a realism is purchased at a high price," namely the price of "clos[ing] off one of the

means—perhaps even, Hythloday insists, 'the one and only means'—of bringing about the

optimus status reipublicae."[66]

A "Best-Commonwealth" Exercise: Logan

In his magisterial 1983 book *The Meaning of More's "Utopia"*[67] George M. Logan presents

an extended argument seeking to show that, not only is *Utopia* a serious contribution to political

theory, but it is specifically a work of political theory in the vein of the ancient Greek city-state

theorists Plato and Aristotle. The mark of this mode of theorizing, according to Logan, is the

question of the best commonwealth.[68] Hence by announcing in the title that its subject is "the

best state of the commonwealth" *Utopia* is associated with this tradition from the outset. The

city-state setting of these ancient Greeks heavily influenced their conception of what the best

commonwealth would look like, as is evidenced by the holistic nature of their method, and their

assumption that the most basic criterion of perfection is self-sufficiency.[69]

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[66] Ibid., 156.
[67] George M. Logan, *The Meaning of More's "Utopia"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
[68] Ibid., 131.
[69] Ibid., 87-89.

Utopia, in fact, represents a revival of this method, which was overtaken and displaced by Stoic and later Christian political thought (according to Logan, following Ernest Barker, St. Augustine's *City of God*, "represents a culmination of Stoic political thought[70]), both of which largely dispense with the exercise of attempting to define a single best commonwealth, in favor of "rules of conduct, for individuals and for polities".[71] To the extent that an ideal is present, it is "a rather amorphous image of the ideal cosmopolis."[72]

Logan contends that *Utopia* represents an attempt to fuse elements of the two dominant schools of political thought in the mid-Renaissance period: the scholastic and the humanist. Whereas scholastic thought, and Italian scholastic thought in particular, had historically emphasized the importance of institutions and "signified a genuine revival of city-state theory"[73] reflecting a Greek influence as derived especially from Aristotle, humanist thought tended to reflect the influence of the Roman Stoic tradition, especially as represented in Cicero and Seneca, which emphasized the importance of individual virtue and the virtue of the ruler in particular. In attempting to fuse the two schools of thought, More shows the strengths and weakness of both. Logan points out that, as is evident from Book I, the issues that More intends to address include important questions regarding the proper method of doing political philosophy and political science;[74] the philosophical issue of whether the active or philosophic life is best,

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[70] Ibid., 92.
[71] Ibid., 91.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 93.
[74] In particular, Logan argues—strikingly—that More has "a better claim to be called the creator of political science than Machiavelli, who is often accorded that title but is innocent of such conceptions [as the distinction between simple empiricism and the scientific method]" (Ibid., 105).

that is, whether the good citizen is or can be identical with a good man and whether the expedient can be something different from the just—an issue addressed by both the Greek and the Roman Stoic political philosophers;[75] and the question of whether true social justice requires the common ownership of property, an issue addressed by the original best-commonwealth exercises.[76]

The core of Logan's argument is that "More's Utopia construct embodies the results of a best-commonwealth exercise performed in strict accordance with Greek rules."[77] These rules, Logan contends, incorporate four steps: first, the theorist must determine in what the best life for an individual human being consists; second, based on that determination, the theorist must determine the "overall goal of the commonwealth and of the contributory goals the joint attainment of which will result in the attainment of the overall goal"; third, the theorist must elaborate "the required components of a self-sufficient polis"; and fourth, the theorist must "determine the particular form that each of these components should be given in order to assure that, collectively, they will constitute the best polis, that truly self-sufficient entity that achieves all of the contributory goals, and this the overall goal, of the polis."[78] Unlike Plato and Aristotle's versions (in the *Republic* and Book VII of the *Politics* respectively), however, More gives only the end result of the exercise; he does not offer the dialectics through which he arrived at his conclusions.[79] Moreover, he disguises these results in the form of a fictional travelogue.[80]

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[75] Ibid., 106-111.
[76] Ibid., 140.
[77] Ibid., 139.
[78] Ibid., 136.
[79] Ibid., 139.
[80] Ibid.

Nevertheless, the purpose of More's engaging in the best-commonwealth exercise is that such an exercise "offered a perfect way of exploring the questions raised in Book 1," namely, the questions of private property, and the "compatibility between the politically expedient and the imperatives of morality and religion."[81] More's purpose in writing, then, was to philosophically examine these questions using what he considered to be an improved methodology over that utilized by Plato and Aristotle, viz. a fictionalized model showing the best commonwealth in action, rather than an abstract dialectical discussion.[82]

As for the oft-discussed question of why More chose to make his "best commonwealth" pagan, Logan rejects both the Hexterian view that it was simply because the fiction that it was a New World civilization demanded it (Logan, in fact, calls this view "absurd"), as well as Chambers' view that it was designed to show a pagan society that was more just and better functioning (despite its flaws) based only on natural reason than those European Christian societies which had both reason and revelation to guide them.[83] Rather, he argues, More's intention was to examine "the liveliest question in early (pre-Reformation) sixteenth-century political thought" namely, "how far, in political life, is [moral and Christian] behavior advisable, or unadvisable, on purely prudential grounds?".[84] In a sense, then, Logan's interpretation is related to the Chambers thesis, in that it understands More to be intentionally bracketing what is known about morality—and thereby about justice—through revelation, in an attempt to discover what reason alone can ascertain, though it differs from Chambers in its assessment of the *reasons*

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[81] Ibid., 140.
[82] Ibid., 142.
[83] Ibid., 141n10.
[84] Ibid., 142.

for which More wrote. The purpose, according to Logan, is ultimately to present a philosophical

assessment of common problems of Renaissance humanist political thought, most prominently

the extent to which *moral* action is compatible with expedient *political* action, and secondarily,

whether the methods proposed were sufficient to the task at hand. In the process, Logan argues,

More demonstrates that, at least in theory, the moral and the expedient are, rightly understood,

always compatible, though the limits of politics can be observed in the fact that, even at a

theoretical level, legitimate ends can conflict. Given this, More "invents" political science,

which is necessary for the application of theory to practice, and for the prudential reconciliation

of competing (though legitimate) ends. In the final analysis, for Logan *Utopia* is not utopian, but

is a serious and sober philosophical work examining some of the most pressing and vexing

questions of political philosophy.

The Catholic Interpretation Reconsidered: Bradshaw

   Cambridge historian and Catholic priest Brenden Bradshaw's seminal 1981 article "More on

Utopia"[85] pushes back on the revisionism of Hexter and Skinner,[86] pleading for a reconsideration

of the "Catholic" interpretation of *Utopia* propounded by Chambers, et al. While Bradshaw

acknowledges the strength of these other modes of interpretation—particularly those of Hexter,

Fenlon, and Skinner—he nevertheless takes issue with each. "The debate about the meaning of

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[85] Brenden Bradshaw, "More on Utopia," *Historical Journal*, Vol. 24 (1981), 1-27.
[86] Skinner, in fact, would later revise his position in light of Bradshaw's argument. See Quentin
Skinner, "Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*," in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern
Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 123-157 and
Visions of Politics Vol. II: Renaissance Virtues (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002),
213-244.

Utopia," Bradshaw observes, "comes down essentially to the question of what is to be made of Book II where the fictitious narrator, Raphael Hythloday, gives an account of the island of Utopia, which he claims to have discovered on his travels, and of the way of life of its inhabitants."[87] In short, is the description of Utopia intended as a "idyll" or an "ideal"? Those who view it as an idyll—the "mainstream" interpretation, per Bradshaw—see it as a "literary conceit designed to heighten the reader's perception of the real world . . . and in doing so to prick the conscience of Europe by pointing out the values by which it lived—self-interest, power, wealth—stood condemned even by the standards of virtuous pagans."[88] This is the Chambers thesis: that More intended to show a society of virtuous pagans which are far from perfect, but nevertheless surpass the virtues of the ostensibly Christian Europe. The second view, in Bradshaw's characterization, "rejected the consignment of Utopia to the realm of fantasy in order to claim More's work for what might be called the Old Testament canon of the literature of social revolution. The imaginative *tour de force* of Book II was taken to refer not to what might have been in a hypothetical world of perfect nature but what ought to be in the real one."[89] As such, "its purpose was to show how existing society must be organized in order to accord with the norms of social justice," and therefore "provided both a radical challenge to the existing order and a blueprint for revolutionary change."[90] This interpretation implies that Utopian society, rather than being a pagan society that falls short of the ultimate ideal, is rather a *truly*

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[87] Bradshaw, "More on Utopia," 2.
[88] Ibid., 2-3.
[89] Ibid., 3.
[90] Ibid.

Christian society, for on this interpretation Christianity is found, not in its liturgy or sacraments or even the scriptures, but in the living out of virtue. In other words, "virtue is Christ".[91]

Bradshaw admits that the Hexter thesis seems plausible on its surface, but it begins to seem less compelling as its implications are contemplated: namely, that More and his humanist friends, including Erasmus, "could have contemplated a model of truly Christian living which had no place in it for the New Testament or for the historical figure of Jesus Christ".[92] Nothing could be further from the intention of More, Erasmus, and their circle, who were devout Christians, and intent on reconnecting Christianity to its sources in the Scriptures and the Church Fathers.[93] Understood in this context, "Utopia . . . must be taken for what the text tells us it is, a non-Christian community, organized in accordance with human values as perceived by the light if reason."[94]

If this is the case, the so-called Catholic interpretation must be revived, at least in part, if we are to understand why More may have engaged in the conceptualization of a society based purely on natural reason. Yet Bradshaw goes further: he connects this to the earlier debate over the relationship between grace and nature, and the Thomist principle "*gratia non tollit naturam sed perfecit*" ("grace does not destroy nature but perfects it").[95] This implies that grace can build upon the solid foundation granted by nature, rather than destroying and replacing nature entirely. Yet it was reframed "from the speculative sphere of ontology, with its categories of nature and

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[91] Ibid., 8.
[92] Ibid., 7.
[93] Ibid., 8.
[94] Ibid.
[95] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 1, Article 8, Reply to Objection 2.

grace, and posed it in terms of the existential relationship between religion and morality."[96] In so doing, More highlights the a paradox which is intended to expose the "inadequacy of the scholastic formula."[97] In particular, it poses the question: if grace perfects nature, why had medieval Christian Europe failed to achieve "any kind of perfection whatever"?[98] More's answer, according Bradshaw, is that Scholastic rationalism—which assumed that simply being presented with the truth would be sufficient to command assent and thereby to change behavior—had a mistaken understanding of how assent occurs. Subjectively speaking, the perception of truth must be proceeded by moral virtue, in the same way that the precondition to spirituality in religious practice is moral virtue.[99] The point of this, however, was not to promote an idea of "*sola virtute*" or to "push creed and cult to the periphery of the Christian life." Rather, "Its purpose was . . . to renew: to renew the Christian cult and Christian theology by reformulating the relationship between morality and religion."[100] In this sense, the function of *Utopia* is to apply this religious insight to the world of society and politics, and to probe the possibility of using this renewal to reform society as whole.

Yet, Bradshaw allows, Skinner is correct to suggest that *Utopia* presents a criticism of the hope that More's fellow humanists had regarding the possibilities for social reform and renewal through education, it also represents a rejection of the Platonist proposal of withdrawal. For More, "commitment to radical social transformation in the long term does not relieve the intellectual of the responsibility of striving to ameliorate the situation in the short term by

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[96] Bradshaw, "More on Utopia," 10.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., 13.
[100] Ibid.

engaging in pragmatic politics."[101] Bradshaw concludes that More's intention was to neither create idyll nor ideal. Rather, he intended to dramatize the tension that exists between these competing visions of political engagement: the idealist who completely rejects participation in all imperfect (and hence, all actually-existing) social and political orders, and the man of affairs engaged in practical politics who recognizes the shortcomings and seeks to make things as good as possible. *Utopia*, he notes, ends on a strikingly inconclusive note: "It is quite clear . . . from the way Utopia ends that, unlike [Plato's] *The Republic* [which appears to reach a definitive conclusion], the dialogue has not concluded: it has simply broken off."[102] This is important, because the inconclusiveness, and the intimation that the dialogue may continue hints that "the possibility of constructive social and political progress resides neither in the moral idealism of the intellectual alone nor in the sceptical [*sic*.] pragmatism of the politician, but in a constructive and continuing dialogue between the two."[103]

Augustinian *Utopia*: Wegemer and Kaufman

Gerard Wegemer's 1996 book *Thomas More on Statesmanship*[104] includes a substantial section on *Utopia*. There he argues that *Utopia* is best read as a dramatic depiction of "competing philosophies of life" and devotes a pair of chapters to examining the way that More illustrates both Ciceronian statesmanship and Augustinian realism therein. In the latter, he develops a comparative analysis of *Utopia* and *City of God*. Both works, he notes, address the

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[101] Ibid., 24.
[102] Ibid., 26.
[103] Ibid., 27.
[104] Gerard Wegemer, *Thomas More on Statesmanship* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press, 1996).

same question—which is also the same as that addressed by Plato and Cicero's account of the best republic—namely the best way of life for humans.[105] His argument proceeds primarily by showing an Augustinian subtext, developing a list of allusions in *Utopia* that seem to show the divergence between Augustine's account of political order and human life and that of Hythloday demonstrating a "playfully antagonistic stance which More constructs within the text of *Utopia* between" their respective views. [106] Interestingly, though Wegemer's reading is broadly influenced by the Catholic intellectual tradition, it largely rejects the "Catholic" interpretation, by effectively denying that Hythloday in any way represents More's authorial perspective, and, *pace* Chambers, et al, that the Utopian way of life as related and praised by Hythloday is in any way an ideal.[107] While Wegemer's scholarship provides a strong foundation for assessing the Christian—and, specifically, Augustinian—aspects of *Utopia*, its rejection of the idea that More intended it as an ideal of *any kind* strains credulity, or at least raises more questions than it answers.

More recently, Peter Iver Kaufman has offered an even more extended examination of the relationship between More and Augustine in his 2007 monograph *Incorrectly Political: Augustine and Thomas More.*[108] According to Kaufman, More's *Utopia* reflects a deeply Augustinian ambivalence toward politics. His conclusions are somewhat reserved in terms of his

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[105] Ibid., 131

[106] Ibid.

[107] Toward the end of the chapter, Wegemer allows that "many aspects of Raphael's ideal republic deserve praise and even implementation" but leaves the reader to guess which he might consider worthy (Ibid., 149). Moreover, there is no criterion offered by which the reader might even be able to guess—Wegemer's interpretive perspective leads to an assessment of the Utopian republic that is almost entirely negative.

[108] Peter Iver Kaufman, *Incorrectly Political: Augustine and Thomas More* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2007).

interpretation of *Utopia*, saying that in it More "led readers on a merry chase, and authorial intent remains beyond reach. The sturdy door that keeps it from us refuses to give, in part, because More made it hard to get traction for a determined shove."[109] Yet, he confidently asserts that, "*Utopia* was a repository for lessons More had already learned from having read St. Augustine's *City* [*of God*]" as well as in the political and legal culture of early sixteenth century London.[110] And, "like Augustine, [More] accepted that government was a part of God's saving work," but, "also agreeing with Augustine, he presumed that politicians' rare surges of selfless sentiment and good counsel could not save politics from itself".[111]

Kaufman, in a sense, reads *Utopia* as a critique of More's fellow humanists, but not in the way suggested by Skinner. Rather, he suggests, it is a critique of their optimism about the possibilities for reforming society through reason and education—including, and perhaps, especially, that of Erasmus himself. Yet, as the prefatory letters included in the early editions show, the humanists being critiqued nevertheless delighted in the work. He offers two suggestions. First, "More's *Utopia* concentrates on entrenched social practices—both those of European courtiers and those of the Utopians—to fret humanists for assuming that political clout could eventually be earned by moral exhortation."[112] In other words, *Utopia* means to criticize the naïve notion that some humanists seemed to hold suggesting that political reform was simply a matter of educating princes. Second, Kaufman suggests that "according to Utopia, the best virtuous, resourceful scholars could do was provide moral perspective on current political

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[109] Ibid., 161.
[110] Kaufman, *Politically Incorrect*, 7
[111] Ibid., 9.
[112] Ibid., 180.

practice. Outcomes were indeterminable. Imagining a better world was propaedeutic, not prescriptive."[113] Yet, it also suggests that indeterminable outcomes are not sufficient to relieve scholars from their duty to serve their political community and to try to make improvements where possible. In this sense *Utopia* aims, in an Augustinian mode, to temper the expectations of virtuous humanist councilors for substantial reform: there is a duty to participate politically, but "one must participate without illusions".[114]

Sissa: A Friendly Critique of Erasmus

   In recent years, a new thesis about the meaning of *Utopia* has been advanced, most prominently by classicist and political scientist Giulia Sissa. In a 2012 essay "Familaris reprehenio quasi errentis: Raphael Hythloday between Plato and Epicurus,"[115] Sissa argues forcefully that *Utopia* is best seen as a friendly critique of More's friend and collaborator Desiderius Erasmus. This is a thesis that, was we have seen, was suggested by Kauffman, but Sissa presents it directly, forcefully, and compellingly. She argues that Raphael Hythloday, rather than being a representative of some aspect of More's own beliefs is instead a kind parody of Erasmus. An evaluation of Erasmus' particular Christian humanism, she argues, shows that he held many of the beliefs that More ascribes to Hythloday and to the Utopians. These include, but are not limited to, the advocacy of the elimination of private property, the unattached cosmopolitan lifestyle of a wandering philosopher, the refusal become directly involved in the

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[113] Ibid., 181.
[114] Ibid., 182.
[115] Giulia Sissa, "Familaris reprehenio quasi errentis: Raphael Hythloday between Plato and Epicurus," *Moreana* Vol. 49, 187-188, 121-150.

politics of any existing political community, the detestation of war, and, perhaps most strikingly, the unusual and counterintuitive combination of Platonic and Epicurean ethics in conjunction with Christianity.

Sissa argues that More most likely composed *Utopia* as a response to Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly*, which was dedicated to More and was composed in More's house in 1509. In *Folly*, Erasmus presents a blistering critique of many of the institutions and personalities of late-medieval European culture. Philosophers and theologians, priests and monks, kings and princes, courtiers and statesmen—no one is spared from Erasmus' venom. By the time it was published in 1511, More was deeply involved in the politics of London, having been a member of Parliament beginning in 1504, and undersheriff of London beginning in 1510. Hence, seems plausible to suppose that More likely took the *Folly* as more than a satirical critique of late-medieval European society: he in all probability saw it as a gentle poke at his chosen profession.

Sissa suggests that More composed *Utopia*, at least in part, as a response of the *Folly*—and more specifically, as a veiled criticism of his friend's political idealism. She points to the differences between More and Erasmus' respective chosen modes of life: "[More] was an active political figure, involved in doing exactly what Erasmus hesitated to do."[116] And, as a political actor he was forced into compromises that Erasmus would have considered distasteful. Moreover, Erasmus' distinctive combination of Platonic and Epicurean ideas—the elimination of private property and the praise of virtue combined with a pleasure-based ethics—make up the precise combination represented in the moral philosophy of Utopia, the state which Hythloday praises as best.

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[116] Ibid., 135.

Sissa extends the thesis in a 2016 essay entitled "A Praise of Pain: Thomas More's Anti-Utopianism,"[117] There she develops two particular aspects of her original thesis, namely around the community of property and the place of pleasure in ethics. Whereas with regard to property, Erasmus tended toward commonality as the ideal state, More never came close to endorsing communism in any of his other words, and in fact he repeatedly and explicitly rejected it. In terms of ethics, while Erasmus promoted a "highly idiosyncratic, counterintuitive, paradoxical mixture of Platonic and Epicurean ideals,"[118] with elements of Stoicism and, of course Christianity, More instead praised the benefits of pain, particularly in his *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, written while he was imprisoned in the Tower of London. Hence, she contends once again that Hythloday is "not the caricature of a generic Erasmian humanist . . .but a playful incarnation of Erasmus himself."[119] The thesis is striking and provides a considerable amount of explanatory power, particularly with regard to the puzzling nature of the persistent objections by More's persona Morus to Hythloday's ideas. Sissa provides a common-sense reading of *Utopia* which answers many of the perplexities found in many of previous interpretations, and her interpretation also has the added benefit of opening the philosophical core of *Utopia* in a way that has evaded most previous interpreters, because it has rarely been considered as a genuine dialogue. Once we see that the character Morus closely reflects More's genuine opinions and can therefore be read in a straight-forward manner, the text takes on a strikingly different—and clearer—hue. Rather than an amorphous and enigmatic text with no

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[117] Giulia Sissa, "A Praise of Pain: Thomas More's Anti-Utopianism," in *Utopia 1516-2016: More's Eccentric Essay and its Activist Aftermath*, ed. Han van Ruler and Giulia Sissa (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 25-70.
[118] Ibid., 35.
[119] Ibid., 36.

obvious argumentative purpose, it becomes a highly purposeful exploration of the ideas that were being debated between Christian humanists at that time, aimed at encouraging philosophic reflection on both the strengths and weaknesses of the positions to which they were attracted, namely Platonism and Epicureanism.

The Place of this Dissertation in the Literature

Simply stated, this dissertation builds on Giulia Sissa's insight that *Utopia* should be read as a kind of challenge to, or critique of, More's friend Erasmus. Once we accept this claim, a world of possibilities opens. In this spirit, it will take the analysis offered by Sissa a level deeper, seeking to clarify and further substantiate it through close textual analysis, and layering an additional interpretative schema: that Erasmus' thought represents a blend of Platonism, Epicureanism, and *Stoicism*, and, especially, that More's challenge to Erasmus' revolves around the question of how to incorporate St. Augustine into their Christian humanism, particularly as it relates to politics. More and Erasmus were fairly eclectic thinkers who pulled influences from numerous places, pagan and Christian alike. But, I will argue that More can be seen as having a more Augustinian bent, in contrast with Erasmus' more Stoic leanings (even as he attempted to incorporate Epicureanism into his Christian humanism as well), and, I will argue, More sought to challenge Erasmus' Platonic-Stoic political idealism with Augustinian realism.

This division between Augustinian and Stoic humanisms was first suggested by William Bouwsma in his 1975 article "The Two Faces of Humanism: Stoicism and Augustinianism in Renaissance Thought." There Bouwsma argued that Renaissance humanism can be understood as having two competing "faces," with one side leaning toward a humanism grounded in a

synthesis of Stoic and Christian elements, and the other leaning more toward an Augustinian vision of the cosmos, human nature, morality, and political philosophy. This division, I will argue, is the animating debate in *Utopia*. In Book I, the Augustinian More, in his persona "Morus," debates Raphael Hythloday, a representation of the Platonic-Stoic Christian humanist, and in Book II, he relates Hythloday's description of the island of Utopia. Utopia is *not* Morus's ideal commonwealth, but rather More's imaginative depiction of the best society according to Platonic-Stoic Christian humanist—that is, Erasmian—vision. More offers the vision for consideration, with the intent of showing how, when applied in "reality," the political idealism of Erasmus requires an unusual amount of coercion, along with other undesirable conditions. This results, I will argue, from the fact that the Utopian commonwealth is fundamentally premised on moral philosophies are, at their root, individualistic—namely Epicureanism and Stoicism. Hence, it has no intrinsic principle of association—it effectively denies the natural sociability of humans in favor of hedonistic/rationalistic individualism. More, therefore, presents an image of a pagan society in which everything is public and all things are common, but which lacks, at its core, a principle of commonality. The Augustinian alternative, which is subtly suggested by Morus, takes a more restrained view of the possibilities of political order for attaining true justice on earth. Yet, its reframing of the classical tradition provides an alternative vision which offers to complete what the classical vision could only aspire to: a truly just society united in a shared love of God, the true Good and highest end of every human person.

In his imaginative construction of a political community based on the most rational principles available to the classical mind, More presents his fellow humanists with an image of both the possibilities and the limitations of the classical tradition which they were laboring to recover. In

so doing, he encourages them to engage in reflective exercise designed to utilize humanistic

methods to philosophically and psychagogically lead them toward a genuinely Christian vision

of political order.

Chapter 2
Erasmus, More, and the Politics of Christian Humanism

Utopia is, unquestionably, a product of Renaissance humanism. More precisely, it is a product of the Northern renaissance, which was and remains most closely identified with Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam. Thus, a reassessment of *Utopia* must begin with an account of Christian humanism and its relationship to social and political order.

Erasmus, the "Prince of the Humanists" and "the most illustrious champion of the liberal arts north of the Alps," was the most famous proponent of humanism in his time.[1] By the time Thomas More met Erasmus in 1499, Erasmus was well on his way to becoming the emblem of the Renaissance recovery of the *studia humanitatis*. Humanism—as it came to be called in the nineteenth century—entailed the study of the classical humanities (*studia humanitatis*): grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy.[2] It involved, especially, a return to classical sources, through the use of specific scholarly methods, aimed at affecting religious and social reform. Humanist scholarship had its origin in fourteenth and fifteenth century Italy, and was subsequently diffused across Europe both by Italian scholars taking up residence at universities at various locales across the continent, and by scholars visiting Italy and returning with new ideas and methods.[3] Erasmus' particular brand of humanism is sometimes called

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[1] John Guy, *Thomas More: A Very Brief History* (London: SPCK, 2017), 5.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Thomas More as a Renaissance Humanist," *Moreana*, Vol. 17, No. 65-66, Issue 1-2 (1980), 5.

"Christian humanism" for its characteristic focus on utilizing humanist methods to affect a renewal of Christianity—both in its religious and social meaning—by returning *ad fontes*.[4]

Influenced by Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* and the *devotio moderna*—a popular movement which advocated for a Christianity that emphasized individual piety over external rituals—Erasmus came to believe that any reform of the Church had to begin by the reform of the piety and morals of each individual. He became frustrated with what he saw as the inability of late-medieval scholasticism to effect this reform given its tendency toward disputations over arcane topics in highly technical language. Erasmus believed that the antidote to the scholastic deformations lay in a return to the ancient sources from which Western thought and Christianity sprang. Erasmus immersed himself in ancient pagan moral philosophy and literature as well as the scriptures and the Church fathers, considering them to be the cornerstone of a proper liberal education. He also labored to perfect his Latin style, as well as to master ancient Greek, believing the latter to be the key to both the most important of the classical works as well as the New Testament. Ultimately, Erasmus sought a synthesis between Christian and pagan thought, though his drive to emphasize the continuity at times caused him to elide over important differences between them.[5]

Erasmus visited England numerous times beginning in 1499, during which he was introduced to many of the leading lights of English humanism, including Thomas More and John Colet. Colet was an English priest and proponent of humanism (as well as friend and spiritual advisor to

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[4] See Charles G. Nauert, "Rethinking 'Christian Humanism,'" in *Interpretations of Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Angelo Mazzocco (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 155-180.
[5] See Fritz Caspari, "Erasmus on the Social Functions of Christian Humanism," *Journal of the History of Ideas,* Vol. 8, No. 1 (January 1947), 78-106.

Thomas More) who had learned Greek studying in Italy with the Florentine Platonists.[6] Colet's

most famous contribution to English humanism was his 1496 lectures at Oxford on St. Paul's

epistles,[7] often considered a "milestone in the history of Christian scholarship"[8] due to their fresh

and original approach of reading these scriptures in a "personal, moral, and religious" way rather

than in the "dogmatic and theological" tendency of Medieval commentaries.[9] In short, the

lectures were "directed toward both theological reform and religious revival."[10]

After meeting Colet at Oxford, Erasmus determined to join Colet's efforts to "restore the true

theology of the ancient Church—the *vetus ac vera theologia*, as he called it."[11] In England,

under the influence of Colet and others, "The forces of humanism work[ed] for the sake of

religion . . . The humanist watchword *ad fontes* [was] applied primary to further the discovery

and interpretation of the sources of Christianity."[12] In this sense, the basic project of this English

humanism was the recovery of the Bible, "to effect a reformation and revival of life."[13] Colet

therefore encouraged Erasmus' belief that "the true student of divinity should hold strictly to the

Gospel and the Apostle's Creed and leave all dogmatic questions to the fruitless strife of [the

scholastic] theologians."[14]

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[6] John Olin, *Catholic Reform: From Cardinal Ximenes to the Council of Trent 1495-1563* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), 6-7.
[7] Ibid., 7.
[8] E. Harris Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of the Reformation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 58.
[9] Ibid., 60.
[10] Olin, *Catholic Reform*, 7.
[11] Ibid., 8.
[12] Ernst Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, trans. James P. Pettegrove (Edinburgh: Nelson Publishers, 1953), 12.
[13] Ibid., 13.
[14] Ibid., 17.

Scholasticism

Scholasticism, the signature philosophical edifice of the Middle Ages, encompassed a wide range of thinkers across Europe. As with any wide-ranging and long-lasting philosophical movement, it is not easily defined. As its moniker indicates, it was the dominant philosophy of the European schools, and particularly in northern Europe between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. Its methods, however, predated the rise of the great Medieval universities from which it received its name.[15] Scholastic method was developed during the twelfth century in conjunction with the rise of new forms political order. Its signature methods began primarily for the purpose of "elaborating systems of law and administration," which required "a new kind of official, trained in the application of written authorities in methods of dispute and resolution."[16]

Because the primary authorities utilized in the newly-emerging political forms were ancient Roman jurisprudence and the moral teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, a certain tension existed between some of the recognized authorities. Scholastic method was essentially a highly technical synthesis of these sources, utilizing the methods found in Aristotle's logic. As James Hankins explains, "The reorganization of traditional authorities into legal codes and textbooks, combined with the logical technique of reconciling apparently incompatible authorities with each other, was at the heart of the new scholastic method."[17] This synthesis relied on the posing of propositions for debate. Hence, "[d]ebate . . . was central to scholastic method: students were

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[15] James Hankins, "Humanism, Scholasticism, and Renaissance Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 33.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.

taught to identify significant problems and find solutions to them that could resist refutation and bear up under the weight of critical scrutiny."[18] In short, the aim was to derive "'harmony from dissonance': to use the disparate authorities inherited from the past as a normative foundation for the systematic sciences of law, theology, and medicine. These sciences could then be used to bring order to state and society."[19]

Humanist critiques of scholasticism were not new by the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. Petrarch, considered by many to be the "father of humanism" had harshly criticized Aristotelian scholasticism as early as the mid-fourteenth century. He had argued that, despite the slavish devotion to Aristotle by many of the scholastics, Aristotle, though a great thinker, was mistaken on many points. Hence, the insistence on following Aristotle on every point not only put these thinkers in error on those points where Aristotle erred, but also entailed a risk of taking on board (or at least accepting as the necessary conclusions of reason) many doctrines that were incompatible with Christianity. Two of these—the immortality of the soul and the eternity of the world—would be the subject of intense debate during the fifteenth century.[20] Petrarch's intent in issuing these critiques was not to argue that some other philosopher (such as Plato, for example) should instead be taken as the sole guide, but rather that, philosophers, no matter how brilliant, are human and prone to error. Therefore no philosopher should be taken as *the* single authority. For Petrarch, "[s]ince philosophy cannot be trusted as a source of truth, there is no point in elaborating systems of thought, no point in seeking a single, coherent philosophical position."[21]

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[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., 41.
[21] Ibid.

To be sure, philosophy can be useful, and can even inspire people to seek wisdom and truth. For example, St. Augustine describes having been inspired by his reading of Plato and the neo-Platonists to seek out Christianity.[22] Nevertheless, the danger Petrarch identifies in the methods of some scholastic philosophers is the myopic insistence that some philosophic authority *must* be unquestioningly adhered to. This disposition, Petrarch believed, results in ignoring sources wisdom outside of the preferred authority, and is ultimately rendered absurd by the manifest errors present in the writings of *all* philosophers.[23]

Petrarch's second critique is rooted in his disdain for what he takes to be the lack of care scholastic philosophy paid to the inculcation of virtue in ordinary people. Scholastic treatises on ethics tended to be jargon-laden and highly technical discussions directed at other scholars, not moral instruction intended to broad consumption. This was due to the emphasis that scholasticism tended to put on the function of the *intellectual* aspect moral development, as opposed to the role of the *will*. For Petrarch, the intellect can determine what actions virtue commends, but it is powerless to induce right action. Right action requires formation of the will toward rightly ordered loves. He summarizes his position—and his dissatisfaction with Aristotle on this point—in his polemic *On His Ignorance and That of Many Others*:

> For it is one thing to know and another to love; one thing to understand, and another to will. I don't deny that [Aristotle] teaches us the nature of virtue. But, reading him offers us none of those exhortations, or only a very few, that goad and inflame our minds to love virtue, and hate vice . . . What good is there in knowing what virtue is, if this knowledge doesn't make us love it? What point is there in knowing vice, if this knowledge doesn't make us shun it? By heaven, if the will is corrupt, and ide and irresolute mind will take the wrong path when it discovers the difficulty of the virtues and the alluring ease of the vices.[24]

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[22] See, for example, St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VII, Chapter IX.

[23] Hankins, "Humanism, Scholasticism, and Renaissance Philosophy," 41.

[24] Quoted in ibid., 43.

In short, Petrarch sought a reform of scholarship in a direction that he believed would be less credulous to any single philosophical authority—open to a broader range of authorities from which wisdom might be gleaned—while at the same time being more likely induce virtuous actions through the training of the will, through the study of literature and self-reflection. The Petrarchian focus on the interiority of the person for the development of virtue would profoundly influence Erasmus' efforts to reform faith and morals through the revival of *bonae litterae*.

   The second major critique of scholasticism came nearly a century later from the pen of Italian scholar Lorenzo Valla. Valla's critique consisted largely in a critique of language—namely the highly technical and decidedly un-classical Latin utilized by scholastic disputations. His analysis of Latin would have a direct influence on Erasmus, who, in his 1511 treatise *De Ratione Studii* recommends Valla for the purposes of proper reading of classical authors for "vocabulary, ornament, and style".[25] Though Valla's critique was presented primarily in terms of an aesthetic critique of the medieval Latin of the scholastics it nevertheless "carried a serious philosophical message," including a theory of culture, as well as major implications for metaphysics and ontology.[26]

   There are two aspects to Valla's theory of culture and its relationship to language. First, he historicizes language within culture: language, he believes, is the *sine qua non* of culture; it is an expression of the culture from which is springs, and to which it gives voice. Hence, he insists on

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[25] Christopher S. Celenza, *The Intellectual World of the Italian Renaissance*: *Language, Philosophy, and the Search for Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 225.
[26] See Lodi Nauta, "Lorenzo Valla and the Rise of Humanist Dialectic," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 195.

recovering the ancient Latin of the Romans, and of Cicero and Quintilian in particular.[27] In so doing, he tacitly makes a normative point: that later innovations in Latin, including and especially the innovations contained in the Latin of the scholastics, are illegitimate and should be rejected.[28] Second, Latin was the language which had long been the means for the development of the sciences and the arts, for as the Roman empire had spread, it had come to be the common language which united numerous nations and regions. Indeed, it continued in this role through the middle ages and the Renaissance as the language of philosophy, science, and theology. Hence, "Valla holds Latin to be the vehicle of cultural growth, and the great motor behind the development of arts, sciences, the legal system, and wisdom in general."[29] There is, to be sure, a certain tension between these two conceptions of the Latin language—on one hand, it exists as a bounded and contingent cultural artifact, and on the other hand, it exists as a universalizing force for trans-cultural development. But be that as it may, these two notions nevertheless served as a powerful impetus for the broader humanist program.[30]

Building on this broad theory of language and culture, Valla then digs in to the hard task of recovering ancient Latin. In his *Repastinatio Dialectice et Philosophie*, Valla deconstructs the medieval formation of Latin upon which the Aristotelian-scholastic edifice was built, relying on grammatical and syntactic examples drawn from ancient sources—especially Cicero and Quintilian—to ascertain a "correct" form of Latin, against which all innovations were to be considered aberrations.[31] Hence, his method "frequently relies on Latin grammar to reject terms

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[27] Ibid., 196.
[28] Ibid., 197.
[29] Ibid., 196-197.
[30] Ibid., 197-198.
[31] Ibid., 198.

of scholastic discourse."[32] For example, he rejects scholastic terms such as *entitas*, *haccetitas*,

and *quidditas* on the basis of grammar, arguing that they are improperly formed according to the

rules of classical Latin. Relatedly, he also rejects the scholastic notion that meaningful

distinctions can be drawn between abstract and concrete terms, which, in turn, causes him to

reject "the ontological commitments which such a view seems to imply," and he shows "on the

basis of a host of examples drawn from classical Latin usage that the abstract term often has the

same meaning as its concrete counterpart (*utile*/*utilitas*, *homestum*/*honestas*, *verum*/*veritas*)."[33]

In this way, through grammatical analysis Valla assumes a philosophical position that in effect

argued that "there is no need to posit abstract entities as referents of these terms; they refer to the

concrete thing itself, that is, to the substance, its quality or action (or a combination of these three

components into which the thing can be analyzed)."[34]

In short, Valla sought to purify and simplify Latin, both to increase its elegance, and decrease

the turgidity of the jargon that had developed through scholastic usage. Though somewhat

technical and seemingly trivial, Valla's critique ultimately resulted in a simplified ontology

somewhat reminiscent of medieval scholastic philosopher William of Ockham's nominalist

ontology. Yet, there are important differences: while "Ockham's rejection of a realist

interpretation of the categories is accompanied by a wish to *defend* them as a distinct groups of

terms," Valla's "obliteration of the distinction between categories . . . would precisely be the

effect of philosophical realism".[35] In this sense, "The safest conclusion is that Valla's rather

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[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 199.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., 200.

eclectic approach does not allow us to categorize his position either as 'nominalist' (let alone 'Ockhamist-terminist') or as 'realist'."[36] The similarities, nevertheless, consist in "the idea that from conceptual distinctions and differences at the linguistic level we should be wary of inferring ontological differences, that is, differences and distinctions between things."[37] At any rate, Valla's critique of scholasticism would prove to be profoundly influential on the self-understanding of later Renaissance humanists, including Erasmus.

There is another aspect of Valla that should be mentioned when considering his influence on Erasmus, particularly relevant for understanding Erasmus' relationship to More and *Utopia.* Valla's *De Voluptate* (1431), revised and published in 1433 as *De Vero Bono*, is a dialogue in which three interlocutors, a Stoic, and Epicurean, and a Christian debate the relative merits of their respective moral philosophies. The overriding theme of Valla's dialogue is the question of the supreme good, and—given that the dialogue places Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Christianity in conversation—mirrors St. Paul's debate with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers on Mars Hill in Acts 17. The underlying question of the dialogue is the possibility of pagan virtue and its relationship to Christianity.[38] He begins by stating that his aim is to show that "paganism has done nothing virtuously, nothing rightly."[39] Valla allows Stoicism to elucidate some points of agreement with Christianity, but it is ultimately Epicureanism that wins the debate, with the Christian declaring "although I disapprove of both sides, I make my decision in favor of the

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] See Peter G. Bietenholz, *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus: Erasmus' Work as a Source of Radical Thought in Early Modern Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 121.

[39] Lorenzo Valla, "Of the True and False Good," in *The Renaissance in Europe: An Anthology*, ed. Peter Elmer, Nick Webb, and Roberta Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 74

Epicureans."[40]   Hence, it is clear that Valla's intent is to rehabilitate Epicureanism against its bad reputation among Christians, who, with the Stoics, had regarded it as a depraved theory of ethics. But to Valla, Epicurus' philosophy "is a message of common sense and joyous vitality; it sets men free."[41]

   Inspired by Valla, Erasmus incorporated Epicurean ethics into his schema, and developed an unlikely combination of Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Christianity, which persisted through his writings, from his early treatise *De Contemptu Mundi* (1488?) through his late colloquy *The Epicurean* (1533). Yet, while it is unlikely, this combination may not be as absurd as it seems. As moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has argued: "What is striking about Epicureanism in the end is not the contrast with, but the resemblance to Stoicism."[42] While the ancient Stoics and Epicureans debated intensely about their respective ethical systems, at their core, the highest end of both is both is tranquility of mind, such that "the gulf between Stoic apathy and Epicurean tranquility (ἀταραξία), verbally wide, is practically narrow."[43] Interestingly, this unusual combination of Epicurean and Stoic ethics is precisely what lies at the heart of the Utopian social order.[44]

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[40] Peter Bietenholz, *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus*, 123.

[41] Ibid., 125.

[42] Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Collier Books, 1966), 107.

[43] Ibid.

[44] See Chapter 5 for a discussion of Utopian moral philosophy.

Erasmus' Christian Humanism

Influenced by Colet, and more remotely by Petrarch and Valla, Erasmus' critique of

scholasticism hones in on the scholastic method of dialectical disputation, which he thought

"subverted theology to a ludicrous and profitless concatenation of quarrels . . . far from the *pure*

docere Christum".[45] While scholastic dialectic was intended to seek truth through the constant

challenging of widely-held opinions, its actual effect, in Erasmus opinion, was to "lead men to an

obstante pertinacity in their own opinions, dangerous to peace and unity of the Church."[46]

Moreover, Erasmus believed that the abstractions utilized in scholastic dialectic undermine

attention to beauty and eloquence in their writings.

One of his primary complaints against the scholastics was their preference for a literal-minded

rationalism in the interpretation of scripture, which payed little attention to the allegorical sense

of scripture found the interpretations of the Church Fathers. In his 1503 *Enchiridion Militis*

Christiani Erasmus argues that "in comparison with the Fathers of the Church our present-day

theologians are a pathetic group. Most of them lack elegance, the charm of language, and the

style of the Fathers. Content with Aristotle, they treat the mysteries of revelation in the tangled

fashion of the logician."[47] He goes on to cite St. Augustine in defense of his position: "St.

Augustine prefers to express himself in the flowing style that so enhanced the lovely writings of

the Platonist school. He prefers them not only because they have so many ideas that are

appropriate to our religion but also because they figurative language that they use, abounding in

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[45] John P. Dolan, Introduction to *The Essential Erasmus* (New York: Meridian, 1983), 13.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Erasmus, "The Handbook of the Militant Christian," in *The Essential Erasmus*, trans. and ed.
John P. Dolan (New York: Meridian, 1983), 63.

allegories, very closely approaches the language of Scripture itself."[48] Moreover, he argues that,

in stark contrast to the late-scholastics with their dry disputations, "The great Christian writers of

the past were able to treat even the most arid subjects with a beautiful prose. They enriched and

colored their sermons and commentaries with the constant use of allegory. Almost all of them

were at home with the writings of Plato and the poets, and they use this literary training to the

very best advantage in interpreting the words of Scripture."[49] As a remedy, he urges a return to

the Church Fathers and the scriptures and recommends the study of the liberal arts—including

the writings of the ancient pagans—as a kind of preparation for proper interpretation of scripture.

    More fundamentally, however, the *Enchiridion* develops Erasmus' view that that *all* of life

for a Christian is best understood as a battle against Satan and sin. John C. Olin notes that "[t]wo

fundamental and related ideas run throughout the book: one is that the great weapon of the

Christian is the knowledge of the Holy Scripture (the first weapon is prayer); the other is that

religion is not primarily a matter a matter of outward signs but rather an inner disposition and the

inward love of God and neighbor."[50] These themes would become common throughout

Erasmus' works, reflecting both his method of returning directly to the sources, and his Platonic

dichotomy between the surface appearance and the invisible reality of things. These are the

trademark features of Erasmus' Platonic Christian humanism.

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[48] Ibid., 63-64. His opinion of Augustine seems to have changed over time, such that by the time he edited Augustine's works in the late 1520s, he considered his style to be less than ideal. He did, however, cite Augustine in polemical debates and to silence critics, since he was considered to be a preeminent authority. See Arnoud Visser, "Reading Augustine through Erasmus' Eyes: Humanist Scholarship and Paratextual Guidance in the Wake of the Reformation," *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* (2008), 73.

[49] Ibid., 64.

[50] John C. Olin, Introduction to *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987), 9.

In this sense Erasmus' project can be compared to that of Socrates (a fact that he himself recognized in his invocation "Saint Socrates, pray for us!"[51]): Erasmus sought to uncover the spiritual core of reality by challenging common ideas and practices. For Erasmus, it centered, at least in part, on exposing the tension that he perceived between the simple essence of Christianity and the complex (and, he thought, sometimes absurd) rituals and practices of medieval society in general, and piety in particular. For example, Erasmus considered many of the practices associated with the cult of the saints to be indifferent at best, and, depending on the nature of the practice and the internal disposition of the practitioner, actively harmful at worst.[52] To be sure, he did not reject the petitioning of the saints, particularly for those who are less advanced in the faith, but he did question of the practice of venerating relics of the saints. Instead he recommended that the faithful look to the lives of saints as examples for living, rather than merely venerating scraps of their bones or clothing.[53] As he clarifies "I do not damn those who do these things with a simple a childish sort of superstition . . . What I utterly condemn is the fact they esteem the indifferent in place of the highest, the nonessentials to the complete neglect of what is essential."[54] In short, Erasmus forcefully advocated for a Christocentric moralistic piety, rooted in virtue and the imitation of Christ, which he believed to be the core of Christianity as expounded in the scriptures and the Church fathers.

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[51] See Erasmus Bartholin and Lynda Gregorian Christian, "The Figure of Socrates in Erasmus' Work," *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 3 No. 2 (October 1972), 9.

[52] Carlos M. N. Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 111-112.

[53] Ibid., 112.

[54] Erasmus, "The Handbook of the Militant Christian," 61.

Despite its public proclamation of Christianity in its symbolism and public rituals, Erasmus viewed the state of late-medieval European society—to include its piety, its politics, and its scholastic moral philosophy—as largely unhelpful, and sometimes even inimical, to the right practice of Christianity. Hence, Erasmus took upon himself the task of highlighting this untenable state of affairs in order that reform—social, political, moral, and ecclesiastical—could be affected. While his rhetorical arsenal certainly included straight forward polemic, like Socrates he also effectively wielded satire and irony to skewer what he considered the absurdities and vanities of European society.

Perhaps the most famous example of Erasmus' irony is his widely read *In Praise of Folly* (*Moriae Encomium*), a work that gained immense popularity in Erasmus' own time, and which has remained so popular that is has never been out of print since it was first published. Written in 1509 while Erasmus was visiting England and residing in Thomas More's household, it was dedicated to More (punning on More's name) and takes the style of a satiric declamation—influenced, no doubt, by his translations of Lucian in conjunction with More.[55] In the work, a personified Folly heaps praises on herself, elucidating all the benefits she claims to bring to humankind. Through this indirect method, Erasmus takes aim at pretentious theologians and churchmen, political rulers, and philosophers—in short, at anyone who considers himself wise. Foolishness, Erasmus has Folly argue, is ubiquitous to the human condition, and thus those who profess themselves to be wise, relying on arid abstract rationalism as their only guide and seeking to extricate all foolishness from human relations, are the most foolish of all.

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[55] See *Complete Works of St. Thomas More Vol. 3 Part 1: Translations of Lucian*, ed. Craig R. Thompson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

Erasmus' satire is intended to cut down to size those who consider themselves wise by heaping the praises of Folly on them. Moreover, it also shows how truth can be uncomfortable, undermining happiness for those who are not prepared to receive it. Folly shows how she makes life bearable because she masks the harsh truth of things. Yet this is a position which Erasmus' Platonism cannot accept. Folly argues, ironically, that those who seek to root out all foolishness would undermine all social and even political relations:

> there is no society, no union in life that could be happy or lasting without me [Folly]. A people will not long bear with its prince, nor a master his servant, nor a maid her mistress, nor a teacher his student, nor a friend his friend, nor a wife her husband, nor a landlord his tenant, nor a boarder his fellow boarder, unless they make mistakes together or individually, flatter each other, wisely overlook things, and soothe themselves with the sweetness of folly.[56]

Folly even goes so far as to point out that political communities wherein the rulers fancy themselves philosophers are often hazardous to the wellbeing of the state: "if you look into history, you will find that rulers have never been more injurious to the state than when the scepter has fallen into the hands of someone taken up with philosophy or *belles letters*."[57] Yet, elsewhere Erasmus held that kings should be philosophers, or at least be learned in philosophy, in order develop virtue and to be able to rule well.[58] Recognizing that folly is endemic to the human condition, Erasmus seems to hold up the ideal of the philosopher king while also pointing to the difficulty of becoming a *genuine* philosopher, especially for someone in power. He seems therefore to suggest that there is as much danger from kings who *falsely* consider themselves philosophers, or who become so enamored with philosophy that they are unable to rule. The

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[56] Erasmus, "The Praise of Folly," in *The Essential Erasmus*, ed. John P. Dolan (New York: Meridian, 1983), 113.

[57] Ibid., 116.

[58] See Erasmus, *Education of a Christian Prince*, trans. Neil M. Cheshire and Michael J. Heath, ed. Lisa Jardine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 15.

accommodation of folly seems to be at least part of the reason for his belief that scholastic

abstractions were insufficient for instruction in virtue—the appeal to *intellect* while neglecting

the *will* failed to sufficiently account for the presence of folly in human affairs.

Yet, there is one way in which Erasmus is genuine in his praise of "folly". Erasmus uses

scripture to show how true Christianity—the revelation of the very Logos itself—is often

dismissed as foolishness by those who proclaim themselves to be wise. Hence, those theologians

who consider themselves to be superior because of their shows of learning and subtle logical

distinctions in fact show themselves to misunderstand the paradox at the core of Christianity—

the truth that appears as folly to the world.[59] He points out that St. Paul calls himself a fool, and

even goes so far as to ascribe "a certain foolishness to God Himself. 'The foolishness of God,'

[St. Paul] says, 'is wiser than men'".[60] He is quick to point out, however, that this foolishness is

not the same as that ascribed to men, for as St. Paul also asserts "The preaching of the cross is to

them that perish foolishness."[61] Moreover, Christ commands a kind of learned foolishness, for

"Christ detests and condemns those wise men who depend on their own prudence." And again

quoting Paul, he notes that "God has chosen the foolish things of the world" and "It has pleased

God to save the world by foolishness."[62] In short, "The whole Christian religion seems to have a

certain relationship with some kind of folly but fails to agree at all with wisdom."[63] This view is

also expressed—in straightforward, non-ironic manner—in the *Enchridion*:

> If any man (saith Paul) among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him be a fool that he
> may be wise, for the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. And a little afore Paul

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[59] Ibid., 162-170.
[60] Ibid., 167.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid., 169.

saith, It is written, I will destroy the wisdom of wise men, and the prudence of prudent men I will reprove. Where is the wise man, where is the subtle lawyer, where is the searcher of this world? Hath not God made the wisdom of this world foolishness?[64]

Erasmus concludes the *Folly* by explicitly drawing the connection between Christianity and

Platonism:

> Christians agree in many respects with the Platonists in that they hold that the soul is submerged and tied down with earthly chains. It is so impeded by what is crass that it hardly has a change to contemplate or enjoy the truth. It is for this reason that Plato defined philosophy as the contemplation of death, because like death it leads the mind away from visible and corporeal things.[65]

Plato's allegory of the cave is, for Erasmus, a reasonably accurate description of what happens to

most men: "he who escaped told the others bound within that the outside held realities rather

than shadows . . . Just as they continued to believe in the shadow, think him deceived, se he

thought them mad to be captivated by such an error. The masses do the same thing in admiring

only what is corporeal and holding all else as almost lacking in existence."[66] In a Christian

context, this means that the profound truths of Christianity are often misunderstood by the

masses. Even the sacraments are subject to misapprehension by those who partake in them:

"With regard to the Eucharist, [religious men] attach little value to the physical reception unless

what it symbolizes takes place in the soul," whereas "The common crowd, on the contrary, look

to the mass only in terms of being close to the altar, hearing the words, and seeing the

ceremonies."[67]

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[64] Erasmus, *Manuel of a Christian Knight* (London: Methuen and Company, 1905), 76.
[65] Ibid., 170.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid., 171.

In *Folly*, Erasmus maintains his distinction between appearances (which are believed be reality by the masses) and reality itself. Erasmus emphasizes the importance of going beyond the outer appearances and uncovering the *true* meaning of things. The distorting effect of social pressures on the ability of the human mind to ascertain the truth are recognized and countered through a heightening of the tension that exists between reality and opinion. In this sense, the Socratic nature of Erasmus' project begins to come into focus: through the use of a combination of irony, barbed humor, eloquence, and exhortation—all aimed at puncturing the pretenses of those who were wise in their own eyes—Erasmus sought to unsettle common opinions, not for its own sake but rather in the service of opening the soul to higher truths. As Dominic Baker-Smith has put it,

> there was for Erasmus, as for Thomas More, a continuity between the Platonic view of reality and satire: as the Platonist distinguishes material embodiment from animating principle, so the satirist distinguishes convention from motive, signifier from signified. It is in the gap between these two terms that Erasmus operates, exposing the gulf that divides merely conventional actions from the original motives which should animate them.[68]

In one sense, Erasmus' project is in accordance with Catholic orthodoxy: the meaning of the sacraments is the unseen grace is imparted by their performance. Hence, they are efficacious at a level that is far deeper than the surface appearance. Yet, there is another sense in which Erasmus can be seen to be skirting Catholic orthodoxy. For if the sacraments are only a *symbol* of what takes place in the soul, rather than the means by which the change is affected, then it is only a small step to the conclusion that the institutional church is superfluous. Erasmus is careful never

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[68] Dominic Baker-Smith, "Uses of Plato by Erasmus and More," in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 89.

to go this far, but his thought did serve as a basis or impetus for much radical thinking, including the religious positions of many of the Reformers, as well as later political thought.[69]

Part of the reason that Erasmus felt confident in his criticisms of the Church and sacraments, however, may be that, for all his disdain for the scholastics and their metaphysical abstractions, his own philosophy depended on that intellectual edifice to a much greater degree than he recognized. As James McConica has pointed out, "Erasmus' calm adherence to a view that metaphysical speculation in religious matters was useless" underestimated the extent to which it

> was itself a metaphysical position which required precisely the kind of examination he disliked. As a result, his positive scriptural bent was highly successful as long as it moved with the traditional doctrinal framework of Latin Christendom. Once it this was challenged by Luther the foundations of a tacit unanimity on a Catholic orthodoxy melted away, and the battle was joined on issues which Erasmus himself found as bewildering as they were uncongenial. To the end of his life he retained his deep skepticism toward scholastic dogma, side by side with an almost instinctive adherence to Catholic doctrine, worship, and authority.[70]

It is also worth noting that, despite their protestations and self-image, there is a sense in which humanist project need not have been viewed as competing with the scholastic project, but rather was different from, and potentially compatible with, that of the scholastics. As Lodi Nauta has pointed out, the "humanists['] . . . calumnies against the scholastics should be dismissed as misdirected and irrelevant, since they stemmed from a failure to recognize the fundamentally different research goals of the scholastics."[71] This is because "the scholastics approached language, reasoning, and argumentation, from an almost scientific point of view . . . They studied

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[69] See Peter Beitenholz, *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus* 189-225.

[70] James McConica, *English Humanists and Renaissance Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 27.

[71] Lodi Nauta, "Lorenzo Valla and the Rise of Humanist Dialectic," 194.

language in order to lay bare the logical forms inherent in it."[72] For scholastics, language was a tool to express concepts—the form of the language was, at best, a secondary concern. "What made their studies vulnerable to the scornful laughter of the humanists was their use of Latin—a particular idiom of Latin to be sure—based on the medieval Latin spoken in the universities."[73] The scholastic analysis of Latin as language allowed the humanists—including Valla and Erasmus—to believe that they shared a similar project. Yet, whereas the humanists were concerned to recover a "pure" form of classical Latin, "scholastics did not aim at analyzing [classical] or any other particular brand of Latin at all but *language in general*."[74] The Latin used in the schools "functioned as a kind of metalanguage, a technical jargon which is virtually inherent in all kind of theoretical speculation, and it was certainly not meant to rival the classical Latin resurrected but the humanists."[75] In this sense, the humanist attacks on scholasticism should be taken with a grain of salt.

If Erasmus misjudged how much his project differed from, and in some respects depended on, the medieval scholastic metaphysical edifice, he also seems to have underestimated the extent to which the institutions themselves acted as preconditions for many of the reforms he advocated. Erasmus' satire and criticism of existing forms and institutions was in service of a fundamentally—perhaps naïvely—optimistic vision of human nature and human society. Despite his overall aim of social and ecclesial reform, Erasmus paid little attention to the important role of institutional forms in maintaining either political or ecclesial order, and in

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[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid (emphasis mine).
[75] Ibid.

shaping human beings in virtue. This lack of concern was rooted in his basic conception of human nature as highly educable, such that he "hoped that the education of all individuals, especially of princes and nobles, in the spirit and disciplines of antiquity and Christianity would bring the rational element in them to full fruition."[76] In a sense, Erasmus' latent anthropology flirts with Pelagianism—the ancient heresy that Augustine famously battled which held that that humans are perfectible through their own efforts. For Erasmus, education was the key to instilling virtue, and virtue was the key to social, political, and ecclesial reform. Hence, Erasmus' lack of attention to institutions was closely linked to his optimism about human nature: if widespread education—and therefore virtue—were achieved, both political and ecclesial institutions would become effectively superfluous because the sources of political peace and spiritual life would be found within every individual.

Letters to Dorp: The Theory of Christian Humanism

Erasmus' satiric attacks predictably provoked a strong reaction, even among those some who were (at least initially) aligned with Erasmus' humanist project. In September of 1514, Martin Dorp, a professor of philosophy at the University of Louvain, wrote to Erasmus criticizing *In Praise of Folly*, as well as his project of retranslating the New Testament from the Greek. Dorp, though affiliated with the humanist tradition, nevertheless considered the attacks on convention contained in the *Folly* to be imprudent, and also took issue with the temerity of Erasmus who presumed to correct St. Jerome's Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible—which had stood as the standard text for nearly 1200 years. Returning to the Greek text in order to retranslate the Bible

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[76] Caspari, "Erasmus on the Social Functions of Christian Humanism," 79-80.

not only seemed audacious to Dorp, but also potentially threatened the scholastic commentaries which relied on the Vulgate, as Greek literacy was extremely rare amongst scholastic theologians and philosophers.

Erasmus responded to Dorp's criticism in a cordial—though lengthy and firm—letter, explaining his purpose by connecting the satirical *Folly* with his other works, and laying out the core of his project. Erasmus explains that *The Praise of Folly* intended nothing more than what he sought to do in his *Enchiridion*, though by a different method: "under the semblance of jest".[77] His stated reason for this is that "a truth[,] of itself somewhat harsh, if presented in an entertaining fashion, more easily finds its way to men's hearts."[78] Furthermore, "[e]vangelical truth sinks in more pleasingly and takes firmer hold in souls when dressed up in these little enticements than if it is simply states as naked truth, an effect Augustine certainly strives for in his work on Christian doctrine."[79] We need not doubt his intentions to also point out that there is a similar thread running through both works, namely that of anti-institutionalism. In the *Enchiridion* Erasmus emphasizes the interior aspect of Christianity, downplaying the importance of institutions in religious life. In *Folly*, his caustic satire undermines those institutions through jest.

Thomas More came to the defense of his friend, composing a lengthy letter to Dorp aimed at vindicating Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* and the humanist project in general. Penned at the same time as More was writing *Utopia*, the letter lays out More's frustrations and criticisms of the

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[77] Erasmus, "Letter to Martin Dorp," in *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus*, ed. John C. Olin (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987), 70-71.
[78] Ibid., 71.
[79] Ibid.

late-scholastic theologians, both their attitudes and their methods. More importantly, he lays out

a *theoretical* defense of the Erasmus' Christian humanist project—something that the generally

anti-metaphysical Erasmus balked at doing—thereby revealing more fully the nature of More's

concurrence with Erasmus. It is therefore worth considering in some detail.

The late-scholastic theologians, he says, "are almost as far removed from such studies [poetry

and rhetoric] as they are from theology. From that they are so far removed that they are not

farther away from anything else, except the common feelings of humanity."[80] Rather than

devoting themselves to the study of scriptures and the Church Fathers, they instead occupy their

time with word games and logic riddles:

> among so-called theologians there are . . . some who so set aside the books of Scripture that,
> once they have been set aside, they never take them up again, and who devote themselves so
> completely to disputatious theology that they not only fail to take up poetry or rhetoric but
> practically consider as unimportant the most holy Fathers, and also the most ancient
> interpreters of the Scriptures, and certainly disregard the commentaries of those men on the
> sacred writings as also the study of those writings . . .they disdain all the things that are the
> finest, the most pious, the most Christian, and most worthy of true theologians, all those
> things they call "positive"; they consider none of those things worthy of any exertion on their
> part, these men born for petty quibbles, matters that are so much more important. And yet,
> even of those quibbles, they pursue most of all such as pertain least of all to piety or moral
> training.[81]

In short, More believes that theology ought to consist primarily in the scholarly study of the

revealed tradition—the Scriptures and the interpretations of the Scriptures offered by the Church

Fathers and the Magisterium—and the reflection on their concrete meaning for piety and

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[80] Thomas More, "Letter to Martin Dorp," in *St. Thomas More: Selected Letters*, ed. Elizabeth
Frances Rogers (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 29.
[81] Ibid.

morality, rather than the disputations on arcane topics and logic puzzles that characterized late-scholastic discourse. The reasons for this are several but related.

First, he believes that it distorts the purpose of theology, which is, most fundamentally, aimed at understanding the nature of God and what humans ought to do in response to Him. While some questions of theology (such as, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity) necessarily require subtle elucidation, More finds the pursuit of subtlety for subtlety's own sake to be destructive to the ends toward which theology is directed. Throughout the letter, he criticizes the ignorance of the Scriptures of many theologians, ignorance which, he argues, leads them to believe that the Scriptures are less profound than they are:

> This very book [the Book of Revelation], Dorp, which seems so easy to you, certainly seemed very difficult to Jerome; Augustine thought it was unfathomable. Not a single one of the ancients had the boldness to say he understood it. They think that the comprehension of this work had been heavily blockaded by some mysterious providence of God, or for the very purpose of challenging inquisitive mind and arousing dormant talent, whose powers had been buried and needed to be called forth by hard work.[82]

Moreover, he states that even if we were to suppose that "scripture were easy, and those petty questions are hard; still there is no reason in the world why a knowledge of the latter is more valuable training."[83] After all, dancing is harder than walking, and eating pieces of pottery is more difficult that eating bread—and yet, "I do not think any person would want to exchange those proper and ordinary natural actions for the extraordinary but useless ones."[84] Hence, More critiques his contemporary theologians for their prideful ignorance of both the Scriptures and the

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[82] Ibid., 33-34.
[83] Ibid., 35.
[84] Ibid.

Church Fathers, and their assumption that things which the Fathers considered quite difficult are so easy as to be beneath their dignity.

Second, he critiques their philosophy of language. The meaning of language, he contends, derives from *long* and *common* usage: "Speech is surely a common possession; but [these theologians] spoil some words which they have gotten from cobblers. They have taken them from the common people, they misuse what is common."[85] How can it be, he asks, that arcane rules of logic "designed in some corner by men who hardly know how to talk, impose new laws of speech on all the world?"[86] Grammar is derived from custom, and is intended to teach correct speech: "it does not devise unusual rules of language, but advises those who are unskilled in speech not to violate the customs of language which she notices are ordinarily observed."[87] Rather than devising obscure rules for language, dialecticians have a "duty to follow our custom in the use of language and to push us along in any direction, with reasons that are true."[88] This stands in contrast to sophists who, "by their deceptive use of words lead us to a spot where we find ourselves with surprise."[89] Those who propound obscure rules and usages for words with the goal of winning a debate instead of pursuing truth display a "dull-witted form of cleverness and a stupid kind of ingenuity."[90]

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[85] Ibid., 23.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid., 24.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.

Both of these underpin his broader critique of these contemporary theologians: namely, that their refusal to seriously engage the scriptures and the Fathers results from their pride, which is made even more pernicious because it is a prideful ignorance. These theologians, he argues,

> have added to an extraordinary ignorance of all subjects a perverted pinion on all sorts of knowledge, by means of which they so flatter themselves as to judge themselves alone capable of giving a ready interpretation, according to their own whims, of any piece of literature, even of Scripture, of anything they have heard on any occasion, although they have never seen the passage, have never looked into the work, and do not know in what context the passage occurs.[91]

The thrust of More's complaint here is that these theologians are not only ignorant, but are *proud* in their ignorance, and their pride leads them to a kind of individualism, such that they believe it unnecessary even to rectify their ignorance—of the Scriptures, of the Fathers, and of the Magisterium—because they hold that the logical parsing of sentences is the most important aspect of their work. In short, their pride cuts them off intellectually from the community of the Church, without which we cannot even know which scriptures should be considered authoritative, much less the proper way to interpret them in light of the common agreement of the Church. As always, More's concern here is with maintaining what is common over against the pride—and alienation—that can come with intellectual individualism. Ironically, then, More's defense of Erasmus at the same time counters Erasmus' own tendency—expressed in both his *Enchiridion* and his *Folly*—toward a prideful anti-institutional individualism.

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[91] Ibid., 29.

Philosophia Christi

Perhaps the most characteristic aspect of Erasmus' theological thought was his *philosophia*

Christi—the philosophy Christ. For Erasmus, at the core of Christianity lay a philosophy which

provided the underlying impetus for all Christian teaching and piety. In some sense, his

overarching project was the apprehension and elucidation of that philosophic core. He sought to

recover the ancient sense of philosophy as both the *love of wisdom* and as a *way of life*. Hence,

integral to his project is the ascertainment of the practices necessary for the development of the

spirit and for the waging of spiritual warfare. Christian soldiers engaged in spiritual warfare rely

on the weapons of prayer and knowledge, and, in particular, knowledge of the scriptures.[92] For

Erasmus, Christianity is the true philosophy: Christianity is philosophy by another name.[93]

Perhaps not surprisingly, given Erasmus' dedication to the Fathers of the Church, the concept

of a "Philosophy of Christ" has Patristic roots, as does his broader idea of *pietas,* "the moral

conscience governing the proper relationship between individual and God as well as the

individual and society."[94] Erasmus elucidates his vision in his *Paraclesis* (the preface to his

translation of the New Testament published in 1516):

> For upon these three ranks of men principally the task of either renewing or advancing the
> Christian religion has been placed: on the princes and the magistrates who serve in their
> place, on the bishops and their delegated priests, and on those who instruct the young eager
> for all knowledge. If it happens that they, having laid aside their own affairs, should sincerely
> cooperate in Christ, we would see not in so many years a true and, as Paul says, a genuine

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[92] See Darren M. Provost, "Erasmus, Christian Humanism, and Spiritual Warfare," in *Re-envisioning Christian Humanism: Education and the Restoration of Humanity*," ed. Jens Zimmermann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 125.

[93] "Being a philosopher is in practice the same as being a Christian; only the terminology is different." Erasmus, *Education of a Christian Prince*, 15.

[94] Erika Rummel, "Desiderius Erasmus", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/erasmus/>

race of Christians everywhere emerge, a people who would restore the philosophy of Christ not in ceremonies and in syllogistic propositions but in the heart itself and in the whole life.[95]

Erasmus' reforming vision, then, is of a society filled with individuals who *live* their Christianity rather than simply enact it in sacramental ceremonies or defend it in rationalistic debate. Hence, he strikes at what he takes to be the particular corruptions of Christianity of his age: ritualistic piety devoid of inward feeling, and prideful—but ultimately pointless—scholastic debates about theological abstractions that obfuscate and confuse but give little in terms of instruction for practical living. Erasmus desired to revive Christianity as a philosophy for living—knowledge combined with praxis—that could rival the other ancient philosophical schools. "[H]ow is it," he asks, "that even those of us who profess to be Christian fail to embrace with the proper spirit this philosophy alone? Platonists, Pythagoreans, Academics, Stoics, Cynics, Peripatetics, Epicureans not only have a deep understanding of the doctrines of their respective sects, but they commit them to memory, and they fight fiercely on their behalf, willing even to die rather than abandon the defense of their author. Then why do not we evince far greater spirit for Christ, our Author and Prince?"[96] Moreover, he argues that the knowledge of scripture and the philosophy of Christ should be widely disbursed among the people: "For is it not fitting, since baptism is common in an equal degree to all Christians, wherein there is the first profession of Christian philosophy, and since the other sacraments and at length the reward of immortality belong equally to all, that doctrines alone should be reserved to those very few whom today the crowd call theologians and monks, they very persons whom, although they comprise one of the smallest parts of the

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[95] Erasmus, "The Paraclesis," in *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus*, ed. John C. Olin (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987), 103.
[96] Ibid., 99.

Christian populace, yet I might wish to be in greater measure what they are styled."[97] In this

protest lies one of Erasmus' signature complaints, namely that those styled as theologians and

religious too often fail to live up to their name, and moreover, that the subtly that was presumed

to be so crucial to theology by some scholastic theologians served mostly to obscure the

teachings of the Gospel and to inflate the pride of the initiated. As he states,

> To me he is truly a theologian who teaches not by skill with intricate syllogism but by a disposition of mind, by the very expression and the eyes, by his very life that riches should be disdained, that the Christian should not put his trust in the supports of this world but must rely entirely on heaven, that a wrong should not be avenged, that a good should be wished for those wishing ill, that we should deserve well of those deserving ill, that all good men should be loved and cherished equally as members of the same body, that the evil should be tolerated if they cannot be corrected, that those who are stripped of their goods, those who are turned away from possessions, those who mourn are blessed and should not be deplored, and that death should even be desired by the devout, since it is nothing other than a passage to immortality. And if anyone under the inspiration of the spirit of Christ preaches this kind of doctrine, inculcates it, exhorts, incites, and encourages men to do it, he is truly a theologian, even if he be a common laborer or weaver. And if anyone exemplifies this doctrine in his life itself, he is in fact a great doctor. Another, perhaps, even a non-Christian, may discuss more subtly how the angels understand, but to persuade us to lead here an angelic life, free from every stain, this is indeed the duty of the Christian theologian.[98]

This passage summarizes, perhaps, Erasmus' general understanding of Christianity—and the

impulse is understandable, particularly in the face of a culture taken with ostentatious displays

and an academic culture which practically equated obscurantist subtly with profundity. The

underlying desire expressed here is the connection of the head and the heart, of knowledge and

the inner person, and, ultimately, of knowledge and moral action.

Yet, it betrays a certain reductionism in his thinking. While it is clearly incorrect to say that

someone as learned and as dedicated to the promotion of learning as was Erasmus was

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[97] Ibid., 101.
[98] Ibid., 101-102.

dismissive of complex thinking, his insistence on the simplicity of the philosophy of Christ

obscures the genuine complexity of certain aspects of Christian orthodoxy: Erasmus' instinctive

disdain for scholastic disputation led him to severely underestimate the extent to which the

orthodoxy that he presupposed relied on the metaphysical edifice built by the Church Fathers,

and expanded through the middle ages. Moreover, Erasmus' concept of Christianity as a

philosophy led him ascribe—at least tacitly—to the idea that the fundamental problem with

humanity is a lack of *knowledge* of the teachings of Christ, and therefore, as one scholar has it,

"it is taken for granted [by Erasmus] that if the words of Christ were sufficiently known and

studied, the course of the world would be altered and the abuses put right. The first thing is to

know and the second to act, and the one follows closely on the other as a natural consequence."[99]

The assumption in Erasmus' philosophical theology which suggested that the proliferation of

knowledge would inevitably result in desirable reform applied equally to ecclesial reform as to

social and political reform. He does not seem to have been overly concerned, therefore, about

the institutional prerequisites for the inculcation of virtue and knowledge. In fact, his tendency

toward detached focus on the development of virtue in the individual soul resulted in a view that

tended to consider institutions—to include the sacramental life of the Church—as largely

indifferent at best, and actively corrupting at worst.[100] This resulted, at least in part, from his

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[99] Margaret Mann Phillips, *Erasmus and the Northern Renaissance* (London: The English Universities Press, 1964), 81.

[100] See Ross Dealy, *The Stoic Origins of Erasmus' Philosophy of Christ* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017). Dealy argues that Erasmus seeks to connect the interior virtue of the individual Christian and external actions in the world, providing a Christian solution to the Stoic *honestum/utile* problem which Cicero addresses in Book 3 of *On Duties*. As Dealy writes on page 73, "The central difference [between Erasmus and Cicero] is the context, Christianity, and that Erasmus goes even lower on the social scale than Cicero." In a sense, then, "Erasmus views one of the primary functions of Christianity as making Stoic virtue available to the masses."

broadly Platonic-Stoic philosophical anthropology, which tended to view human nature as fallen but able to be improved through education in virtue. Erasmus does not seem to have sufficiently considered the possibility that fallen human persons might require the strictures of institutions to constrain their basest impulses, give shape to their common life, and, in the case of the Church, mediate divine grace through sacraments. In short, Erasmus' religious, moral, and political thought all tend toward a focus on the individual, and particularly, on the interiority of the individual in over against the exterior symbols of religious, moral, and political order.

This turn to the individual reflects Erasmus' peculiar brand of philosophical eclecticism, especially in his moral theory. He pulled widely and somewhat indiscriminately from a variety of sources, making use of insights that he thought valuable, no matter their source. The result was a strange, counterintuitive combination of insights from various philosophical schools. Most striking, perhaps, is his attempted recovery of Epicureanism, and its combination with not only Platonism and Stoicism—both of which were vehemently opposed to Epicureanism given their emphasis on the ultimately unreality of bodily pleasures and pains and the primacy of mind and soul in contrast to Epicurus' insistence on the ultimate reality of matter and bodily pleasure—but also Christianity. In his colloquy entitled "The Epicurean," Erasmus labors to bring together Christianity and Epicureanism, arguing through a character named Hedonius "If we speak the truth, none are greater Epicureans than those Christians that live a pious life."[101]

Any such synthesis, of course, must reject the famous twin pillars of ancient Epicureanism, namely the mortality of the soul and the random (i.e. non-providential) nature of earthly affairs—

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[101] Desiderius Erasmus, "The Epicurean," in *The Colloquies of Erasmus Vol. 2*, trans. N. Bailey, ed. Rev. E. Johnson (London: Reeves and Turner, 1878), 327.

and it is noteworthy that the Utopians' virtue-centered hedonism explicitly relies on the rejection of these two principles[102]—though Erasmus elides a direct discussion of these issues, opting instead to focus on what he views as the points of compatibility. He goes on to elucidate the connection by arguing that it is in fact true piety which produces true pleasure and therefore lasting happiness, both in this life and in the next. It is, in some ways, a compelling argument, but it is striking how individualistic it is, centering almost entirely on the *subjective* aspects of morality and happiness.

Perhaps this emphasis was necessary to the recovery of the person—and in particular the interiority of the person—in an age of political consolidation, institutional exhaustion, and a popular piety centered on public rituals but which often failed to touch the heart. Still, More understood that this inward turn had certain dangers, both because the political order was capable of more than Erasmus' Epicurean-Stoicism implied, and because More's Augustinianism suggested to him that human nature is weaker than Stoicism's individualistic, virtue-centric ethic allowed. For More, institutions provided a means for human efforts to be channeled into the mitigation of evils, while, at the same time, constraining the worst human impulses through formation and education of the soul.

Stoicism and Augustinianism Renaissance Humanism

While the Stoic undertones in Erasmus' thought are distinctive, they are not entirely idiosyncratic. Rather, they can be seen in continuity with a broader stand of Stoic-influenced thinking Renaissance humanism, as William Bouwsma has effectively shown. In a 1975 essay

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[102] See Chapter 5.

entitled "The Two Faces of Humanism: Stoicism and Augustinianism in Renaissance Thought"[103] Bouwsma argues that, rather than a single, unified intellectual movement, Renaissance humanism can actually be divided into two discernible strands: Augustinianism and Stoicism. While Bouwsma admits that these strands were in fact never as distinct as such polarization may imply—he notes that he uses "ideal type" analysis and that he employs the terms "in a general sense, to designate antithetical visions of human existence"[104]—they do provide a helpful framework for thinking about the difference between More and Erasmus that is represented in *Utopia*. This is not least because one of the primary functions of *Utopia* is to illustrate two competing visions of human existence.[105]

For the humanists, Bouwsma argues, Stoicism and Augustinianism presented attractive possibilities for addressing the "deep and changing needs of Renaissance society and culture."[106] This was partly because of the increased complexity of social life, associated with the rise of towns and "the new vision of human existence towns increasingly evoked."[107] The rise of towns as a center of social and political existence "produced a set of conditions that made parts of Europe more and more like the hellenistic world in which both the Stoics and Augustine had been reared: the constant menace of famine and pestilence, urban disorders and endemic warfare in the countryside, incessant conflict among individuals, families, and social groups, growing social mobility that left a substantial portion of the urban population rootless and insecure, above

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[103] Reprinted in William Bouwsma, *A Usable Past: Essays in European History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 19-73. References are to this printing.
[104] Ibid., 20.
[105] See, e.g., Gerard Wegemer, "The Rhetoric of Opposition in Thomas More's 'Utopia': Giving Form to Competing Philosophies," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1990), 288-306.
[106] Bouwsma, *A Usable Past*, 30.
[107] Ibid.

all terrible anxieties of a life in which the familiar conventions of a close and traditional human community had given way to a relentless struggle for survival in a totally unpredictable and threatening world."[108] From a social standpoint, it was a situation in which "scholastic culture seems irrelevant, and which conversely Stoicism and Augustinianism sought, in their different ways, to interpret a remedy".[109]

Bouwsma places Erasmus firmly on the Stoic side of this dichotomy, noting in particular Erasmus' agreement with the Stoics regarding the role of reason in human life;[110] the function and process of education in the development of reason;[111] his detached cosmopolitanism;[112] his view that "all political disorder . . . [is] the result of stupidity" and his concomitant view that princes should be philosophers;[113] his nostalgic sense that social improvement required looking to the past;[114] his sense that, in general, once social perfection was achieved, innovation could only be decay;[115] and his idea that one must separate himself from the crowd to attain true virtue and understanding.[116]

Stoicism provided a means to deal with the increasing alienation experienced by many in the in the late Middle Ages because of its intense focus on the idea that the one thing needful is the

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[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid., 34.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid., 36.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid., 37. It is noteworthy that Erasmus' marginal notes in *Utopia* treat Utopia as though it were recalling some distant past rather than a contemporary society existing somewhere in the New World.
[115] He notes, citing the *Education of a Christian Prince*, that "One of the essential duties of the Erasmian ruler is to resist all innovation." Ibid., 38.
[116] Ibid., 42.

right ordering of the interiority of the person. Its sense of virtue consisted primarily in ordering the inner world to the cosmos, effectively bypassing the social and political realm, such that "through a combination of enlightenment and disciplined accommodation, the individual could come to terms with the humanly pessimistic implications of a cosmic optimism."[117] Because complete rational ordering of the natural, social, and political realms was impossible, Stoicism instead argued that the path to happiness was through the rational control of the inner world, the only place where reason could be sovereign.[118] In a positive sense, Stoicism contributed the idea of the inwardness of the person, which "deepened consciences and provided one source for the moral sensitivity of the Catholic as well as the Protestant Reformation. Inwardness pointed to the role of conscience in the moral life, the inner voice which is concerned rather with motives than outward acts and results."[119] And, in this, it shared a genuine point of convergence with Augustinianism. Yet Stoicism still presented an abstract and idealistic vision of reality, which, however compelling in theory, still presented some difficulty in practice. Prominent among these was the abstractions which necessarily frame the Stoic system, given that its starting point is with the *cosmos*, and its moral theory seeks to bring the interior life into alignment with that abstraction. It therefore tended to "ignore or reason away rather than to engage with and solve the practical problems of life," and, given its insistence on the enlightened separation of the virtuous from the rest, it was necessarily available only to a select enlightened few having "no remedy for the misery of the overwhelming majority of mankind."[120]

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[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid., 39.
[119] Ibid., 40.
[120] Ibid., 43.

The crucial distinction, Bouwsma argues, between Stoic and Augustinian humanism is that "With Stoicism we must begin with the cosmos, and this in turn implies a certain view of man. But with Augustinism we must begin with man, and from here we reach a certain view of the cosmos."[121] This results in the view a view of man "not as a system of objectively distinguishable, discrete faculties reflecting ontological distinctions in the cosmos, but as a mysterious and organic unity."[122] More importantly, that unity, for Augustine, is not ruled by reason, but by *will*. Hence, knowing the good is not identical with doing the good, as both the Stoics and the Platonists had argued, and, therefore, for Augustinian humanism, more crucial than developing right reason was the formation of the will. The will is not ruled by reason but is instead controlled by the affections—hence, Augustine's focus on rightly ordering the loves, and his idea that the city of God and the earthy city are formed by what the citizens of each loves most. This directly countered the Stoic ideal of *apatheia*, which tended to view the passions and affections as a source of weakness and vice.

In addition to its rehabilitation of the passions Augustinianism also offered a more positive view of the physical body than Stoicism. Whereas Stoicism's focus on the interiority of the person led to a distrust of the body and the physical world generally, Augustinism's emphasis on the incarnation and resurrection of Christ allowed for a more affirming view. This had implications for the debate over the active versus the contemplative life which had been ongoing through the Middle Ages and continued into the Renaissance: "The inferiority of activity to contemplation assumed an inferiority to the mind of the body, which does the active business of

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[121] Ibid., 45.
[122] Ibid.

the world."[123] The Augustinian reordering had "deep theological significance, for it redirected attention from the immortality of the soul to the resurrection of the body."[124] This was also related to the tension between the Stoic and Augustinian ideal of virtue. Whereas Stoicism tended to emphasize self-sufficiency in the attainment of virtue, Augustinianism instead stressed the profound human dependence on God, including for any virtue that might be attained. Virtue, for the Augustinians, had both its source and its end in God. Pagan virtue, while genuine in a sense, nevertheless was vitiated by being referred not to its true end in God but instead to personal glory, or, at best, that of the earthly city.

Interestingly, however, this Augustinianism also tended toward a de-sacralization of the political realm, given its emphasis on the limits of human action for the building of a perfect political order. In contrast to the Stoic idea of the cosmos as a unified realm, which encompassed the individual, social, and transcendent realms, Augustinianism allowed for a disjunction between the fallen human world and the perfection of the heavenly realm allowed for a new way of thinking about the political and social realm. This, in turn, opened new possibilities for political theory, in that it enabled political order to be considered as a relatively autonomous order which functioned according to its own rules, and could therefore be analyzed according to its own legitimate ways of being.[125] "The pragmatic secularism to which Augustinian humanism pointed opposed the political idealism of Stoic humanism in all its dimensions: its belief in the universal principles needed to validate all government, its

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[123] Ibid., 49.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid., 52.

universalism, its insistence on the rule of the wise, its indifference to changing circumstance, its pacifism."[126]

The lines of distinction between these two schools, of course, are not as clear as they seem, and many Renaissance humanists displayed tendencies toward both Augustinianism and Stoicism at different times. As Bouwsma notes, "[n]either pure Stoics nor pure Augustinians are easy to find among the humanists, though individual figures may tend more to one position or another."[127] Indeed, though Erasmus objects to the Stoic ideal of apathy in his *Praise of Folly*[128] and he includes the Stoics among the philosophies to which he opposes the Philosophy of Christ in the *Paraclesis*, his thought nevertheless displays a number of the hallmarks of Stoic humanism, and as Bouwsma notes, Erasmus "seems more Stoic than Augustinian"[129]—and it is striking how many of these traits Hythloday shares as well. In light of More's affinity for Augustine, then, we can begin to see that *Utopia* becomes more intelligible in light of this (admittedly imperfect) dichotomy.

In a sense, then, we might say that, while More was broadly in agreement with Erasmus on the ills afflicting late-medieval society, his Augustinianism prompted him to question Erasmus' Stoic-tinged political thought in three particular ways. First, he questioned Erasmus' optimism about human nature and its capacity for being ordered according to reason. While Stoicism's emphasis on the fundamental rationality of human nature led to a more-or-less latent belief that reason could, in principle, be the foundation of personal morality, the Augustinian emphasis on

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[126] Ibid., 53.
[127] Ibid., 58.
[128] Ibid., 48.
[129] Ibid., 58.

the insufficiency of human reason let More to an acute sense that reason is limited in its ability to guide moral action, much less to provide a basis for a stable and just political order. Secondly, given his more Augustinian pessimism about human nature, he questioned Erasmus' general lack of concern for the *means* by which rational virtue might be expected to be instituted as the basis for political order—in other words, he sought to draw attention to necessity of institutions for political order. Third, he questioned Erasmus' Stoic-tinged assumption that the political order was nothing more than an extension of the cosmic order. Given that the Augustinian disjunction between politics and the cosmic order enabled the consideration of the political realm *qua* political, More sought to develop an analysis of political order *as such*. In short, then, the problem might be framed as a question about the possibility of effectively and meaningfully transposing an essentially individual ethic to a political morality.

Erasmus, More, and Political Theory

As we have noted, Erasmus' thought is genuinely eclectic, pulling influences from numerous ancient, biblical, patristic, and contemporary sources. In this sense, Erasmus was not a systematic philosopher, particularly in moral and political philosophy. This was, at least in some sense, related to his project of recovering of philosophy as a *way of life*, directed at the search for wisdom, rather than as a methodology or a process of intellectual system-building.

Erasmus' most overtly political work, *Education of a Christian Prince* (1516), contains a substantial amount of his political thinking, and Erasmus' Stoic tendencies are on full display—in fact, Augustine is only mentioned in the context of war, and only negatively, where Erasmus

criticizes Augustine's concession that there may be just wars.[130] The animating heart of his

political thought, however, is not found in the *Education*, but rather in his *Adagia*. The *Adagia*

was Erasmus' compendium of Greek and Latin proverbs, in which he not only compiled but also

attempted to explain both their meaning and their origin. First published in 1500 as a 152-page

book, the *Adagia* grew over the course of Erasmus' life as he added to both the proverbs

included, as well as expanded the explanatory essays. As it grew, new editions appeared

periodically, with the final edition being published in 1536, in the last few months of Erasmus'

life. The final edition included 4151 proverbs, and some of the explanatory essays became

standalone pieces—perhaps most famously "Dulce Bellum Inexpertis" in which Erasmus uses

the ancient proverb to expound on the attractiveness and evil of war.

Beginning with the 1508 edition, the *Adagia* always began with the same proverb,

"Amicorum Communia Omnia" ("Between friends all is common") because, he explains, "there

is nothing more wholesome or more generally accepted than this proverb" and hence "it seemed

good to place it as a favorable omen at the head of this connection of adages."[131] Such power

does Erasmus attribute to this proverb that he goes so far as to say that if it were "so fixed in

men's minds as it is frequent on everybody's lips, most of the evils in our lives would be

promptly removed."[132] Plato, he points out, argues that "the happiest condition of a society

consists in the community of all possessions,"[133] and that "a state would be happy and blessed in

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[130] See Erasmus, *Education of a Christian Prince*, 104-105.
[131] Erasmus, *The Adages of Erasmus*, trans. Margaret Mann Phillips with notes by R.A.B.
Mynors, selected by William Barker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 29.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid. Notably, Erasmus' phrasing here is close to that which More uses in the full title of
Utopia "On the best state of a commonwealth" wherein he proceeds to describe a society which
in fact has the community of all possessions.

which these words 'mine' and 'not mine' were never heard," and he confesses amazement that "Christians dislike this common ownership of Plato's . . . although nothing was ever said by a pagan philosopher which comes closer to the mind of Christ."[134] Strikingly, Erasmus downplays Aristotle's explicit and extended criticism of Plato's community of property in the second book of the *Politics*, saying only that "Aristotle in book 2 of the *Politics* moderates the opinion of Plato by saying that possession and legal ownership should be vested in certain definite persons, but otherwise all should be common according to the proverb."[135] This is noteworthy because when Morus offers Aristotle's arguments to counter Hythloday's advocacy of communism, Hythloday simply ignores the argument and instead offers his description of Utopia as a reply. If we are correct in viewing Hythloday as More's playful depiction of Erasmus, we might suggest that More means to indicate that Erasmus has not considered Aristotle's criticism of Plato closely enough.[136] In any case, Erasmus concludes by stating that Pythagoras, who is supposed to have originated the proverb, "instituted a kind of sharing of life and property in this way, the very thing Christ wants to happen among Christians."[137]

In his introductory essay to the *Adagia*, Erasmus utilizes the Pythagorean proverb to illustrate the way in which there are many uses for the knowledge of proverbs. Proverbs, he notes citing Aristotle as a source, are "simply vestiges of that earliest philosophy which was destroyed by the calamities of human history."[138] Therefore, Erasmus suggests, they are worth studying because "underlying them there are what one might call sparks of that ancient philosophy, which was

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[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid.
[136] See CW 4, 107/5-109/36.
[137] Erasmus, *The Adages of Erasmus*, 30.
[138] Ibid., 12-13.

much clearer-sighted in its investigation of truth than were the philosophers who came after."[139]

Take, for example, he says, that saying of Pythagoras "Between friends all is common."

> Anyone who deeply and diligently considers that remark . . . will certainly find the whole of human happiness in this brief saying. What other purpose has Plato in some many volumes except to urge a community of living, and the factor which creates it, namely friendship? If only he could persuade mortals of these things, war, envy, and fraud would at once vanish from our midst; in short a whole regiment of woes would depart from life once and for all. What other purpose had Christ, the prince of our religion? One precept and one alone He gave to the world, and that was love; on that alone, he taught, hang all the law and the prophets. Or what else does love teach us, except all things should be common to all?[140]

These remarks are striking, first for their easy equation of the teachings of the philosophers and the teachings of Christianity, and secondly, for its reduction of Christianity to a single precept—a precept which, it seems, has little to offer that is not already available in ancient philosophy.

This elision between Pythagoreanism/Platonism and Christianity is indicative of Erasmus' tendency to gloss over important differences between Christianity and pagan philosophy on issues as fundamental as human nature, the nature of virtue, and the function of government. This conflation tends to ignore or cast aside distinctions that had been considered problematic since the earliest days of Christianity. In his *Prescription Against Heretics,* for example*,* Tertullian had famously asked "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"[141] For Tertullian, Athens represented pagan philosophy, or as he put it "the doctrines of men and of demons" which are the source of heresies.[142] Jerusalem represented the Christian faith, the source of true

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[139] Ibid., 13.
[140] Ibid. For an assessment of the relationship between Erasmus' *Adagia* and More's *Utopia* see John C. Olin, *Erasmus, Utopia and the Jesuits: Essays on the Outreach of Humanism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), 57-70.
[141] Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*, Chapter 7.
[142] Ibid.

wisdom for Tertullian, thereby establishing a dichotomy with which the Christianity has long had to wrestle. Though the consensus has tended toward synthesis, establishing that synthesis and understanding its limits has constituted a large part of the Western philosophical tradition. Medieval philosophy recognized the possibilities for synthesis while maintaining a firm distinction between the kinds of things that can be known through philosophy and the kinds of things that can only be known through revelation. The most notable among these, Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, labored to bring about this synthesis through thousands of pages of text, guided by the maxim that "grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it".[143] Most prominent among the early attempts at delineation, and the one which was most influential on Aquinas, is Augustine's *City of God*, which engages and deconstructs classical philosophy in an effort to show both its strengths (especially that of Platonism) and its inadequacies in light of the truths of Christianity. In this sense, Erasmus' synthesis of Christianity and paganism is aligned with the consensus of Christian thinking, though nothing could be less Augustinian than his lack of care with the distinctions between them.

Reflecting his broadly Stoic tendencies, Erasmus' project for social reform is almost exclusively focused on the function of education for developing individual reason, and thereby individual virtue. His political theory, to the extent that he has one, is therefore heavily focused on the importance of the individual virtue of the prince as the *sine qua non* for a just political order. This focus has little to say about either the *institutional* prerequisites for stable political order, or for the role of citizens in maintaining a vibrant political order—to say nothing of the role of the Church in administering sacraments by which grace is dispensed. Erasmus seems to

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[143] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-I, 8 ad 2.

assume that a prince—properly educated and imbued with the correct virtues—is the one thing

necessary for a just political order. As Fritz Caspari has noted, "Erasmus did not concern

himself with the way in which opinion and consent are transformed into political action. Since

the 'practical details' of institutions did not interest but rather annoyed him, he made hardly any

serious suggestions with regard to constitutions, laws, and political bodies."[144] Hence, "his

argument is concerned with ethics rather than with the incorporation of such ethics in the actual

organization of society." [145]

　　This helps to shed light on why Erasmus' primary work of political thought, the *Education of*

a Christian Prince, takes the form of an educational treatise rather than a comprehensive analysis

of political life and institutions. Erasmus seems to have assumed that "his admonitions are . . . in

themselves sufficient to provide for a peaceful and harmonious solution of the play of forces

between men and between states."[146] While Erasmus thought it was *in principle* possible for all

humans to be educated in virtue, he was not so optimistic to believe that it was likely to happen

in practice. But, he does seem to have considered it possible to educate princes into virtue,

which he expected would then overflow to the benefit of the entire political community: "his

goodness flows from his to other men as from a spring."[147] Indeed, his argument in *Education*

hinges on the possibility of learned tutors educating princes in virtue, becoming "blameless" so

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[144] Caspari, "Erasmus on the Social Functions of Christian Humanism," 95.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Erasmus, *Education of a Christian Prince*, 23. Cf. CW 4, 57/16-18.

that he may act as a "sheet-anchor for the ship of state."[148] If princes are "overcome by depraved desires and foolish ideas," he asks "what last hope is there for that ship?"[149]

Though More shared Erasmus' confidence in human reason to guide human action, his broadly Augustinian anthropology, coupled with his experience in the real world of active politics, prevented him holding from an overly optimistic view of human nature. This, in turn, lead him therefore to a more restrained vision of the power of education and reason to reform political and social order. Yet it also allowed him to consider the political order according to its own logic, informed by, but distinct from, that of the individual human person or the transcendent moral order. More was, of course, not a secularist in the modern sense—as his vehement defense of the Church and his eventual martyrdom attests—but, with Augustine, he understood that the political order has a kind of autonomy, such that questions of political morality that cannot be simply referred to the individual or the transcendent orders. This understanding, in fact, allowed him to take pagan virtue even more seriously than Erasmus, because for More and Augustine, virtuous acts done for the sake of the earthly city are genuine, even if not ultimate, given that they refer to an order that possesses its own legitimate autonomous being.

This sensibility warned More away from political radicalism—which tends to result from a failure or refusal recognize the distinctive structure and operation of the political sphere—even as he recognized the need for justice or the duty to improve where improvement was possible. Augustine, in fact, had noted the duty of wise men to serve the political community, even in light
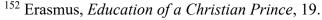
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[148] Ibid., 23.
[149] Ibid.

of its opacity and the propensity for error and corruption.[150] In short, More's clear-eyed

understanding of the dangers and dilemmas of political life prevented him from expecting too

much from politics. This clarity, in turn, allowed him to be a shrewd and effective political

actor, climbing to the heights of political power while always remaining keenly aware of the

potential hazards both from his own pride, as well as from the pride and corruption of others. As

More's son-in-law William Roper reports, More once quipped that, despite being favored by the

King above any subject in the realm, nevertheless "if my head could win [King Henry VIII] a

castle in France . . . it should not fail to go."[151] The brutal realities a politics driven by pride and

greed were not lost on More. Yet, even when political maneuvering is less transparently

motivated by baser instincts, it nevertheless regularly presents practitioners with genuine

dilemmas, whether in the punishment of crime, national security, distribution of material goods,

or any of the innumerable matters that underpin the functioning of political order.

Yet, in striking contrast to More's political savvy, Erasmus seems somewhat naïve about the

demands of political order and the genuine dilemmas that it often presents.   In a famous passage,

he admonishes princes: "if you cannot defend your kingdom without violating justice, without

much human bloodshed, or without great damage to the cause of religion, then abdicate rather

than that, and yield to the realities of the situation."[152] Erasmus, in this sense, seems unwilling to

admit that political order and the messy realities of politics present tensions between legitimate

duties. For him, it seems, the demands of private morality are to be considered the only

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[150] See Augustine, *City of God,* 19.6 and Letter 220 to Boniface.
[151] William Roper, "The Life of Sir Thomas More," in *Essential Works of Thomas More*, ed. Gerard Wegemer and Stephen W. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 1396.
[152] Erasmus, *Education of a Christian Prince*, 19.

legitimate duty, and if the requirements of public and private morality should conflict, the private should take precedence.

In this sense, Erasmus' predilection toward fundamentally individualistic moral philosophies—Epicureanism, based in individual pleasure, and Stoicism, rooted in individual virtue—meant that he was ultimately unable to develop a genuinely social, much less political, morality. And his counterintuitive attempt to combine Epicureanism and Stoicism—arguing that individual virtue was ultimately a path to the achievement of pleasure and tranquility of mind—meant that, for Erasmus, social and political life were always suspect, given that by their nature they impose certain obligations on the individual, risking both corruption and disturbance of mental tranquility. Hence, Erasmus remained aloof from political life, and, while he was certainly social in the sense that he had numerous friends and collaborators, his sociality was always at a remove, evidenced most starkly, perhaps by his "Republic of Letters," a somewhat paradoxical phrase that he and his circle—which included More—used to describe their trans-national community, cemented together by a shared love of *bonae litterae* and the writing of letters.

Book I of More's *Utopia* dramatizes this debate. One side we find "Morus," More's persona from whose perspective the story is told—a man who is described as an agent of his king and government, connected to a particular city, and the head of a household—along with his friend and fellow public servant Peter Giles. On the other side we find Raphael Hythloday, a man who, like Erasmus, is a cosmopolitan philosopher, disconnected from family, nation, and office. Morus and Giles take the position, predictably perhaps, that public service is the duty of wise men: the wise owe the political community their talents, despite the fact that all is not—and

cannot be made—perfect. Hythloday takes the opposite view, arguing that service to imperfect political orders can only be useless at best, and corrupting to the individual at worst. Though Morus and Giles speak relatively little compared to the prolix Hythloday, their words represent a substantive criticism of Hythloday, and by extension, of Erasmus' political thought.

That criticism, succinctly stated, is that Hythloday's political idealism misunderstands human nature completely, and in particular, misunderstands how political order functions in relation to virtue. Hythloday views political order—or at least, any actually-existing political order—as constraining and potentially corrupting, which leads him to radically underestimate the necessity of institutions for the development of virtue and the sustainment of political order. Morus' position, on the other hand, subtly but strongly affirms the need for institutions both to shape human beings and to give shape and stability to political life—and this position underpins his refusal to countenance the abandonment of institutions, not matter how imperfect. Institutions are, by their nature, constraining on individuals—which is precisely why Morus believes them to be necessary: because humans are fallen and we cannot expect them to be other than what they are any time soon. Hence, Morus expresses an Augustinian position, which holds moderate expectations for politics in the *saeculum*, but which affirms the legitimacy of political order and socio-political institutions—and the obligations that they bring—as a means to shape and channel human action into common purposes in the here and now.

Chapter 3

***Sic est in Republica*: More and Morus**

In Book I of *Utopia* Thomas More recounts a conversation he claims to have had with a mysterious traveler names Raphael Hythloday. More—known as "Morus" in the Latin text—constructs an image of himself as a philosophically-inclined statesman, sensitive to the limitations of politics, but confident in the obligation of the philosopher to serve the *civitas.* His character plays the role of the Ciceronian statesman, dedicated to serving the wellbeing of his political community and applying philosophical insights to the task of constructing a decent—though imperfect—political order.

Yet, despite the fact that More himself (or at least a fictional version of himself) appears in the dialogue, many interpreters have dismissed the idea that Morus could meaningfully represent the opinions of Thomas More the author. It is often suggested that Morus' urging of political action, his defense of prudence and political reason including his Aristotelian arguments against communism, and his concluding doubts about the Utopian commonwealth, must be ironic, put forth only for the purpose of refutation.[1] Moreover, the reiteration of his position at the end of Book II, in which he gives himself the final word by dismissing many Utopian institutions as "absurd," must be intended either as a winking hint to the audience that the opposite is meant, or as an indication *Utopia* is intended to be open-ended and inconclusive.[2]

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[1] See e.g. Quentin Skinner, "Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*," in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 123-157, especially 152-157.
[2] See e.g. Brenden Bradshaw, "More on Utopia," *Historical Journal*, Vol. 24 (1981), 26-27

Part of this is derived from the reasonable observation that the dialogue is dominated by the overbearing Hythloday, and the fact that his description of *Utopia* consumes virtually the entirety of Book II—no other voices are heard until More's final objections, which are uttered not to Hythoday but to the reader. But it is also derived from the fact that More is closely associated with Erasmus and hence an assumption that *Utopia* should be read in continuity with Erasmus and humanism more broadly. And understandably so: More was one of the leading lights of the prestigious circle of humanist scholars and statesmen that Erasmus pulled into his orbit in a "republic of letters", known to themselves as the *Erasmici*. His turn of mind bears many of the tell-tale signs of Erasmus' brand of humanism—from his interest in Greek language and literature to his confidence in the capacity of human reason to comprehend reality and to address social problems; from his desire for moral, social, political, and ecclesial reform to his instinctive contempt for the ostentatious displays that accompanied court life and diplomacy in the early sixteenth century. Because many of these attitudes are reflected in *Utopia*, and many of them are attributed to More's interlocutor Raphael Hythloday. it is often assumed, therefore, that Hythloday must somehow speak for More. But this assumption is not necessary, and in fact it raises more questions than it answers. Why would More attribute objections to himself that he disbelieved while allowing a mysterious and not-entirely-attractive stranger—whose name means "nonsense"—demolish his arguments? Arguments that suggest More was being ironic are unconvincing in the final analysis: when More's other works are considered, they show a turn of mind that is far from the imprudent radicalism of Hythloday. Though some interpreters have suggested that More's mind may have changed between the time he wrote *Utopia* and his later expressions of contrary opinions, Travis Curtright's recent work has compellingly shown that

More is remarkably consistent in his thinking throughout his career.[3] If this is the case, then what could be More's purpose in representing these arguments in the way that he chose? Could it be that More intended to represent the positions of his friend Erasmus? Might *Utopia* be an ironic and meditative thought experiment, designed to test (and critique) the political ideas of Erasmus?

More and Erasmus had first met in 1499, when Erasmus had come to England to teach at Oxford. They quickly bonded, exchanging numerous letters. Within a few years, their friendship bore fruit in the form of a shared translation project. They collaborated in translating several selected dialogues from the second century satirist Lucian of Samosata, and each appended a declamation in response to Lucian's declamation on tyrannicide. Erasmus composed his famous satire *In Praise of Folly* while staying at More's house in 1509, and dedicated it to More, punning on the similarity between More's name and the Latin name of the work *Moriae Encomium*.[4] When Erasmus came under attack for that work (and others), More leapt to his defense, penning several lengthy letters in defense of his friend and of the Christian humanism that they shared.[5]

The intellectual affinity that More shared with Erasmus was real and productive. Yet the divergence in their lives points to underlying intellectual differences that should not be overlooked. There were important differences between More and Erasmus, both in their lives and

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[3] See Travis Curtright, *The One Thomas More* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of American Press, 2012).

[4] Erasmus says to More "Your family name of More . . . is as close to the Greek word for folly as you are far from the meaning of the word. See "The Praise of Folly," in *The Essential Erasmus*, ed. John P. Dolan (New York: Meridian, 1983), 99.

[5] See *Complete Works of St. Thomas More Volume 15: In Defense of Humanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

in their thinking. Whereas More was a loyal citizen of England and London, serving in various

roles as a public official from a young age, Erasmus largely disassociated himself from the city

of his birth, leading the itinerant life of a cosmopolitan intellectual. Whereas More pursued

family life and a lucrative career in law, Erasmus instead led a life disconnected from such

obligations. Whereas More entered royal service when called upon to do so, Erasmus refused to

become a couturier, intent on preserving his freedom to speak his mind and to travel at will.

More, Erasmus, and Augustine

As close friends, More and Erasmus never openly attacked one another—but there were

substantial differences in their thinking, particularly on certain topics. One of their most

noteworthy intellectual disagreements was their respective positions on St. Augustine.   More

was a devotee of St. Augustine. He had given public lectures on the *City of God* at the age of

twenty-three, and Augustine was not only More's "favorite saint and [Church] Father,"[6] but is

the Church Father that More appeals to most throughout his writings.[7]

Erasmus, on the other hand, was less fond of Augustine than was his friend. To be sure, he

respected Augustine as a fellow Christian, a bishop, a saint, and Father of the Church, and he

often quoted him as an authority particularly when it was useful to silence critics. Yet, he was

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[6] Richard Marius, "More and the Early Church Fathers," in *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, ed. R.S. Sylvester and G.P. Marc'hadour (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1977), 417.

[7] See J.B. Trapp's commentary on More's *Apology* in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More Volume 9: The Apology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 320.

less than enamored of Augustine as an author and a thinker,[8] famously preferring St. Jerome (with whom Augustine himself had exchanged polemical correspondence regarding Jerome's translation of the new testament).[9] In the 1520s, Erasmus edited Augustine's complete works, adding commentary which often was less than complementary. Some of his criticisms were of Augustine's style, and some of his substance. Among other things, Erasmus notes his verbosity,[10] his "harshness" and "coldness,"[11] his propensity to speak about himself too much in the *Confessions*, the "silly, not to say sordid" things that he discusses about his "childhood, adolescence, his feelings of lust, and similar things".[12] But Erasmus' distaste for Augustine was well known long before his ten-volume edition was published over the course of 1528 and 1529. For example, in Martin Luther's first correspondences with Erasmus in 1516—prior to Luther's sparking of the reformation in 1517 and the same year of *Utopia*'s publication—Luther had suggested that Erasmus consider giving Augustine more careful consideration, particularly Augustine's anti-Pelagian works.[13] Other more conservative theologians also urged Erasmus to pay closer attention Augustine, including Edward Lee, Johann Eck, and Noel Beda.[14] Eck went so far as to suggest that even some of the *Erasmici* were dismayed at his negative assessment of Augustine, writing in 1518 that:

there is no shortcoming in you which your supporters so much regret as your failure to have

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[8] Arnoud Visser, "Reading Augustine through Erasmus' Eyes: Humanist Scholarship and Paratextual Guidance in the Wake of the Reformation," *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* (2008), 73.

[9] Ibid. See also Eugene Rice, *St. Jerome in the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 137.

[10] Visser, "Reading Augustine though Erasmus' Eyes," 77.

[11] Ibid.,

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 74.

[14] Ibid.

read Augustine. Cease therefore, dear Erasmus, to darken by your criticisms a leading light of the church then which none has been more illustrious since its first pillars. Admit rather that Augustine was a great scholar, steep yourself in his works and turn his pages with all diligence, and you will regard as quite shameless the man who dares prefer any of the Fathers to Augustine as a scholar.[15]

While Eck does not mention which of the *Erasmici* held this opinion, it is not unreasonable to suspect that Thomas More, devotee of Augustine that he was, would have agreed.

This difference in opinion regarding Augustine cashed out in important divergences between More and Erasmus' respective assessments of human nature. To be sure, these differences were not always explicit. More and Erasmus agreed on many things, including the need to shape human persons in virtue through education. But the extent to which humans could be molded, the level of virtue could be expected, and the possibility of inculcating virtue without careful attention to institutions—political, social, and cultural—seem to have been potential points of disagreement between the two friends.

Whether Erasmus' dislike for Augustine was related to Augustine's pessimistic view of fallen human nature, or whether Erasmus took a more optimistic view of human nature because of his lack of attention to Augustine early in his intellectual formation is not clear.[16] What is clear is that More's early attention to Augustine indelibly shaped his thinking and aspects of it can be seen to guide More's thinking, his career, and his piety throughout his life. His works often seem to strive to balance the legitimate demands of familial, social, and political life with an awareness that they are not ultimate. The in-between nature of the human existence led More to

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[15] Quoted in ibid.

[16] Erasmus' view of Augustine seems to have shifted somewhat over the course of his career, with his earlier writings containing more frequent, and more positive, references to the saint, while his later writings reference him less and in more critical ways.

meditate on the fleeting nature of earthly things, but it also led him to appreciate the humorous irony inherent in the predicament. The appreciation of satire, irony, and "merry jests" was something More and Erasmus shared, and they considered the art of effective humor to be an important part of their training in the *bonae litterae*.

By the time More began writing *Utopia* in 1515, he had been for nearly two decades immersing himself in the *studia humanitatis*: literature, philosophy, and history. Influenced by his mentor Archbishop of Canterbury John Cardinal Morton's support for the humanist "new learning"—in whose house he had served as a page and on whose recommendation he had been admitted to Oxford—More devoted himself to studying the liberal arts, and after encountering the Greek language at Oxford, he threw himself into mastering the language. Morton had also served as Henry VII's Lord Chancellor, and on his model, More came to consider the *studia humanitatis* to be a fundamental part of gaining an understanding of human nature—and therefore to effective, wise, prudent political engagement.

In 1506, More undertook the aforementioned project with Erasmus, translating six dialogues—three each—by the second century satirist Lucian of Samosata. In addition, they each translated a fourth, *Tyrannicida*, and each wrote declamation speeches in response. More dedicated his translations to English clergyman and humanist scholar Thomas Lupset. The choice of the irreverent pagan Lucian is perhaps surprising for two dedicated Christian humanists. But More defends the choice in his dedicatory letter. As he points out, the irreverent satire of the pagan Lucian can serve an important function in pointing the way toward truth: "Refraining from the arrogant pronouncements of the philosophers as well as from the wanton wiles of the poets, he everywhere reprimands and censures, with very honest and at the same

time very entertaining wit, our human frailties." [17] Lucian's stinging bite targets the pretenses of

the philosophers and ignorance of superstitious alike, both of which More views as inimical to

Christian life. Citing St. John Chrysostom's use of Lucian's *Cynicus* in one of his sermons,

More points out that nothing "should have pleased that grave and truly Christian man

[Chrysostom] more than this dialogue which, while the severe life of the Cynics, satisfied with

little, is defended and the soft, enervating luxury of voluptuaries denounced, by the same token

Christian simplicity, temperance, frugality, and finally that straight and narrow path which leads

to Life eternal, are praised".[18] Similarly, Lucian's *Philopsudes*, which uses a "measure of

Socratic irony" and aims at "ridiculing and reproving the inordinate passion for lying,"[19] is

useful for Christians because it indicates the folly of the practice in medieval piety which was

full of false stories "about a saint or a horrendous tale of hell to drive some old woman to tears or

make her tremble with fear."[20] The Truth, More argues, does not need falsehoods to make it

more compelling. Moreover, it is more `harmful once the falsehood is found out, serving to

undermine the Truth that was supposed to be bolstered: "Surely as the aforementioned father

Augustine testifies, when the added falsehood is detected, the author of truth is immediately

diminished and weakened."[21] Hence, he concludes, "we ought to place unquestioning trust in the

stories commended to us by the divinely inspired by Scripture, but testing others deliberately and

carefully by the teaching of Christ . . . we should either accept or reject them if we wish to free

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[17] *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol.3, Part 1: Translation of Lucian*, ed. Craig R.
Thompson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 3. Hereafter, cited as CW 3-1.
[18] Ibid., 5.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 7

ourselves both from foolish confidence [as the philosophers have] or superstitious dread.[22] Here

More succinctly articulates his conception of the use of pagan literature for the formation of the

Christian mind, and the renewal of Christendom. Despite his mocking impiety and his clear

incompatibility with Christianity on points of particular doctrine, study of Lucian can help

reveal—in a manner that is both salutary and entertaining—the ways that both overconfidence in

reason *and* undue adherence to superstition can lead away from truth.

By the time he wrote *Utopia*, More had been involved in political life, in one way or another,

for more than a decade, having been elected to in Parliament in 1504, and taking on the role of

Undersheriff of London in 1510. This experience had given him first-hand knowledge of the

power struggles that underpin political communities, and the less-than-straightforward rhetorical

tactics that are often necessary to be effective in political life. Yet, it also must have shown him

that institutions—despite their potential for corruption and the need to utilize indirect methods of

persuasion when working within them—play a crucial role in channeling human action into

productive common projects and goals. Hence, More recognized, any hope for a renaissance of

Christendom lay in the renewal of its sclerotic and decaying institutions.

More's recognition of the importance of institutions was directly related to his overall view of

human nature, which he took, more or less, from Augustine. Simply put, for More as for

Augustine, human nature is "free but fallen."[23] For freedom to become possible in fallen human

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[22] Ibid.

[23] See Gerard Wegemer, "The Political Philosophy of Sir Thomas More" in *Saints, Sovereigns and Scholars: Studies in Honor of Frederick D. Wilhelmsen*, ed. R. A. Herrera, James Lehrberger, M. E. Bradford. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 137.

beings, it is necessary that it be constrained and directed in certain ways that allow for its flourishing and enable its freedom. Hence, freedom and constraint are not opposites, but are two sides of the same coin: for fallen human nature, freedom is only possible with the right kind of constraint.

Education constrains and directs the human person toward freedom. By its nature, successful education takes the raw, unformed material of fallen human nature and shapes it into a form that allows it to be freed. The fundamental freedom of the human person is implied by the rationality that it possesses by nature. But rationality can be misused when it is unformed: as Aristotle noted in the *Politics*, "For just as man is the best of the animals when completed, when separated from law and adjudication he is the worst of all. For injustice is harshest when it is furnished with arms; and man is born naturally possessing arms for [the use of] prudence and virtue which are nevertheless very susceptible to being used for their opposites."[24] Though the capacity for reason is natural to human beings, the ability to think rationally must be developed in each person by a process of education in virtue.[25] If this fails, untrained human nature will overpower rationality, leading humans to apply the ennobling capacities with which they are equipped at birth to ends that debase them to a level that is worse than beasts.

Education, then, is essential to the development of virtuous human beings. And, virtuous human beings are essential for the maintenance of a just political community. But education cannot happen in a vacuum: a just political community is essential for education in virtue.

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[24] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 5 [1253a32-36].
[25] The etymology of education comports with this view: the Latin *educare* means literally to "lead out".

Education therefore relies on a stable and reasonably just political order: liberty and law are

mutually reinforcing.

Virtue entails the orientation of the *whole* person (not merely the intellect) toward virtuous

action through habituation, and habituation is affected by the social structures which enable

repeated action in a particular direction. Thus, for Aristotle, education requires more than

exhortations to virtue from the study of literature—education in virtue requires healthy social

and political *institutions*, and the *Politics* is a discussion of those institutions, from the family to

the city. For Aristotle, no consideration of virtue can be complete without a concomitant

consideration of the institutions—social and political—that enable its development.

Augustine, too, recognized the importance of institutions in controlling and directing fallen

human nature. While Augustine was, of course, more pessimistic than Aristotle about the

possibilities of *perfecting* (or "completing") human nature given his recognition of the fallenness

of human nature, Augustinian anthropology nevertheless views institutions as essential for the

constraint of its worst aspects. Social and political life for Augustine is always opaque and

fraught with dangers, but there are gradations of political order, with some embodying justice

more closely than others.[26] Institutions, at best, are always at risk for corruption, and, at worst,

they can actively undermine justice. But they are indispensable to the maintenance of peace, and

they contribute to whatever small measure of good can be hoped for in this fallen world. Hence,

for Augustine, political and social institutions are not to be neglected: there is the duty of

Christian citizens to carefully consider the requirements of justice in the life of political

communities, and to serve the communities when called upon to do so, even as one should

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[26] *City of God* 19.6

constantly bear in mind that the earthly city is fleeting and can never fully instantiate justice in the *saeculum*.

Drawing on these influences, More's social theory is one that takes seriously the necessity of institutions for the flourishing of fallen human beings. Well-formed institutions play a crucial role in forming human beings in ways that promote virtue, giving form and structure to our common life. Well-formed institutions even play a crucial epistemological role, passing on the collected wisdom and knowledge of the ages, allowing for consensus and common action. This is why, for example, More defends the common uses of language against the arcane and technical uses preferred by the late-scholastics[27] and why he defends Catholic Church against the reformers' individualistic approach to worship and scriptural interpretation.[28] More's defense of both sprang from the same impulse: to defend that which is *common* against the forces of disintegration.

The same impulse to defend the common also underpins More's passionate advocacy for reform. Because institutions are critical to human development and flourishing, crises of confidence in them can have disastrous consequences on political and social life. The degradation and corruption of institutions, therefore, poses a serious threat to their ability to command the confidence that they require in order to retain legitimacy. When political leaders are seen to be utilizing their public office to advance their own interests over against those of their people, their legitimacy is undermined. The same effect occurs when Church leaders are seen to be pursuing earthly power and wealth rather than the spiritual wellbeing of those in their

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[27] See Thomas More, Letter to Martin Dorp, in *St. Thomas More: Selected Letters*, ed. Elizabeth Frances Rogers (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 24.
[28] See Thomas More, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (New York: Scepter Publishers, 2006), 181.

care. For More, social and political order are essential to human existence, and yet are fragile—precariously perched between the ennobling capacity of law and the destructive capacity of fallen human nature.

Erasmus agreed with More that liberal education was essential to social reform. Yet his reasons for thinking so differed. Reflecting his skepticism toward Augustine (and his preference for Plato over Aristotle), Erasmus' attitude toward human nature was far less pessimistic than More's. This relative optimism led Erasmus to presume that humans were more or less naturally disposed toward goodness, requiring only a bit of moralistic education and exhortation in order to be made mostly good. This assumption cashed out in a general attitude toward institutions that oscillated between indifferent and hostile, underpinned by the suspicion that they tend toward constraint and corruption of the natural goodness of humans.[29]

This subliminal debate between More and Erasmus about human nature and the function of institutions, though never openly voiced in their writings, forms the core of *Utopia*, and especially the dialogue in Book I. A careful examination of More's persona Morus—both as More presents him, and the arguments that he puts forth—reveals that Morus' arguments should *not* be dismissed as insubstantial, or as mere fodder for Hythloday onslaught, but instead represent the true opinions of More himself. More and Erasmus were friends, and were like-minded in many important ways. But friends may have disagreements—and it is not unreasonable to suppose that More and Erasmus may have had a genuine disagreement on this point. As we have mentioned, one of the primary reasons this has been overlooked is that

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[29] See Fritz Caspari, "Erasmus and the Social Functions of Christian Humanism," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (January 1947), 78-106.

interpreters have too closely identified More's opinions with those of Erasmus, and have therefore failed to take seriously the fact that More presents himself as having serious reservations regarding Hythloday's ideas. For example, one recent interpreter dismisses that interpretative possibility by stating that "[We have Erasmus'] assurance that a communist way of life is a Christian one . . .and once one recognizes that *Utopia* echoes themes from the *Adages* it becomes far harder to conclude that More intended to portray the fundamental institutions of *Utopia* as being at odds with Christianity. To have done so would have been to attack Erasmus, who was *Utopia*'s chief sponsor."[30] This seems to presume that Erasmus was incapable of having friends with whom he had disagreements, or that he was unable to take criticism, or that he would not have sponsored for publication a book which contained a veiled critique of his ideas.

Yet, one of Erasmus' favorite texts was Plutarch's *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, an essay that distinguishes flatterers from true friends, in part, by arguing that *true* friends will not simply agree with each other, but will instead criticize and take criticism in turn with the aim of approaching truth.[31] As Plutarch points out, "If we observe how often and in how many respects our own attributes are disgraceful, distressing, imperfect and wrong, we will constantly discover that we do not need a friend to commend and compliment us, but to take us to task and speak candidly—yes even critically too—about our misdeeds."[32] Yet, candor is dangerous for those

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[30] David Wootton, "Friendship Portrayed: A New Account of Utopia," *History Workshop Journal*, No. 45 (Spring 1998), 36.

[31] Erasmus translated Plutarch's essay and included it in his gift edition of *The Education of a Christian Prince*.

[32] Plutarch, "How to Tell a Flatterer From a Friend," in *A Thomas More Source Book*, ed. Gerard Wegemer and Stephen W. Smith (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 189.

who do not apply it effectively: "there are few who have the courage to speak candidly rather than gratifyingly to friends, and again, even among the few, it is far from easy to find people who really know how to do this, rather than those who think they are using candor when they are merely being rude or critical."[33] If it is administered at the wrong time and in the wrong way, it will fail to have the desired effect—and can even create an opening for the flatterer to gain a foothold. Hence, "candor must be tempered by tact and must be rational, so that it is not overdone and so that its impact is diluted, as if it were bright light: otherwise, because people are upset and hurt by those who criticize everything and disparage everyone, they turn for shelter to the shadow of the flatterer and incline toward freedom from distress."[34]

More also appreciated Plutarch's essay and composed a Latin poem entitled "On a False Friend" which echoes the same themes.[35] Both More and Erasmus recognized that true friendship—far from requiring that friends never disagree or correct one another in candor—in fact requires courageous but tactful and loving correction of each other's shortcomings and blind spots. This may, in fact, explain why More creates the imaginary character Hythloday to articulate Erasmus' position, even as he includes his and Giles' positions in their own mouths.

In 1519, Erasmus wrote a description of More to a mutual friend, German humanist scholar Ulrch von Hutton. He states that "whoever desires a perfect example of *true* friendship, will seek it nowhere to better purpose than in More."[36] This is high praise coming from Erasmus, and in light of More and Erasmus' shared appreciation of Plutarch's distinction between flatterers

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[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] See ibid., 194.
[36] Ibid., 6 (emphasis mine).

and friends, indicates that Erasmus considered More be an instantiation the ideal of a true friend—including the judicious use of candor.

Hence, interpreters of *Utopia* who insist that it cannot be plausibly read as a friendly, though serious, critique of Erasmus because of More's friendship with Erasmus or because Erasmus had a hand in the editing and publication of that work, miss this important aspect of the two men's understanding of friendship generally, and their friendship in particular. If the key to *Utopia*, then, is understanding it as a dramatization of this debate between More and Erasmus, then an understanding of *Utopia* lies in the dramatic contrast between More and Hythloday. To make this case, we need not presume that Hythoday is like Erasmus in every way. We need only to see how Hythloday's positions are meant to *broadly* reflect those of Erasmus, particularly on those points where More intends to register his disagreement, and to see how Morus is meant to represent More himself, and his objections are meant to give voice to More's own reservations.

Morus and Hythloday

The reader of *Utopia* first encounters Morus in the dedicatory letter from More to Peter Giles. More and Giles, of course, are the two real persons who appear also as characters in the dialogue, and Giles—along with Erasmus—assisted More in having his manuscript published. The letter serves to heighten the verisimilitude of *Utopia* and blur the lines between reality and fiction. It also serves to introduce the reader to More—and Morus.

Morus begins the letter by apologizing to Giles for the delay of "almost a year"[37] in sending the finished copy for printing. The reason for the delay, he explains, is "[his] other tasks left

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[37] CW 4, 39/4.

[him] practically no leisure at all."[38] For, he says, he is "constantly engaged in legal business, either pleading or hearing, either giving an award as arbiter of deciding a case as a judge. I pay a visit of courtesy to one man and go on business to another. I devote almost the whole day in public to other men's affairs and the remainder to my own. I leave myself, that is to learning, nothing at all."[39] Hence, the reader is given a picture of a man of affairs, engaged in *negotium* at the expense of *otium.* This is, of course, also an accurate description of what we know about More's life at this time in his roles as a lawyer, judge, and diplomat. He continues: "When I have returned home, I must talk with my wife, chat with my children, and confer with my servants. All this activity I count as my business when it must be done—and it must be unless you want to be a stranger in your own home."[40] Again, the reader is given an accurate description Thomas More's life, now as the head of a large and busy household. Home life, too, is a place of business, not of leisure. Indeed, what little time he does get to himself to write, he must "filch away from sleep and food."[41] Morus, like More, therefore, is an engaged, committed, responsible, self-giving, man who takes on responsibilities, is shaped by the institutions in which he is embedded—from the courts to his family—and who lives according to his duties, rather than according to his whims. The letter, then, establishes Morus as an image of the real More.

This is, of course, nearly the opposite of how Hythloday is presented. Hythloday, we are told, is a solitary traveler, who has given his share of his inheritance to his brothers and thereby

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[38] Ibid., 39/27-28.
[39] Ibid., 39/28-33.
[40] Ibid., 39/34-37.
[41] Ibid., 41/9-10.

considers his duties to them complete.[42] He is a man who resists all responsibility as a constraint on his will, retorting that "I live as I please [*sic vivo ut volo*]" when it is suggested that he consider joining a king's court as an advisor on account of his learning.[43] The contrast between More and Hythloday could not be more stark.

The similarities between Hythloday and *Erasmus*, however, are striking. For example, like Hythloday, Erasmus lived an essentially cosmopolitan existence, rarely remaining in a single place for long, and having no real, permanent residence. Hythloday's preference for Greek literature and philosophy over Latin (save, that is, "certain treatises of Seneca and Cicero"[44]) matches that of Erasmus, as does his preference for Plato over all other philosophers. Hythloday's consistent use of ancient aphorisms comports with Erasmus' taste for aphoristic expression as evidenced by his ever-expanding *Adagia*—a new edition of which was published in 1515, and which contained a number of aphorisms dealing with political and social life. Many of Hythloday's social and political critiques closely mirror those of Erasmus, and his advocacy of the community of property is consistent with Erasmus' ideal.

Most notable for the purposes of the dialogue in Book I is Hythloday's strident insistence that entering political service is equivalent to slavery and that there is no obligation to do so, particularly because it is unlikely to have any positive effect. While Erasmus was slightly less strident than Hythloday on this score, he did resist entering into royal service in any meaningful sense: even though he accepted Archduke Charles of Burgundy's offer to become a councilor, probably in early 1516, he insisted on his right to "resign everything" in the event that he

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[42] Ibid., 55/23-25.
[43] Ibid., 57/2.
[44] Ibid., 51/4.

perceived his freedom being threatened by the demands of the post.[45] This mirrors his earlier

rejection of monastic life—having sought, and received, a dispensation from his vows. While

there is some evidence that Erasmus entered the Augustinian priory under financial duress,

thereby calling into question the veracity of his vocation, this resistance to being restrained by

the demands of *all* institutional roles is indicative of a broader attitude toward institutions of all

kinds—political, social, educational, and ecclesial—that underlay his acidic (and, admittedly,

largely deserved) attack on various institutions of late-Medieval Europe in his *In Praise of Folly*.

Erasmus' latent individualism led him to easily see the problems in the institutions of his time—

their corruption and folly—but it also obscured for him their importance in maintaining social

order, and in promoting virtue by encouraging the virtuous formation of human beings.

   More, to be sure, concurred with much of Erasmus' assessment regarding the folly that

inhabited many of Europe's institutions at that time. The petty maneuverings of councilors

inside the councils of kings, the pointless wars between Christian kingdoms, the obsession with

ostentatious clothing and jewelry, the slavish and sclerotic methods of the schools, and the

corruption in the Church all frustrated More and he joined Erasmus in his impatience with

these—and other—instantiations of folly. Particularly irritating to both Erasmus and More was

the fact that the folly of those in these institutions, perversely, also tended to inflate the pride of

those engaged in them, making them particularly intractable to reform. But More saw deeper.

Whereas Erasmus tended to view these problems as somewhat contingent and the product of a

particularly corrupt time (as a result of his somewhat more optimistic view of human nature)

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[45] See David Harris Sacks, "Utopia as Gift: More and Erasmus on the Horns of a Dilemma," *Moreana*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2017), 163n29.

More's Augustinian view enabled him to recognize that these prideful follies were not somehow unique to their own time, but were in fact endemic to human endeavors everywhere and always. Yet, flawed as they might be, More understood that institutions have an important role to play as well.

More's Augustinian conception of human nature, in addition to teaching him to expect folly and corruption in everything humans create, also helped him see that institutions serve a crucial function in restraining and channeling human nature toward virtue. For More, institutions serve to give shape to human life, particularly common life. Law, for example, mediates between citizens, brings order to social relations, and allows action to be directed in a common direction.[46] While just laws must comport with a transcendent source of order—what Aquinas calls the "eternal law"—positive laws mediate between concrete human existence and the transcendent order, and help to instruct citizens in virtue. The family, to take another example, places certain demands and expectations—chosen and unchosen—on the individual which habituate each member toward virtue, thereby simultaneously acting as a fundamental building block of society. It is no accident, then, that these are precisely the obligations—legal and familial—that More cites in his letter to Giles as those that have constrained his ability to complete *Utopia*. He states that he is "constantly engaged in legal business . . . devoting almost the whole day to other men's affairs"[47] and that the family, comprised of "those whom nature has supplied," whom "chance has made" and whom "you yourself have chosen, to be companions of

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[46] See More's defense of law against Luther in *A Response to Luther*. See *The Essential Works of Thomas More*, ed. Gerard Wegemer and Stephen W. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 508-511.
[47] CW 4, 39/28-29.

your life,"[48] "count as business when it must be done".[49] All the institutions that form us, More suggests, are composed of this admixture of nature, chance, and choice. Yet, though they infringe on our liberty and leisure, and though they are contingent, they nevertheless *legitimately* impose duties on us and command our attention.

More finishes the letter to Giles with a humorous reflection on human ingratitude. "[T]o tell the truth," he says, "I myself have not yet made up my mind whether I shall publish [*Utopia*] at all."[50] This is because

> So varied are the tastes of mortals, so peevish the characters of some, so ungrateful their dispositions, so wrongheaded their judgements, that those persons who pleasantly and blithely indulge their inclinations seem to be very much better off than those who torment themselves with anxiety in order to publish something that may bring profit or pleasure to others, who nevertheless receive it with disdain or ingratitude.[51]

In short, More says, it is much easier to sit on the sidelines and criticize what others do and write, than it is to take the trouble to act and write only to be criticized by those who, whether through laziness or through lack of a sense of responsibility, cannot be bothered to do anything—profitable or pleasurable—for the benefit of others. Some people are ignorant, some people are fickle, some "approve only of what is old" and "very many admire only their own work."[52] Some are "so grim that [they] will not near of a joke," some are "so insipid that [they] cannot endure wit," and "some are so dull-minded that they fear all satire as much as a man bitten by a mad dog fears water."[53] "These persons sit in taverns and over their cups criticize the talents of authors.

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[48] Ibid., 41/1-3.
[49] Ibid., 39/35-36.
[50] Ibid., 43/30-31.
[51] Ibid., 43/31-39.
[52] Ibid., 45/4-5
[53] Ibid., 45/7-9.

With much pontificating, just as they please, they condemn each author by his writings, plucking each one, as it were by the hair. They themselves remain under cover and, as the proverb goes, out of shot."[54]

The humorous descriptions of various human follies echoes that of Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*. And yet, More *does* publish *Utopia*, a work which he describes in the full title as "no less beneficial than entertaining"[55]—thereby subjecting himself to the criticism of lazy fools who refuse to be of service to their fellow humans. In this sense, More's letter to Giles foreshadows the debate that follows in which Morus defends service to the commonweal against Hythloday— the "idle talker"—whose rhetorical *ethos* seems only to value his own work, and who prefers to criticize while remaining "out of shot".

The *Ethos* of Hythloday

The bulk of Book I of *Utopia* consists in an extended dialogue between Morus, Raphael, and Peter Giles centered on the merits of serving as a king's councilor. It has thus been labeled the "Dialogue on Council" by J.H. Hexter, who compellingly argued in his 1952 book *More's* Utopia*: The Biography of an Idea* that it was a later addition to the work.[56] The dialogue is introduced by the aforementioned description of Hythloday given by Giles to More. The scene opens with More describing to the reader the circumstances of his being in Antwerp: he has been sent on a diplomatic mission to Bruges, in Flanders, as a representative of the "most invincible

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[54] Ibid., 45/11-15.
[55] Ibid., 1.
[56] J.H. Hexter, *More's* Utopia*: The Biography of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952). He repeats his argument in the introduction to CW 4, xv-xxiii.

King of England, Henry, the eighth of that name" to dispute "certain weighty matters" with

Charles, Prince of Castile.[57]   During a break in the negotiations, More tells us, he made his way

to Antwerp where he became acquainted with Peter Giles.

He describes Giles as "an honorable man of high position in his home town yet worthy of the

very highest position, being a young man distinguished equally by learning and character".[58] He

is also "most virtuous and most cultured," "most courteous" to everyone, but "to his friends so

open-hearted, affectionate, loyal and sincere . . . the perfect friend on every score."[59] Moreover,

"His modesty is uncommon" and "none has a wiser simplicity of nature."[60] Most importantly for

More, "he is so polished and so witty without offense that his delightful society and charming

discourse largely took me away from my nostalgia and make me less conscious than before of

the separation from my home, wife, and children to whom I was exceedingly anxious to get

back".[61] In short, More's description of Giles' rhetorical *ethos* is similar to More himself—a

learned man of affairs, and a worthy friend. So like-minded were they, in fact, that his company

was temporarily able to relieve More's desire to return to his natural, familial connections.

The events of the day that More recounts in *Utopia* begins as he is leaving Mass at Antwerp's

Notre Dame cathedral, "the finest church in the city and the most crowded with worshippers."[62]

This serves to immediately locate the dialogue in a Christian context, and further serves to

identify More as a devout Catholic Christian. Upon leaving the Church, More happens upon

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[57] CW 4, 47/1-12.
[58] Ibid., 49/3-5.
[59] Ibid., 49/6-9.
[60] Ibid., 49/9-10.
[61] Ibid., 49/11-15.
[62] Ibid., 49/17-18.

Giles "in conversation with a stranger, a man of advanced years, with sunburnt countenance and a long beard and cloak hanging carelessly from his shoulder, while his appearance and dress seemed to me to be those of a ship's captain."[63] This is More's first meeting of Raphael Hythloday, the mysterious interlocutor who will relay the story of the Utopians. His discourse on Utopia is foreshadowed in Giles' words to More regarding Hythloday: "There is no mortal alive today who can give you such an account of unknown peoples and lands, a subject about which I know you are always most greedy to hear."[64]

But Giles corrects More's assumption: "his sailing has not been like that of Palinurus but that of Ulysses or, rather, of Plato."[65] Palinurus refers to the pilot of Aeneas' ship in Virgil's *Aeneid* and is perhaps intended to simply reference a sailor who fell asleep at the helm and was drowned, though some Medieval commentators recognized Palinurus as a pagan image of Christ, in that his sacrifice of himself saved many ("one's life shall be given for many")—and this reference may intentionally establish the tension and interplay between paganism and Christianity that Hythloday's story will later draw out.[66] Ulysses, of course, is the hero of Homer's *Odyssey* whom Erasmus describes in his *Adeges* as "ingenious, astute, and wily"[67]—an apt description, perhaps, of Hythloday. But Plato is the author that Hythloday most admires, and

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[63] Ibid., 49/18-23. Notably, ancient martyr St. Erasmus of Formia, from whom Erasmus adopted his name, is the patron saint of sailors.
[64] Ibid., 49/30-33.
[65] Ibid., 49/36-37.
[66] See "Additional Notes" in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Aligheri: Volume 2: Purgatorio*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 599.
[67] *Essential Works of Thomas More*, 505n2.

it is the philosophy of Plato—or a particular interpretation of Plato—which most influences Hythloday's approach to morality and political philosophy.[68]

While this is the first time Plato is mentioned in the main portion of the text, it is not the first time that Plato is mentioned in the work. In a six-line poem—perhaps written by Giles, but it is uncertain—included in the introductory material, Utopia is described as "a rival of Plato's republic, perhaps even a victor over it. The reason is that what he has delineated in words I alone have exhibited in men and resources and laws of surpassing excellence."[69] In other words, unlike Plato's *Republic*, which is a "city in speech," Utopia is presented as a fully-existing and functioning city. Again, this serves to heighten the verisimilitude, but it also serves to identify *Utopia* with the Platonic tradition, and signaling that *Utopia* is, in some way, a response to Plato's *Republic*. Notably, Giles' letter to fellow humanist Jerome Busleyden explicitly mentions Plato and Ulysses as well, in the former case, echoing the poem by stating that Utopia "is eminently worthy of everyone's knowledge as being superior to Plato's republic," and in the latter, that Hythloday is "a man superior even to Ulysses himself in his knowledge of countries, men, and affairs."[70]

With this, then, the reader is primed for the dialogue that follows. As Giles continues his description of Hythloday to More, he notes that he "is no bad Latin scholar, and most learned in Greek. He studies that language because he had devoted himself unreservedly to philosophy, and in that subject he found that there is nothing valuable in Latin except certain treatises of

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[68] For an insightful discussion of the meaning of these comparisons to Ulysses and Plato see Wolfgang E.H. Rudat, "More's Raphael Hythloday: Missing the Point in *Utopia* Once More?," *Moreana*, Vol. 18, Iss. 69 (March, 1981), 41-64.

[69] CW 4, 21/5-6.

[70] Ibid., 21/18-19 and 30-31.

Seneca and Cicero."[71] Greek, then, is considered by Hythloday to be *the* language of

philosophy—an opinion shared by many humanists including Erasmus and More.

  Giles explains further that Hythloday had been the "constant companion" of Amerigo

Vespucci on three of the four voyages "who are now universally read of"—but "on the final

voyage he did not return with him [Vespucci]."[72] Rather, he had begged Vespucci to be one of

the twenty men left behind at the furthest point of the voyage, because he was "more anxious for

travel than about the grave."[73] Giles' notes that this attitude comports with two sayings that are

"constantly on his lips: 'He who has no grave is covered by the sky,' and 'From all places it is

the same distance to heaven.'"[74] This establishment of Hythloday's *ethos*—his lack of care for

familial or patriotic ties, coupled with his use of adages to justify it (both of which are of ancient

origin and both of which were included in Erasmus' *Adagia*)—seems particularly well-calculated

to allude to Erasmus, whose cosmopolitan vision militated against loyalty to any particular

political community, and who boasted of his ability to "feel at home everywhere".[75] Yet, Giles

comments, "This attitude of his, but for the Grace of God, would have cost him dear" had he not

been rescued from an uncertain fate by "strange change" by which he was "carried to Ceylon [Sri

Lanka], whence he reached Calicut [Kozhikode]. There he conveniently found some Portuguese

ships, and at length arrived home again, beyond all expectation."[76]

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[71] Ibid., 49/39-51/1-4.

[72] Ibid., 51/6-8.

[73] Ibid., 51/9-12.

[74] Ibid., 51/12-16.

[75] See William J. Bouwsma, *A Usable Past: Essays in European Cultural* History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 36.

[76] CW 4, 51/18-21. Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama had established a trade route to Calicut in 1498 after successfully navigating the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa. The name of one of his ships on the voyage was the St. Raphael. Incidentally, if Hythloday's account

At this point, the text turns away from Giles' account of Hythloday's character and background, and back to More's first-person account of the conversation. After exchanging typical pleasantries, they agree to retire to Morus' residence, where they take up a place in the garden, on a turf-covered bench, "to talk together" (*confabulamur*).[77] Morus recounts how Hythloday regaled he and Giles with tales of numerous lands and peoples he encountered on his travels after being left by Vespucci.

Two points in this section are especially worth noting. First, Morus describes how, at some point, Hythoday had encountered a country which contained skilled mariners, but which did not have knowledge of how to use a magnetic compass to navigate. This lack of knowledge had made them modest in their endeavors, such that they "had hesitated to trust themselves to the sea and had boldly done so in the summer only."[78] Yet, with the introduction of the compass, they had begun to venture further out to sea, even during the winter, in a "dangerously confident" manner—and hence "there is a risk that what was thought likely to be a great benefit to them may, through their imprudence, cause them great mischief."[79] This wry observation by Morus serves to subtly foreshadow what will become the central point of contention in the dialogue between Giles, Morus, and Hythloday: namely, whether the technical and experiential knowledge that Hythoday possesses and wishes to impart on European society regarding the best state of a commonwealth is an unalloyed good, such that it should be fully and unhesitatingly adopted on Hythloday's word alone. As this anecdote hints, knowledge brought by Hythloday

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of his travels were true, it would make him to the first person to circumnavigate the globe, some 20 years before the feat was accomplished by Magellan.

[77] Ibid., 51/27-28.

[78] Ibid., 53/21-25.

[79] Ibid., 53/27-29.

should be adopted only with great prudence and caution, lest "great mischief" come from that which was intended as a "great benefit".

Second, Morus notes that the things that most interested him and Giles were "those wise and prudent provisions which he noticed anywhere among nations living together in a civilized way"[80] and "on these subjects we eagerly inquired of him . . . but about stale travelers' wonders we were not curious."[81] Unlike the readers of the *Aeneid* and the *Odyssey* who hear tales of the Scylla, and Celanos, and Laestrygones, and other monsters—all of which are "common enough"—"well and wisely trained citizens [*institutos cives*] are not everywhere to be found."[82] In other words, the *true* monstrosities—things that are strange, inhuman, unnatural—in the world are governing institutions which reliably produce good citizens. Hythloday's experiences, Morus notes, were useful in calling attention to "many ill-advised customs among these new nations" as well as elucidating "not a few points from which our own cities, nations, races and kingdoms may take example in correction of their errors."[83] Morus, then, considers Hythloday's experience and insights as useful primarily for comparison and gradual—piecemeal— improvement of European institutions. But, as the dialogue on council makes plain, this is not how Hythloday understands the value of his knowledge: Hythloday is a man so taken with his own insights that he will not accept half-measures or compromise, rendering his insights useless or inaccessible to those actively contending in real-world politics. Nevertheless, on the basis of his wide-ranging experiences and knowledge of numerous political and social forms, Giles asks

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[80] Ibid., 53/33-34.
[81] Ibid., 53/35-37.
[82] Ibid., 53/36-39.
[83] Ibid., 55/1-4.

in amazement why Hythloday is not employed as an advisor to a king, thereby commencing the dialogue on council.

Service and Slavery

The dialogue on council, as Hexter has termed it, begins with Giles' surprised comment:

> Why my dear Raphael, I wonder that you do not attach yourself to some king. I am sure there is none of them to whom you would not be very welcome because you are capable not only of entertaining a king with this learning and experience of men and places but also of furnishing him with examples and of assisting him with council. Thus, you would not only serve your own interests excellently but be of great assistance in the advancement of all your relatives and friends.[84]

Hythloday—not surprisingly, given what we already know about him[85]—retorts "[a]s for my relatives and friends . . . I am not greatly troubled about them, for I think I have fairly well performed my duty for to them already,"[86] referring to his having divided his possessions between his relatives and friends. Moreover, he insists, "I think they ought to be satisfied with this generosity from me and not to require or expect additionally that I should enter into servitude [*servitium* or "slavery"] to kings."[87] Giles responds by clarifying that he does not mean *servitude* [*servias*] but rather *service* [*inservias*]. The difference, Raphael contends, is "only one syllable," a point more easily seen in the Latin text.[88] Hythloday here uses a debater's trick, drawing a false equivalency between two things because of the similarity of the sound of the words (and, likely, etymology).

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[84] Ibid., 55/15-22.
[85] Recall Giles' earlier comment to Morus that Hythloday has already given his patrimony to his brothers in order to be liberated for an unattached, iterant lifestyle.
[86] Ibid., 55/23-25.
[87] Ibid., 55/29-31.
[88] Ibid., 55/34, cf. 54/27-29.

But this is not a serious objection, as Giles makes plain by his response: "whatever name you give to this mode of life . . . it is the very way by which you can not only profit people both as private individuals and as member of the commonwealth but also render your own condition more prosperous."[89] Here Giles, now seemingly taken aback at Hythloday's hyperbolic response to his original off-the-cuff statement of surprise offers a more substantive position, appealing now to the benefit to the public good, rather than only to Hythloday's private good, and connecting the two together.

Hythloday is unmoved by Giles' appeal, and his real opposition to serving becomes clearer in his response: "Should I," he asks, "make it more prosperous by a way of life which my soul [*animus*] abhors? As it is, I now live as I please [*Atqui nunc sic vivo ut volo*],[90] which I surely fancy is very seldom the case with your grand courtiers. Nay, there are plenty of persons who court the friendship of the great, and so you need not think it a great loss if they have to do without me and one or two others like me."[91] In short, Hythloday objects *primarily* to the likelihood that service to a king would restrict his freedom—a freedom for which he has already sacrificed his possessions and his family. In this sense, Hythloday reveals his view of freedom as being essentially opposed to service in political institutions—*inservias*, for him, is in essence the same as *servias.* Moreover, Hythloday here sows a seed here that will seriously undermine his later argument against serving: whereas later the core of his complaint will rest on the fact that councils are filled with men who are ambitious and uninterested in truth or justice, he here

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[89] Ibid., 55/35-39.
[90] Compare with Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.70: "His idem propositum fuit, quod regibus, ut ne qua re egerent, ne cui parerent, libertate utrentur, cuius proprium est *vivere, ut veles*" (emphasis mine).
[91] CW 4, 57/1-6.

suggests that at least part of the reason that he, and others like him, refuse to sacrifice their freedom lies in their unwillingness to be challenged or constrained, even in service of the common good.

Here, Morus enters the dialogue, and he will forcefully show the contradictions in Hythloday's own position. Praising Hythloday for his lack of interest in either riches or power, he contends that "it seems to me that you will do what is worthy of you and of this generous and truly philosophic spirit of yours if you so order your life as to apply your talent and industry to the public interest, even if it involves some personal disadvantages to yourself."[92] Now the appeals to Hythloday's self-interest have dropped out—Morus' appeal is to the public interest, *over and against* Hythloday's desire to live as he pleases. This is important because "[f]rom the monarch, as a never-failing spring, flows a stream of all that is good or evil over the whole nation."[93] Hythloday's learning and experience ensure that he "would make an excellent member of any king's council."[94] But, Hythloday objects, "You are twice mistaken," "first in me and then in the matter in question." He goes on to explain that he is in fact not as talented as Morus has assumed, and moreover, that even if he were, this disturbance of his personal peace and quiet would still be ineffective in serving the public interest. This is for two reasons: first, because kings are only interested in war, and second, because royal councilors are all so taken with their own opinions and are so sure of their own wisdom that they will refuse to listen to the ideas of anyone else.[95] Hence, Hythloday's argument against serving as a counselor would seem

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[92] Ibid., 57/10-14.
[93] Ibid., 57/16-18.
[94] Ibid., 57/21.
[95] See Ibid., 57/25-38.

to hinge on whether this is, in fact, the case. Strangely, his position is immediately challenged by his own argument.

Cardinal Morton's Table

After indicating that he had once been in England and had seen this dynamic of councils at work, Hythloday proceeds to tell of an incident that he claims occurred at the table of John Cardinal Morton, the Lord Chancellor of England under Henry VII and More's mentor in whose house he had served as a page. Before he relates the incident, however, he pauses to give a description of Morton for the benefit of Giles. Morton was, according to Hythloday, a man "who deserved respect as much for his prudence and virtue as for his authority."[96] Moreover, "his speech was polished and pointed. His knowledge of law was profound, his ability incomparable, and his memory astonishingly retentive, for he had improved his extraordinary natural qualities by learning and practice."[97] Hythloday continues:

> The king placed the greatest confidence in his advice, and the commonwealth seemed much to depend on him when I was there. As one might expect, almost in earliest youth he had been taken straight from school to court, had spent his whole life in important public affairs, and had sustained numerous and varied vicissitudes of fortune so that by many and great dangers he had acquired a statesman's sagacity which, when thus learned, is not easily forgotten.[98]

This entire passage seems calculated to subtly undermine Hythloday's entire position. First, Hythloday's contention that all councilors are nothing more than grasping flatterers with little interest in virtue or justice is contradicted by his recognition of Morton's apparent prudence,

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[96] Ibid., 59/26-27.
[97] Ibid., 59/35-38.
[98] Ibid., 59/39-61/6.

virtue, and knowledge of the law. Second, Morton's long experience in the court indicates a

concomitant lack of experience *outside* of the court life—he has not travelled as Hythloday has.

Yet, this long experience is counted, by Hythloday himself, not as a detriment, but as having

given Morton a "statesman's sagacity".

   At any rate, this flattering picture of Morton is related in order to set the scene for

Hythloday's primary intent, which is to justify his position by giving an illustration from his time

in England. He tells Morus and Giles that at dinner one evening, the conversation had turned to

the punishment of thieves. A lawyer, Hythloday explains, was expressing his confusion that the

severe punishment of hanging was seemingly having little effect on the problem. Upon hearing

this, Hythloday pounces on the opportunity to "be free in expressing [his] opinions without

reserve"[99] and proceeds to pronounce the policy of hanging men for simple theft is neither

efficacious nor just in itself.

   The first part of his argument consists in an attack on the militaristic culture of much of

Renaissance Europe. Princes and noblemen are raised to be warriors, and therefore often engage

in needless wars in pursuit of honor or superfluous lands. From these wars, there are men who

have "lost their limbs in the service of the commonwealth or of the king" and "their disability

prevents them from exercising their own crafts, and their age from learning a new one."[100] But,

because wars are not constant, Hythloday turns instead to examine things that occur every day.

Idle noblemen keep retainers—knights, private armies, and other hangers-on—who are "bred up

in idleness and pleasure, and who has been wont in sword and buckler to look down with a

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[99] CW 4, 61/15-16.
[100] Ibid., 61/38-63/2.

swaggering face on the whole neighborhood and to think of himself far above everybody" and

are not "fit for the spade and hoe"[101] and are then left unable to provide for themselves when

their master dies. Standing armies also pose problems, because an idle warrior class poses a

danger to the stability of the political order at worst—citing the Romans, Carthaginians, and

Syrians as examples—and, at best, run-of-the-mill disturbances of the peace, including theft.

But, Hythloday avers, there is yet another cause for theft that is more unique to England: the

enclosure movement. This was the process by which, in the fifteenth and early sixteenth

centuries, the rights of common use for lands were gradually undermined by the enclosing of

those lands in order to enable exclusive private use. As economic historian Harriet Bradley has

explained,

> When it began, the arable fields of a community lay divided in a multitude of strips separated
> from each other only by borders of unplowed turf. Each landholder was in possession of a
> number of these strips, widely separated from each other, and scattered all over the open
> fields, so that he had a share in each of the various grades of land. But his private use of the
> land was restricted to the period when it was being prepared for crop or was under crop.[102]

Over time, however, this arrangement was shifted by the gradual enclosure of lands through the

building of hedgerows and fences, eliminating the possibility of common usage even when the

land was fallow.[103] This was mostly done in order to convert the land in to pasture for sheep,

due to the rising demand for wool on the international market. Bradley continues, "[t]his

involved the eviction of the tenants who had been engaged in cultivating these fields and the

amalgamation of many holdings of arable to form a few large enclosures for sheep. The

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[101] Ibid., 63/21-25.
[102] Harriett Bradey, *Enclosures in England: An Economic Reconstruction* (Kitchener, ON: Batoche Books, 2001), 7.
[103] Ibid.

enclosure movement was not merely the displacement of one system of tillage by another system of tillage; it involved the temporary displacement of tillage itself in favor of grazing."[104] The process resulted in numerous social and economic changes in English society, not least because of the upheaval it necessitated.

Hythoday describes the effects of this process in detail, memorably stating that the situation is one in which sheep, "which are usually so tame and so cheaply fed, begin now, according to report, to be so greedy and wild that they devour human beings themselves and devastate and depopulate fields, houses, and towns."[105] He further notes that those who engage in enclosure of common lands "are not content, by leading an idle and sumptuous life, to do no good to their country; they must do it positive harm. They leave no ground to be tilled; they enclose every bit of pasture; they pull down houses and destroy towns, leaving only the church to pen the sheep."[106] In short, they "turn all human habitations and all cultivated land into wilderness."[107]

This, of course, forces people out of their homes, and into a life of wandering, begging, and, eventually, theft. After offering a fairly sophisticated economic argument about the structure of pricing in the wool trade forcing out cattle as a viable commodity and thereby creating a food shortage[108] Hythloday concludes: "Thus the unscrupulous greed of a few is ruining the very thing by virtue of which your island was one counted fortunate in the extreme."[109]

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[104] Ibid.
[105] CW 4, 65/38-67/2.
[106] Ibid., 67/6-11.
[107] Ibid., 67/12-13.
[108] Ibid., 69/1-22.
[109] Ibid., 69/23-25.

Finally, Hythloday condemns the taste for luxury that has taken root, among "not only the servants of noblemen but the craftsmen and almost the clodhoppers [*rusticis*] themselves, in fact all classes alike, are given to much ostentatious sumptuousness of dress and excessive indulgence at table."[110] Vices, including "dives, brothels, and those other places as bad as brothels, to wit, wine shops and alehouses" as well as "crooked games of chance, dice, cards, backgammon, ball, bowling, and quoits" all serve to "drain the purses of their votaries and send them off to rob someone".[111] Hythloday's long and somewhat rambling speech is brought to a close with a typically forthright set of proposals for reform, which, he is sure, will remedy the current situation wherein, he memorably claims, societies "first create thieves and then become the very agents of their punishment".[112]

Hythloday's position is radical and his demeanor emphatic. Yet, Morton dismisses the lawyer's prepared rebuttal, in which the lawyer claims will "show in what respects ignorance of our conditions has deceived you," and proceeds to inquire into Hythloday's positions more deeply.[113] How, Morton asks, exactly would Hythloday punish theft? What would be more just?

Hythloday's response is strikingly humane, and he makes three distinct points to support his claim. First, he argues that it is "altogether unjust that a man should suffer the loss of his life for the loss of someone's money." For "not all the goods that fortune can bestow on us can be set on a scale against a man's life"[114] citing the ancient adage "extreme justice [is] extreme wrong"

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[110] Ibid., 69/30-33.
[111] Ibid., 69/33-37.
[112] Ibid., 71/15-17.
[113] Ibid., 71/26-27.
[114] Ibid., 73/8-11.

(*summmum illud ius, summa . . .iniuria*).[115] He attacks the "Stoical ordinances" which "count all

offenses equal so that there is no difference between killing a man and robbing him of his coin

when, if equity has any meaning, there is no similarity or connection between the two cases."[116]

Second, he cites the divine command against killing, setting God's law against human laws

which sanction it, such that, if it were carried to its extreme, "men will determine in everything

how far it suits them that God's commandments should be obeyed."[117] Even the law of Moses,

he observes—which was "intended for slaves, and those of a stubborn breed"—only punished

theft with a fine, so how much more should the "new law of mercy in which He gives commands

as a father to his sons" prohibit cruelty.[118] Finally, he cites common sense: "surely everyone

knows how absurd and even dangerous to the commonwealth it is that a thief and a murderer

should receive the same punishment."[119] For, if the punishment is the same, what is to prevent

every theft from becoming a murder, in order to ensure that no witnesses are left? Hence, "while

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[115] Ibid., 73/14 (72/10-11).

[116] Ibid., 73/17-21. This appears to be a reference to the notorious Stoic doctrine which Cicero elucidates in section III of his *Paradoxa Stoicorum*: "All offenses are equal and all good deeds are equal." Cicero attempts to explain the paradox thus: "when whatever offense is committed, it is committed by upsetting reason and order, and once reason and order have been upset, nothing more could be added which would make it possible for there to be more of an offense." (Cicero, *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, trans. Mark O. Webb (Master's Thesis, Texas Tech University, 1985), 25. To say that Hythloday (and Erasmus) leans toward a Stoic disposition is not, of course to say that he is wholly Stoic, as this demonstrates. More to the point, however, is the fact that this Stoic teaching is not, in fact, an "ordinance" (*scita*) but rather a paradox—Hythloday's literalistic mind seems incapable of grasping the tensions in reality to which paradox points. For a detailed discussion of this paradox and its meaning, see J.M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 81-96.

[117] CW 4, 73/35-36.

[118] Ibid., 75/1-3.

[119] Ibid., 75/5-7.

we endeavor to terrify thieves with excessive cruelty, we urge them on to the destruction of honest citizens."[120]

Indeed, even the Romans, "the greatest experts in managing a commonwealth [*reipublicae*]"[121] were not so harsh as to kill men for petty theft. Instead, "when men were convicted of atrocious crimes, [the Romans] condemned them for life to stone quarries and to digging in metal mines, and kept them constantly in chains."[122] Surtz's note points out that Hythloday's referencing of the Romans in this manner follows Aquinas—himself following Augustine—who in his *De Regimnine Principum* gives three reasons for the prospering of the Romans: patriotism, justice and civic benevolence.[123] And, Surtz also points out that Erasmus, in the *Education of a Christian Prince*, had remarked that "we inflict the death penalty (and that quite beyond the example of all laws of the ancients) on a thief who has chanced to steal a few dollars."[124] Furthermore, one way of analyzing the late Roman legal system was as an instantiation of Stoic philosophy into a legal system, at least in the sense that it was there that the idea of a universal natural law (*ius natural*)—first developed in Greek philosophical thought—was instantiated into a legal order: "Roman Stoicism, integrated into Roman law, enabled the idea of a cosmopolis to become a military, administrative and political reality."[125] For Hythloday, a devotee of Greek philosophy and Roman Stoic (and Stoic-influenced) thinkers like

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[120] Ibid., 75/13-15.
[121] Ibid., 75/20.
[122] Ibid., 75/21-23.
[123] Ibid., 342.
[124] Ibid., 342-343.
[125] R.W. Dyson, *Natural Law and Political Realism in the History of Political Thought Volume I: From the Sophists to Machiavelli* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 135.

Seneca and Cicero, the Roman political order would have represented an ideal Stoic-cosmopolitan political arrangement.

Yet, Hythloday does not satisfy himself with a reference to the Romans, nor does he suggest that England adopt the policy of the Romans. Rather, he recommends that England adopt the policy of a previously unknown people called the Polylerites. While the Polylerite episode seems insignificant on the surface, the striking parallels to Utopia indicate that More may have intended it to be a presaging of Book II's lengthily description of that commonwealth.

The Polylerites (probably from the Greek meaning "much nonsense"[126]) are a people in Persia who, like the Romans, sentence thieves to forced labor rather than killing them. They have other characteristics of an Erasmian ideal state as well, especially the fact that "[i]n accordance with their long-standing national policy, they do not try to enlarge their territory . . . Being completely free from militarism, they live a life more comfortable than splendid and more happy than renowned or famous, even their name, I think, is hardly known except to their immediate neighbors."[127]   Yet, the reason for their freedom from militarism is that they are cut off from most outside intercourse by mountains, and, more importantly, that they pay a tribute to the Persian padishah, who provides for their protection.[128] This is the first indication that all is not as it seems: the realities of political life require that security be taken into account. While natural barriers may provide some protection, nations that refuse to take the burden of their own security do not eliminate the need—the simply pass it off to someone else.

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[126] See CW 4, 343.
[127] Ibid., 75/33-39.
[128] Ibid., 75/35-36.

More striking, however, is that this "humane" system of criminal justice—which allegedly does away with execution for minor offenses—surprisingly includes a long string of capital offenses, some for seemingly minor crimes: it is a death sentence to give money to or receive money from a slave (*servos*), or for a slave to touch a weapon, to throw away his identifying badge, to travel outside of his district, or to talk to a slave from another district.[129] It is also death to a slave and slavery for a free man if they should even conspire to do any of these things—and informers are handsomely rewarded.[130] The purpose of all this "is never to make it safer to follow out an evil plan than to repent of it."[131] The life of a slave, Hythloday assures his listeners, "has no hardship," "[e]xcept for constant toil."[132] Hythloday ends his encomium by declaring that "You can easily see how humane and advantageous [*humanitatis & commodi*]" the arrangement of the Polylerites is.[133] Its intent seems admirable, to be sure: "to destroy the vices but save the persons and so to treat them that they necessarily become good (*bonos*) and that, for the rest of their lives, they repair the damage done before." But considered carefully, we are drawn to ask—what does it mean for men to become good *of necessity*? Do we really save persons when we destroy their vices through slavery, and force them to be "good"? Moreover, despite Hythloday's earlier argument that it is unjust for a man to lose his life over a bit of money, their policy of executing slaves for receiving money indicates that the Polylerites are prepared to do just that: kill men over bits of money.

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[129] Ibid., 77/35-79/5.
[130] Ibid., 79/5-8.
[131] Ibid., 79/8-9.
[132] Ibid., 77/15
[133] Ibid., 79/11-12.

At any rate, it is this system which Hythloday recommends be instituted in England, saying "I [see] no reason why this method might not be adopted in England and be far more beneficial in its working than the justice which my legal opponent has praised so highly". The lawyer responds by simply asserting that "[n]ever could that system be established in England without involving the commonwealth in a very serious crisis" before falling silent.[134] Hythloday may be correct that the Polylerite system is preferable to the system in place in England, but the episode seems calculated to show that Hythloday is wholly lacking in either the Socratic art of inducing *aporia* through questioning, or in the political art of rhetoric. His strident manner, which insists that an unknown system be fully and immediately implemented on little more than his authority, undermines the possibility of his ideas being considered dialectically such that weaknesses—which are clearly present—might be probed.[135] Moreover, Hythloday presumes that his private experiences—traveling to the Polylerite lands in this case—are sufficient to grant him the requisite authority. He fails to appreciate that without institutions, authority is difficult to come by: it is institutions which underpin the authority to make pronouncements, allowing the channeling of the private experiences of the authoritative individual into a public action. Hythloday's refusal to take up the responsibilities of public office—at least in the form of a courtly appointment—undermines his ability to have influence. And, yet it is this which ostensibly convinces him that court life is intractable and ultimately corrupting.

Further undermining Hythloday's point is the fact that—despite the lawyer's rejection of the plan—Morton shows interest. Morton suggests, however, that, rather than full and immediate

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[134] Ibid., 79/38-81/5.

[135] See John D. Schaeffer, "Socratic Method in More's *Utopia*," *Moreana*, Vol. 18, No. 69 (March, 1981), 13.

implementation, it might be wise to attempt a pilot program, for "[i]t is not easy to guess whether it would turnout well or ill inasmuch as absolutely no experiment has been made."[136] He then suggests that no harm would be done if, "after pronouncement of death, the king were to order the postponement of its execution and, after limitation of the privileges of sanctuary, were to try this system, then if success proved its usefulness, it would be right to make the system law."[137] But, "[i]n case of failure, then and there to put to death those previously condemned would be no less for the public good and no more unjust than if execution were done here and now. In the meantime no danger can come of the experiment."[138] Morton even adds to Hythloday's proposal, suggesting that "vagrants might very well be treated in the same way for, in spite of repeated legislation against them, we have made no progress."[139] Morton's tentative approval of Hythloday's suggestion militates against Hythloday's primary line of argumentation which aims to show that that serving on a king's court is futile, because kings are obsessed with glory and conquest and councilors are obsessed with their own insights, such that both are resistant to the views of others no matter how worthy. Yet, it is Morton—not the lawyers and other hangers-on—who actually holds a seat on the king's council.

Despite Morton's willingness to consider Hythloday's point, however, Hythloday is still discontented. "When the Cardinal had finished speaking," he says, "they [the hangers-on] all vied in praising what they had received with contempt when suggested by me, but especially the part relating to the vagrants because this was the Cardinal's addition."[140] This is revealing:

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[136] CW 4, 81/7-9.
[137] Ibid., 81/9-13.
[138] Ibid., 81/13-16.
[139] Ibid., 82/17-18.
[140] Ibid., 81/19-22.

ultimately, Hythloday's primary complaint seems to be less that his ideas would not be considered—and, ultimately, that social problems would fail to be ameliorated—but rather that his ideas would fail to be adopted on the strength of his testimony alone, and that he be recognized for the ideas. This strongly suggests that Hythloday is, as Richard Sylvester has described him, "a man obsessed with his own insights".[141]

Yet, in spite of the self-undermining example offered by Hythloday, many commentators (including Sylvester[142]) have argued that it is most likely that More agrees with the thrust of Hythloday's criticism of the English penal system, and there is no reason to disagree. Morton's generally sympathetic disposition—given More's high regard for the Lord Chancellor—indicates that More likely saw merit in the proposals. Yet, unlike Hythoday, More did not apparently reject the political culture of the royal court: though he saw its limitations and hazards, he nevertheless understood that every political arrangement had its strengths and weaknesses, and that imperfections in the political order did not justify rejection of politics *as such*, or excuse wise and learned men from doing what they can to improve matters.

On the other hand, just as Hythloday rejected courtly life, so Erasmus rejected "the entire *cultus* of late medieval court life with its high and pugnacious notions of honor, its military saints and splendid fêtes."[143] Yet, also like Hythloday, Erasmus' sometimes rash rejection of courtiers and courtly life caused him to misjudge both the ability of courtiers to deliberate and consider

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[141] Richard S. Sylvester, Si Hythlodaeo Credimus': Vision and Revision in Thomas More's 'Utopia,'" in *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester and Germain Marc'hadour (Hamden, CT., Archon Books, 1977), 297.

[142] Ibid., 295.

[143] James D. Tracey, *The Politics of Erasmus: A Pacifist Intellectual and His Political Milieu* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 66.

proposals other than their own, as well as the effectiveness of courtiers in harnessing and directing kings toward beneficial policies—even policies with which Erasmus himself agreed.[144] Morus's line of argument against Hythloday should be taken seriously, not only because it comports with how More conducted his own life, but also because it has important implications for how we understand the relationship between Erasmus' Christian humanism and politics and morality more generally.

A Flexible Philosophy

Hythloday's *exemplum* from Morton's table, by which he intends to justify his refusal to serve a king, is countered in measured tones by Morus, who still insists that his opinion has not changed: Hythloday ought to "persuade [him]self not to shun the courts of kings" for "you could do the greatest good to the common weal by your advice. The latter is the most important part of your duty as it is the duty of every good man."[145] In other words, Morus suggests that, by his refusal to lend his learning to the good of his fellow man, Hythloday fails in his basic duty *as a human being*. For Morus (and for More) learning is not simply for one's own enjoyment, but for the benefit of others—and *curiositas* remains a vice, as Aquinas argued, that is closely related to pride.[146]

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[144] Ibid., 69.

[145] CW 4, 87/7-11.

[146] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Question 167. Interestingly, as per usual, Aquinas cites one authority in the *Sed Contra* of each of the two articles: Erasmus' preferred Church Father St. Jerome in the first article, and More's favorite St. Augustine in the second. For a discussion of Erasmus' affinity for St. Jerome, see John C. Olin, "Erasmus and Saint Jerome: The Close Bond and its Significance," in *Erasmus, Utopia, and the Jesuits: Essays on the Outreach of Humanism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), 1-26.

Against Hythloday's insistence that service to kings is futile, More appeals to Hythloday's "favorite author"[147] Plato, who "is of opinion [*sic*] that commonwealths will finally be happy only if either philosophers become kings or kings turn to philosophy."[148] On the other hand, "What a distant prospect of happiness there will be if philosophers will not condescend even to impart their counsel to kings!"[149] Hythloday counters by making two points: first, he argues that philosophers *have* advised kings, if kings would only consult their writings: "They are not so ungracious . . . that they would not gladly do it—in fact many have already done it in published books—if the rulers would be ready to take good advice."[150] Secondly he points out that More has misstated Plato's case—Plato did *not* say that kings should be advised by philosophers, but that kings *themselves* must become philosophers, citing Plato's misadventure with Dionysius of Sicily which he discusses in the *Seventh Letter*: "But, doubtless, Plato was right in foreseeing that if kings *themselves* did not turn to philosophy, they would never approve of the advice of real philosophers because they have been from their youth saturated and infected with wrong ideas. This truth he found from his own experience with Dionysius."[151] Hythloday seems to have the better of the argument here, given that his account of Plato's position is more accurate. He is also accurate as to his assessment of what would likely happen "[i]f [he] proposed beneficial measures to some king and tried to uproot from his soul the seeds of evil and corruption"—namely that he "should forthwith be banished and treated with ridicule."[152] This,

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[147] CW 4, 87/11.
[148] Ibid., 87/11-15.
[149] Ibid., 87/13-15.
[150] Ibid., 87/16-18
[151] Ibid., 87/18-23.
[152] Ibid., 87/23-25.

however, should alert us to the possibility that, if More's intends a subtle criticism of Hythloday, he may have intended *Utopia* to suggest a criticism of Plato as well.[153]

In particular, he wants to suggest, against both Hythloday and Plato, that the goal of advising a king should be neither to instantiate abstractions in political regimes, nor to uproot all evils from the king's soul. Rather, he will argue, the goal of political action should be more restrained, and that effective political council requires, above all, the virtue of prudence which allows the wise man to read the situation and adapt his advice accordingly. After a lengthy speech in which Hythloday offers three hypotheticals outlining various situations in which he claims (and Morus agrees) that his advice would be rejected, Morus finally offers his longest response in the dialogue.

"To sum it all up," Hythloday exclaims, "if I tried to obtrude [my] ideas on men strongly inclined to the opposite way of thinking, to what deaf ears should I tell the tale!"[154] "Deaf indeed, without a doubt," More responds, "and, by heaven, I am not surprised. Neither, to tell the truth, do I think that such ideas should be thrust on people, or such advice given, as you are positive will never be listened to."[155] The problem, More intimates, is not that Hythloday's ideas will not be listened to—it is that they *cannot* be listened to because he has offered no way for the ideas to enter the minds of others. He refuses to convince, but simply demands obeisance: "What good could such novel ideas do, or how could they enter the minds of individuals who are

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[153] Several scholars have explored this. See, for example, Colin Starnes, *The New Republic: A Commentary on Book I of More's Utopia Showing Its Relation to Plato's Republic* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990) and John A. Gueguen, "Reading More's "Utopia" as a Criticism of Plato," in *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, Vol. 10, Quincentennial Essays on St. Thomas More (1978), 43-54.
[154] CW 4, 97/35-38.
[155] Ibid., 99/1-3.

already taken up and possessed by the opposite conviction?"[156] The mode of argumentation that

Hythloday insists upon, More contends, is misplaced in the affairs of state: statesmanship—while

informed by philosophy—is not the same thing as philosophy, and therefore must be approached

differently. "In the private conversation of close friends," More admonishes, "this academic

philosophy [*philosophia scholastica*] is not without its charm [*non insuavis*], but in the councils

of kings, where great matters are debated with great authority, there is no room for these

notions."[157] Here More draws a crucial distinction between philosophical conversations

attendant to *friendship*, which are essentially private and which take place between men who

share things in common including some kind of like-mindedness, and *statesmanship* which

inherently entails public discourse, dialogue with others who are of "opposite convictions," and

compromise. We should take care, however, to avoid the impression that More intends to

somehow disparage philosophical discussion amongst friends (as the translation here seems to

imply by contrasting "charm" with "great"): the phrase "*non insuavis*" is a litotic[158] construction

meaning "not harsh" or "not disagreeable," implying that outside of the bond of friendship, this

kind of argumentation can seem harsh or disagreeable and therefore is not well calculated to do

the work of statesmanship: promoting dialogue, consensus, and compromise.

This also brings to mind Erasmus' reliance on the Pythagorean maxim "Friends have all

things in common" in his political thought. By rooting his political ideals in this maxim,

Erasmus collapses the distinction between the commonality that exists amongst friends, and the

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[156] Ibid., 99/3-5.
[157] Ibid., 99/5-8.
[158] For an examination of More's use of litotes in Utopia, see Elizabeth McCutcheon, "Denying the Contrary: More's Use of Litotes in *Utopia*," in *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More* (Hamden CT: Archon Books, 1977), 263-274.

difference that defines political order—just as Hythloday's insistence on utilizing "*insuavis*" modes of argumentation in all situations blurs the distinction between friendship and statesmanship.

Yet, Hythloday—predictably—misses the point. He takes More's admission that there is no room for *philosophia scholastica* in the councils of kings to be an affirmation of his contention that "there is no room for philosophy with rulers."[159] But Morus disabuses him of this notion, introducing the crucial distinction between "philosophia scholastica," which "thinks that everything is suitable in every place" (*quae quiduis putet ubuis convenire*), and "*philsophia civilior*," which is "more practical for statesmen, [and] which knows its stage, adapts itself to the play at hand, and performs its role neatly and appropriately."[160] Hythloday has already demonstrated his tendency to think that "everything is suitable in every place" with his recommendation that the system of the Polylerites could easily be adopted in England, without considering whether there might be factors which might cause unintended consequences as the lawyer objects. Now we see that Hythloday's inability to recognize these distinctions makes him unwilling to rhetorically tailor his speech in such a way that his opinions could be actually persuasive, to say nothing of sharpened and corrected through dialectical examination. In short, Hythloday seems to presume that truth pertaining to the social and political order is univocal, admitting to a single correct answer which only he possesses. Yet, the Augustinian Morus has his doubts.

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[159] CW 4, 99/9-10.
[160] Ibid., 99/11-16.

Morus employs a "striking simile" (as the marginal gloss has it[161]) in which he compares

political life to a "situation in which a comedy of Plautus is being performed and the household

slaves are making trivial jokes at one another and then you come on stage in a philosopher's

attire and recite the passage from the *Octavia* where Seneca is disputing with Nero. Would it not

have been preferable to take a part without words [*mutam personam*] than by reciting something

inappropriate to make a hodgepodge of comedy and tragedy [*tragicomoediam*]?"[162]

As might be expected, this reference is not random. The play *Octavia* (traditionally attributed

to Seneca but authorship is now disputed, and some have suggested Curiatius Maternus[163])

depicts the philosopher Seneca in his role as councilor to the young Nero. He begins his speech

asking why Fortune had elevated him to councilor when "I was content with my lot . . . Didst

thou hope that, received into a lofty citadel, I might see afar so many causes for anxiety and

therefore fall most heavily?"[164] In a striking parallel to Hythloday, Seneca laments his lost

leisure and longs to return to his studies in solitude: "Rather would I, removed far away from

envious misfortunes, lie concealed among the rocks of the Corsican sea where my mind had

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[161] It is noteworthy that this marginal gloss is half in Greek and half in Latin, reading "ὁμοίωσις mira", and the next is wholly in Greek, reading "πρόσωπον κωφόν" or "silent mask" indicating a part in a play with no speaking role. These are the only two margin notes in Greek, and it is interesting that they both utilize words from the New Testament that have important meaning for Christian theology. This indicates Erasmus' authorship for the marginal notes, given his work translating the New Testament which was published the same year as *Utopia,* and may have deeper meaning as well: in addition to "mask," πρόσωπον also means "person," a word which has significant importance in the history of political thought. (See, for example, David Walsh, *Politics of the Person as the Politics of Being* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2016).

[162] CW 4, 99/17-25. Platus, the ancient Roman comedic playwright who More references here, uses the term "*tragicomedia*" in the prologue to his play *Amphitryon, or Jupiter in Disguise*.

[163] See Elizabeth Twining Hall, "A Translation of Octavia, A Latin Tragedy, with Notes and Introduction," (Master's Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1901), 3.

[164] Ibid., 26.

freedom and leisure to pursue its studies."[165] Following Ovid's account in Book I of the

Metamorphoses, Seneca details—and laments—the loss of an age wherein "[t]he maiden Justice,

the goddess of divine majesty, sent with sacred Piety from heaven, mercifully ruled the human

race. The nations had not known wars, nor the fierce blasts of the trumpets, nor arms; they did

not surround their cities with walls; everything was held in common. Mother Earth herself,

blessed and happy in her devout foster sons, voluntarily opened her fruitful bosom."[166] He

recounts how a "second race less skilled and gentle appeared; then a third, practised in new arts

but not wicked yet"[167] until finally

> a worse age pierced the vitals of its own parent. It dug up heavy iron and gold and soon
> armed its cruel hands. The land was divided; kingdoms were established; new cities were
> built; it defended its own walls or, intent upon pillage, sought the property of a stranger.
> Astraea, now the great glory of the stars, fled from the earth and the cruel customs of men
> defiled with bloody carnage. Desire for war and thirst for gold increased throughout the
> entire world. The greatest misfortunes had their origin in luxury, that beguiling evil, which
> gained strength from time and serious error. Vices acquired during so many long ages abound
> in us. We are oppressed by an infamous age in which crime rules, raging impiety grows
> furious, and passionate lust and disgraceful love conquer. With avaricious hands, victorious
> Luxury grasps the immense resources of the world to destroy them.[168]

The corruption of mankind through luxury, property, war, and vice has caused Astraea (goddess

of justice) to flee to the stars, such that it is no longer possible to instantiate justice on earth.

This prefaces the dialogue, which Morus references, in which Seneca dutifully, though

ineffectively, councils Nero to abandon his tyrannical plans. Hence, the reference by Morus

seems calculated to suggest that the philosopher ought not shrink from acting as a councilor,

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[165] Ibid., 27.
[166] Ibid., 28.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Ibid., 28-29.

even though complete justice is impossible to instantiate, having flown from the earth (or been lost to the postlapsarian world), and even though the king be a tyrant like Nero.

Yet, an effective (even if ultimately unsuccessful) councilor must recognize the nature of his part in the play. A play prescribes certain lines, roles, and duties to different actors, such that each actor must constrain himself to the play at hand, rather than taking it upon himself to bring in whatever matters he wishes—for in so doing, "You would have spoiled and upset the actual play by bringing in irrelevant matter—even if your contribution would have been superior in itself."[169] In short, "[w]hatever play is being performed, perform it as best you can, and do not upset it all simply because you think of another which has more interest."[170]

Institutions give structure to common life, providing a mechanism by which imperfect human beings can temper their pride, and work in conjunction with others for the common good. Institutions also constrain would-be tyrants—like Nero—whose pride drives them toward actions radically at odds with the common good. As in a play, "[s]o it is in the commonwealth. So it is in the deliberations of monarchs. [*Sic est in Republica sic in consultationibus principum*]."[171] The analogy holds because, in both cases, structures and roles serve to both constrain action and channel actors into a common end. Morus directly connects this state of affairs to the persistence of the existence of wrongheadedness and vice in human affairs: "If you cannot pluck up wrongheaded opinions by the root, if you cannot cure according to your heart's desire vices of long standing, yet you must not on that account desert the commonwealth. You must not

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[169] CW 4, 99/25-27.
[170] Ibid., 99/27-29.
[171] Ibid., 99/30-31.

abandon the ship in a storm because you cannot control the winds."[172] Just as Seneca did not fail

to enter the council of Nero, despite the personal inconvenience (and even danger) it entailed,

and despite the likelihood of failure in light of Nero's wronghead viciousness, so it is the duty of

the philosopher to hold fast to the ship of state in order to do what can be done to promote the

common good.

This duty, however, entails the philosopher entering into the "play" of politics, allowing his

mode of communication to conform to the conventions of political discourse, enabling him to

avoid "forc[ing] upon people new and strange ideas which you realize will carry no weight with

person of opposite conviction."[173] In other words, philosophers must exercise the virtue of

prudence, applying practical reason which connects abstract principles to concrete political and

social situations. The particular method by which this is accomplished is a through a tactful

indirection: "On the contrary, by the indirect approach [*obliquo ductu*] you must seek and strive

to the best of your power to handle matters tactfully."[174] Morus then offers an alternative—

Augustinian—vision for the purpose of political action. The purpose of earthly politics *not* to

create a perfect society on earth, but instead aims at mitigating evil: "What you cannot turn to

good you must make as little bad as you can."[175] Indeed, such a society is not possible in this

postlapsarian world, and any attempt to construct one would be a fool's errand: "For it is

impossible that all should be well unless all men were good, a situation I do not expect for a

great many years to come!"[176] The Augustinian Morus moderates expectations not only for

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[172] Ibid., 99/31-34.
[173] Ibid., 99/36-38.
[174] Ibid., 99/38-101/1.
[175] Ibid., 101/1-2.
[176] Ibid., 101/2-3.

political engagement in a given corrupt system, but for politics *as such*. A political community in which all is right and just is simply not a reasonable expectation in a fallen world in which the goodness of human actions—or even intentions—cannot be presumed upon.

Morus' categorical statement increases the stakes of the debate, and Hythloday responds in kind, shifting from an indictment of politics in Renaissance Europe to a broader mode of argumentation about political order as such. But, rather than addressing Morus' Augustinian anthropological argument, Hythloday instead directs his fire at the "indirect approach" that Morus recommends: "By this approach . . . I should accomplish nothing else than to share the madness of others as I tried to cure their lunacy."[177] Here Hythloday's pride and hubris come into full view: rather than presuming good will on the part of his hypothetical interlocutors, or the possibility that his position could be sharpened or corrected through engagement with those of different opinions, Hythloday writes off opinions other than his own as nothing but "lunacy". Nothing could be further from the Socratic spirit of dialogue which begins with the knowledge that he knows nothing, but believes that truth and nature can be revealed through dialectical exchange. Though he claims the mantle of Plato, it is actually Morus who displays a truly Socratic-Platonic spirit.[178]

Hythloday maintains that, in order to say what is true, "I must needs speak in the manner I have described."[179] To do otherwise, he is convinced, would be nothing other than to speak lies: "To speak falsehoods [*falsa loqui*], for all I know, may be the part of a philosopher, but it is

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[177] Ibid., 101/5-7.
[178] See John M. Rist, "From Dreamland 'Humanism' to Christian Political Reality or From Nusquama to Utopia," *Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 69, Iss. 4 (June 2016), 762, and John D. Schaeffer, "Socratic Method in More's *Utopia*," *Moreana*, Vol. 18, No. 69 (March 1981), 5-20.
[179] CW 4, 101/7-8.

certainly not for me."[180] Again we see Hythloday's hard-headed insistence that social and

political matters must admit of a single, univocal truth, such that even tactfulness on Hythloday's

part can be nothing but a lie, and any doubt—to say nothing of resistance—to his ideas can only

be the result of insanity. There can be no legitimate cause to question his opinions. "What if,"

he asks "I told them the kind of things which Plato creates in his republic or which the Utopians

actually put in practice in theirs? Though such institutions were superior (as, to be sure, they are

[*ut certe sunt*]), yet they might appear odd because here individuals have the right of private

property, there all things are common [*omnia sunt communia*]."[181] This is the first time

Hythloday mentions his endorsement of that most famous feature of Utopia: the community of

property. From this point on, the conversation shifts to a more abstract consideration of how

political order functions as such. And, here Hythloday invokes a higher power to justify his

insistence that his speech is "appropriate [*conveniat*]"[182] and even "obligatory [*oporteat*]"[183] to

"have propounded everywhere"[184]: the authority of Christ himself.

    Christ, Hythloday contends, put forth teachings that are "far more different from the morals of

mankind" than those that Hythloday had propounded,[185] and yet, Christ had "forbade us to

dissemble them to the extent that what He had whispered in the ears of His disciples He

commanded to be preached openly from the housetops."[186] Hythloday's elision is subtle but it

allows him to enlist Christ himself in his critique of political prudence, arguing that some

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[180] Ibid., 101/8-9.
[181] Ibid., 101/12-18.
[182] Ibid., 101/22.
[183] Ibid., 101/23.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid., 101/29-30.
[186] Ibid., 101/26-28.

preachers "finding men grievously disliked to have their morals adjusted to the rule of Christ and following I suppose your advice, accommodated His reaching to men's morals as if it were a rule of soft lead that at least in some way or other the two might be made to correspond."[187]

This is not the only time that More mentions the lead rule, and its implications should be well noted. In his letter to Dorp, More directly connects the reference to Aristotle's mention of the lead (or "Lesbian" due to its association with building techniques used on the Greek island of Lesbos) rule in his discussion of *epieikeia* (ἐπιείκεια) in Book V, Chapter 10, of *Nicomachean Ethics*.[188] Epieikeia (often translated "equity"), on Aristotle's account, is an aspect of justice but "although the equitable [epieikia] is just, it is not what is just according to the law. The equitable is instead a correction of the legally just."[189] The reason this correction is needed is that "all law is general but concerning some matters it is not possible to speak correctly in a general way."[190] In other words, equity is necessary to bring the abstraction of the law into conformity with the needs of the concrete situation. Equity, however, does not overturn the law, but corrects the necessary limitations of the law—in particular, its abstract and general nature—by applying it to the nature of the given situation. Hence, it is not made necessary due to an error on the part of the law or the lawgiver—indeed, genuine equity will be in conformity with what the lawmaker himself would have done if confronted with the particular set of facts[191]—but in the "nature of the matter as hand."[192] Hence, Aristotle says, "equity is just and better than what is just in a

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[187] Ibid., 101/31-34.
[188] See More, "Letter to Dorp," *St. Thomas More: Selected Letters*, 27.
[189] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1137b12-13.
[190] Ibid., 1137b14-15.
[191] Ibid., 1137b22-23.
[192] Ibid., 1137b19.

certain sense—not what is just unqualifiedly but the error that arises through it being stated unqualifiedly."[193] Equity surpasses simple legal justice because it applies the universal rule to the particularity of changing circumstances. This flexibility of what is just Aristotle compares to the lead rule of Lesbos: "For the rule [or measure] of something indeterminate is indeterminate too, just as is the case with the lead rule used in house building in Lesbos: the lead rule changes in relation to the shape of the stone and does not stay the same; and so too the specific decree changes in relation to the matters at hand."[194] The equitable person, then, is he who is "not exacting to a fault about justice, but is instead disposed to take less for himself even though he has the law on his side."[195] In this sense, epieikeia is the aspect of justice related to mercy, because it declines to press justice to an extreme but takes mitigating circumstances into account. Some translators render epieikeia "decent"[196] and we can now see why: the man who practices epieikeia is concerned about justice but goes beyond justice when the situation calls for it, and therefore displays decency (from the Latin *decere* indicating that which is fitting or proper to a given situation), recognizing that different situations call for different things.

Hythloday's referencing of this rule, at least for those familiar with Aristotle's use of the term, ironically undercuts his insistence that any deviation from what he recognizes to be the abstract right is nothing more than lying or dissembling. He fails to recognize that the contingent nature of human affairs—including politics—and the darkness which shrouds social life[197]

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[193] Ibid., 1137b24-26.
[194] Ibid., 1137b29-33.
[195] Ibid., 1137b36-37.
[196] See, for example, Joe Sachs' translation (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002), 99-100 and 99n138.
[197] Cf. St. Augustine, *City of God*, 19.6.

militates against the idea that there can be a single political truth that applies at all times and places, and that attempts to do so undermine both mercy and charity. This lack of charity comes into view with his invocation of Plato (from Book 6 of the *Republic*) who "in a very fine comparison shows why philosophers are right in abstaining from administration of the commonwealth."[198] Philosophers "observe the people rushing out into the streets and being soaked by constant showers and cannot induce them to go indoors and escape the rain. They know that, if they go out, they can do no good but will only get wet with the rest. Therefore, being content if they themselves are at least safe, they keep at home, since they cannot remedy the folly of others."[199] The juxtaposition of this reference with the words of Christ only a few lines before is jarring, for while Christ's words are rooted in fealty to the truth out of charity, Hythoday instead wishes to ensure that he himself is safe while contenting himself with ridiculing the perceived folly of others from afar. Nothing could be further from the spirit of Christian charity, and in endorsing this position, Hythloday again shows his Christianity to be far more inflected by Stoic than Augustinian ideas.[200]

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[198] CW 4, 103/16-18.

[199] Ibid., 103/18-23. Cf. Plato's words "just like a human being who has fallen in with wild beasts is neither willing to join them in doing injustice nor sufficient as one man to resist all the savage animals—[a true philosopher in a corrupt city] would perish before he has been of any use to city or friends and be of no profit to himself or others. Taking all this into calculation, he keep quiet and minds his own business—as a man in a storm, when dust are blown about by the wind, stands aside under a little wall. Seeing others filled with lawlessness, he is content if somehow he himself can live his life here pure of injustice and unholy deeds, and take his leave from it graciously and cheerfully with fair hope." See Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom, Second Edition (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 496c-e.

[200] See Pierre Manent, *Metamorphoses of the City: On the Western Dynamic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 269-273. See especially page 272: "What Christianity attacks is not social or political inequality but the pertinence of the distinction between the few and the many, the philosopher and the nonphilosopher, with regard to the capacity to attain or receive truth."

Conclusion

While we should be cautious about too quickly identifying the character Morus with the author More, adopting an interpretative frame which reads Morus' voice as More's own unlocks the text to a substantial degree. The same is true of associating Hythloday, at least in some sense, with Erasmus (even if only an extreme caricature of Erasmus). Using this framework, we can see that More's use of the character is intended to engage his friend's political thought in a friendly but philosophically serious way. Morus's concern with serving the public weal despite its imperfections reflects More's Augustinian tendencies, which may well have influenced his choice for active participation in public life. Likewise, Hythloday's itinerant lifestyle—preferring freedom to service—as well as his advocacy for a communistic social order over private property, hint that Erasmus' more Stoic (and Epicurean) views—and not More's—are the source of those espoused by Hythloday. Suggesting that Erasmus' views are tinged with Stoicism and Epicureanism is not, of course, meant to doubt his sincerity as a Christian thinker, but does call into question his ability to think in a fully Christian way about ethics and politics, or even to think about politics *as such*.

This deficiency is what More seeks to raise for philosophical consideration in *Utopia* by conducting a thought experiment about what a political community, functioning on the basis of Erasmus' political and moral thought, might look like in action. It shows the *institutions*—political, social, and religious—that would be required for such a political community to come into being and persist over time, against the background Augustine's thought—represented by

Morus—which, it is suggested, may present a corrective to the shortcomings contained in

Erasmus' thinking about politics.

Chapter 4

Omnia Sunt Communia*: Wealth, Private Property, and *Utopia

The final section of Book I turns to the question of private property in earnest. While Hythloday

had alluded to it previously[1] it is here that he confesses his allegiance to political forms that do

not allow private property. He links the corrupt state of political regimes which he has just

described to their countenancing of private property, because it tends to make money the

measure of all things, and tends to put power in the hands of those least worthy of it: "it appears

to me that wherever you have private property and all men measure all things by cash values,

there it is scarcely possible for a commonwealth to have justice or prosperity—unless you think

justice exists where all the best things flow into the hands of the worst citizens or prosperity

prevails where all is divided among very few".[2] Hythoday's rhetoric is evocative of the ancient

debate regarding private property and the problems that it can cause. He directly connects his

thoughts on the matter to those of Plato, whose arguments concerning the preferability of the

community of property manifest in both the *Republic* and the *Laws* became some of the first

genuinely philosophical treatments of the question, though Plato himself seems to have doubted

the possibility of actually attaining such an arrangement.[3] Hythloday, however, seems to ignore

both Plato's own doubts on the matter (and Plato's tacit admission in the *Laws* that it may in fact

be possible to create a political community that includes private property but which avoids

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[1] See CW 4, 101/12-18. This echoes the poem at the beginning of the text that Utopia in some way shows Plato's *Republic* in action.

[2] Ibid., 103/25-30.

[3] In the *Republic*, which is ostensibly a depiction of an ideal state, community of property is restricted to the guardian class only, while in the *Laws*, it is suggested as an ideal but not considered as a practical possibility (744b). Plato never suggests that community of property could be an effective arrangement for an entire political community.

devolving into an oligarchy which, measures all things by "cash values" as Hythloday has it), as well as Plato's anti-egalitarianism in both the *Republic*[4] and the *Laws*.[5] Hythloday argues: "This wise sage [Plato], to be sure, easily foresaw that the one and only road to the general welfare lies in the maintenance of equality in all respects. I have my doubts that the latter could ever be preserved where the individual's possessions are his private property."[6] Perhaps, he concedes, it might be mitigated by passing certain laws, such as limiting the amount of property any given person might hold or how much income any one person might receive,[7] but this is akin to treating a sick person who is beyond cure, providing palliatives to reduce symptoms, but unable to provide a cure.[8]

At this point, Morus interjects to argue—albeit in the subjunctive mood—against Hythloday's case for communism. His arguments pull heavily both from Aristotle's arguments against Socratic communism in Book II of the *Politics*, as well as Thomas Aquinas' Aristotelian arguments in the *Summa Theologica*[9] who considers the question as part of his treatment of theft and robbery. "I am of a contrary opinion," Morus states.[10]

> Life cannot be satisfactory where all things are common [*ubi omnia sint communia*]. How can there be a sufficient supply of goods when each withdraws himself from the labor of

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[4] The *Republic* is famously premised on the "noble lie" that there are three types of people—gold, silver, and bronze—which spring from the earth by nature (414b-415c).

[5] The *Laws* concedes the impossibility of absolute equality, and as a second-best measure proposes four classes, based in part on the virtuous use of money and property (744b-c). The *Laws* also does not shrink from suggesting that charity is to be praised, and that those willing and able to give should receive the most honor, while those willing but unable should be ranked second, and those who does not share with the community, no matter how much he has, is blameworthy. Hence, possessions themselves should not be considered blameworthy, but rather the character of the possessor, and therefore it is not vicious to strive for possessions (730e-731a).

[6] CW 4, 105/8-11.

[7] Ibid., 105/24-28. Cf. Plato's *Laws*, 744d-745b.

[8] Ibid., 105/35-107/4

[9] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Qu. 66, Art. 1-2.

[10] CW 4, 107/5.

production? For the individual does not have the motive of personal gain and he is rendered slothful by trusting to the industry of others. Moreover, when people are goaded by want and yet the individual cannot legally keep as his own what he has gained, must there not be trouble from continual bloodshed and riot [*caede ac seditione*]? This holds true especially since the authority of magistrates and respect for their office [*autoritate ac reverentia magistratuum*] have been eliminated, for how can there be any place for these among men who are all on the same level I cannot even conceive [*ne comminisci quidem queo*].[11]

Both property and the possibility of wealth, Morus contends, are essential to the right ordering of society and societies must be structured such that they incentivize of human beings to produce goods and services for the betterment of the community.[12]

Some commentators have dismissed these arguments by Morus as ironic, asserted only in order to show them being be refuted by Hythloday's disparagement of property and the rich. Yet, a comparison of these comments with More's treatment of property and wealth in his other works suggests that these arguments are not ironic, but are presented for serious consideration. In his *Responsio ad Lutherum* More takes up the question of human law versus divine law against Luther's claim in the *Babylonian Captivity* that "neither pope, nor bishop, nor any man has the right to impose a single syllable on a Christian man, unless this is done by the latter's consent. Whatever is done otherwise is done in a tyrannical spirit."[13] More take issue with this claim, and, like Aquinas, connects the question of property to the prohibition of theft.

Against Luther's argument that, as More puts it, "the law of the Gospel alone would ultimately be sufficient and human laws useless if magistrates were good and the faith were truly preached,"[14] More retorts

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[11] Ibid., 107/5-16.

[12] For a helpful consideration of these issues, see Edward Surtz, "Thomas More and Communism," *PMLA*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (June 1949), 549-564.

[13] Quoted in Thomas More, "A Response to Luther," in *The Essential Works of Thomas More*, ed. Gerard B. Wegemer and Stephen W. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 508/68-72.

[14] Ibid., 509/88-91.

As if even the best magistrates could manage either that the whole Christian people would want to live to in common or that the wicked would not want to steal or that any preaching of the faith could procure that no one anywhere would be wicked. If the law of the Gospel does not permit stealing, surely the human law which punishes stealing is not useless; and the human law which alone apportions ownership is done away with, there cannot indeed be stealing. But if he [Luther] should say that from this premise the argument is drawn that we would do better without that law from which the ownership of goods arises and would do better to live in a certain natural community with the occasion of stealing eliminated, it does not help his case even if someone should grant him this argument. For even if we could live in common with far fewer laws, we still could not live together without laws. For the obligation to work would have to be prescribed for certain classes, and laws would be needed to restrain crimes which would run riot even in that kind of life. But now if, with the faith preached most truly as the apostles used to preach it most truly, with, moreover, the best rulers everywhere put in charge of the Christian people, the ownership of property could yet remain, and many wicked men would remain, he [Luther] cannot deny that the human law binds Christians so that no one might steal what the law has apportioned to another, nor would the law be useless in punishing anyone who committed theft.[15]

Here we can detect echoes of Morus' comment that "it is impossible that all should be well unless all men are good,"[16] and we can see more clearly how More made the connection between this Augustinian position and the role of property which lies just beneath the surface in *Utopia*. He admits to the commonplace notion that property is not natural—that is, is not allocated by the natural law—but is instead conventional, the result of human law. Cicero expresses this position in *De Officiis*,[17] as does Augustine,[18] and Aquinas,[19] though all affirm the position that the establishment of private property by human law is not *contrary* to justice or natural law. As Aquinas puts it: "the ownership of possessions is not contrary to the natural law, but an addition thereto devised by human reason."[20]

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[15] Ibid., 509/91-510/28.
[16] CW 4, 101/2.
[17] See *De Officiis* I.VII.
[18] See *Tractates on John*, VI.25-26.
[19] See *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q. 66, Art. 2, especially Reply Objection 1.
[20] Ibid.

More points out that the very concept of theft, which is prohibited by the law of the Gospel,[21] is rendered unintelligible if private property is done away with. Moreover, More here shows how he understands the interaction between the law of the Gospel and the civil law: they are mutually reinforcing, and are established so as to account for and counteract intrinsic human weaknesses. Laws, including laws apportioning private property, are crucial to the maintenance of public order, and to seek to undermine them—even though they are derived from human law alone—is both to endanger the public weal, as well as to undermine the duty of Christians to prohibit theft. Hence, for More, the protection of private property is not only a legitimate end for political order, but is in fact essential and in line with both the law of the Gospel and the natural law.

Property, Wealth, and Christianity in *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*

An even more substantive consideration of the question of property and wealth is found in More's the *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* written in 1534, as he awaited execution in the Tower of London. In that work, More presents a dialogue between a man named Anthony and his nephew Vincent; the wise Anthony reflects the voice of More as he addresses the probing questions posed by Vincent. Set in Hungary in 1527-28 as the Turks—under the command of Suleiman I—are threatening to invade, prior to their attack on Buda and Vienna in 1529, the dialogue offers a profound and searching theological and philosophical reflection on the function of tribulation and pain in the Christian life, and in human life more generally,[22] as well as a

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[21] Cf. Ibid., Art. 5.

[22] This theme, in itself, serves as a counter the pagan Utopians' hedonistic moral theory in which the pursuit of pleasure becomes the highest end of human life. This will be discussed in Chapter 5.

consideration of the comfort that Christianity offers in the face of earthly trials. It explores a wide range of topics centered on the that theme, touching on the use (and insufficiency) of pagan philosophy, the meaning of suffering, the sources of tribulation, the importance of perseverance, the dangers of pride, the question of suicide, and many others. Among the issues addressed is the question of wealth and its role in the economy of salvation. Namely, if suffering is important for the development of perseverance and dependence on God, as well as for keeping pride in check, can the rich, who suffer less and are less inclined to see their own insufficiency, be saved? Moreover, can rich keep their possessions without danger of damnation as long as there are those who are poor?

These are questions that had long occupied Christian thinking, as it tried to navigate the complexities of living in a fallen, material and contingent world—and the corporal works of mercy demanded by Christian charity—while maintaining a vision of the city of God to which Christians belong by faith. The Book of Acts describes how, in the early church, Christians had formed a communistic community in which they shared all they had, selling their possessions to give to those in need—an image that has exercised a substantial amount of influence over the Christian socio-political imagination.[23]

The early Church Fathers addressed issues of wealth and property in their writings and sermons. Though it should be borne in mind that their purpose was usually pastoral or meditative (that is to say, their intent was not to do political or moral philosophy but to exhort themselves or other Christians to good works), they generally accepted the notion that, by nature, all things are common to all, and that, even though private property and wealth may be permissible given the fallen state of mankind, they should always be viewed as a concession to

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[23] Acts 2:42-47.

the fallenness of human nature, not an ideal. St. Ambrose, the spiritual father of St. Augustine, for example, had vigorously argued that "The land was made to be common to all, the poor and the rich," and he asks "[w]hy do you, o rich, claim for yourselves alone the right to the land?"[24] And, "God has ordered all things to be produced, so that there should be food in common for all, and that they earth should be the common possession of all. Nature, therefore has produced a common right for all, but greed has made it a right for a few."[25] Yet, for all their fervor, Ambrose's admonitions never indicate that he supports a revolutionary overturning of the rich or radical restricting of social arrangements. Rather, they are always aimed at encouraging the rich to remember the poor and to be mindful that their wealth is not ultimately theirs, but is rather by nature common to all, and hence, the poor have a right to the charity and liberality of the rich.

Likewise, St. Jerome (who was, as we have mentioned, Erasmus' preferred Church Father), adheres to the Christian theme that suggests that material goods are not ultimately ours to keep: "Only those things are truly ours that thieves cannot take nor tyrants wrest away from us, and which will follow us beyond death."[26] Neither Ambrose nor Jerome, however, insist that the possession of wealth, much less private property is intrinsically evil. Both subject the question to a higher consideration of the status of the heart: do the riches cause the person to become prideful and forget the necessity or reliance on God, the transience of life, and the equality of all before God? If so, they are sinful; if not, they are not.

St. John Chrysostom—the Church Father that More called "a man of most acute judgement, of all learned men perhaps the most Christian and (at least in my opinion) of all Christians the

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[24] St. Ambrose, "De Nabuthe Jezraelita," quoted in Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1990), 191.

[25] St. Ambrose, *De Officiis*, quoted in ibid., 191.

[26] St. Jerome, "Commentary on Ecclesiastes," quoted in ibid., 194.

most learned"[27]—also did not consider wealth to be intrinsically evil. Instead its moral meaning

derives only from how it is used—or not used. For Chrysostom, economic trade is a reflection of

human nature—specifically, humans' social nature and desire for exchange. As he states

> God wisely promoted mutual love through our own trades and dealings. Notice that God filled the earth with goods, but gave each region its own particular products, so that, moved by need, we would communicate and share among ourselves, giving other that of which we have abundance and receiving that which we lack. The same is true of us individually, for God did not grant all knowledge to all, but rather medicine to one, construction to another, art to a third, so that we would love each other because we need each other.[28]

Hence, economic activity, including the exchange of money, is a reflection of our dependence on

each other, and is therefore a providential arrangement whose purpose is the drawing together of

humankind. As such, for Chrysostom, wealth—in order both to *be* wealth and to be justified—

must be used.[29] The piling up of money for its own sake undercuts the purpose of wealth, and is

moreover a reflection of a greedy disposition toward the love money—which is evil, and which

subverts the social nature of humans. For Chrysostom, "[r]ich is not the one who has much, but

rather the one who gives much."[30]

There is, however, a seeming contradiction—or perhaps a tension—in Chrysostom's teaching.

As patristics scholar Justo Gonzalez points out, "[o]n one hand he holds that God's purpose is

the commonality of goods; on the other, he takes for granted that there will be rich who must

share their wealth with the poor."[31] Yet, this tension is lessened when it is realized what

Chrysostom is addressing: the seeming contradiction "becomes less marked when we realize that

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[27] Thomas More, *The Yale Editions of The Complete Works of St. Thomas More Vol. 3, Part I: Translations of Lucian*, ed. Craig R. Thompson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 3.
[28] St. John Chrysostom, *Homily de Perfecta Caritate*, quoted in Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth*, 202.
[29] See ibid., 203.
[30] Chrysostom, *Homily ad Populum Antiochenum*, quoted in ibid., 203.
[31] Ibid., 205.

beneath it lies a rejection of the traditional Roman notion of property and an attempt to substitute a different view for it. . . at the core of the Roman legal system was the right of private property conceived in absolute terms, including not only the use of property but even its abuse. What Chrysostom in fact proposes is a different view of property, a view limited to use and directed toward communication that is the goal of creation."[32] Against the traditional Roman notion of property, in which property owners are relieved of all duties with relation to their property, Chrysostom's view instead imposes *additional* duties on the wealthy, for "[w]hat the rich have is in fact no more than a deposit or a trust, a further reason they must be careful, lest the deposit that has been entrusted to them make them guilty of mismanagement."[33] For Chrysostom, rights to property, while legitimate, need to be limited in accordance with right use, and that use should always be in service of the goal of "communication, solidary [and] the unity and concert of all humanity. Both common ownership and private property—such as is allowed—have been established by God with that purpose."[34]

　　Finally, Augustine—whose views, as we have seen, exerted a particularly large influence on More—likewise held that wealth is not intrinsically evil, but that its moral meaning derives largely from how it is used. As with all of Augustine's political thought, his positions on property and wealth elude simple characterization—they must be reconstructed by pulling together various quotes from his corpus—but in general his position is largely consistent with that of earlier patristic writers. Namely, he holds property to be a creation of human law, but that it is not for that reason intrinsically opposed to divine (or natural) law. In a sermon on John 1:32-33, and in the context of the Donatist controversy in which estates and villas have been

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[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 206.
[34] Ibid.

taken from the Donatists by the imperial government, Augustine defends the act of confiscation

by arguing that property rights are not found in natural or divine law, but rather in human law,

created and enforced by temporal authorities. He says:

> Look, there at the villas. By what right do you protect these villas? By divine or human right? Let them reply, "Divine right we have in scriptures; human right in the laws of the king." On what basis does anyone possess what he possesses? Is it not by human right? By divine right, "The earth and its fullness belong to the Lord" (Ps. 24:1). God made the poor and the rich from the one clay, and the one earth supports both the poor and the rich. Nevertheless, by human right one says, "This villa is mine; this house is mine; this slave is mine." Thus, by human right, by the right of emperors. Why? Because God has distributed these same human rights to the human race through the emperors and kings of the world.[35]

Like Ambrose, Jerome, and Chrysostom, Augustine considers the question of the moral status

of property to be one of *use*, such that it is impossible to determine *a priori* whether a particular

rich person is just or unjust, righteous or wicked. The determination can only be made by an

examination of the heart of the rich man, by observing the actions that flow from it. As he states

in *City of God*, "[g]reed . . . is not something wrong with gold; the fault is in a man who

perversely loves gold and for its sake abandons justice, which ought to be put beyond

comparison above gold."[36] Similarly, "[p]ride is not something wrong in the one who loves

power, or the power itself; the fault is in the soul which perversely loves its own power, and has

no thought for the justice of the Omnipotent."[37]

Like Chrysostom, Augustine held that wealth is for the sake of right use, and that wealth only

justly belongs to those who use it rightly: "Gold and silver thus belong to the one who knows

how to use them, for it is commonly said among people that one is worthy of owning something

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[35] *Tractates on John* VI.25-26. Trans. Michael Tkacz and Douglas Kries. *Augustine: Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), 248–49.

[36] St. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 12.8, 480-481.

[37] Ibid., 481.

when one uses it well. On the other hand, whoever does not use justly does not legitimately possess, and if whoever does not legitimately possesses claims possession, then this will not be the claim of a just owner, but the lie of a shameless usurper."[38] Similarly, like Chrysostom he rejected the Roman idea that property rights included the right to *abuse*: the proper use of things is that which encourages the enjoyment (*fruitio*) of God in communion with our fellow human beings. For Augustine, in fact, the source of "every human perversion (also called vice) consists in the desire to use what ought to be enjoyed and to enjoy what ought to be used," while "good order (also called virtue) consists in the desire to enjoy what ought to be enjoyed and to use what ought to be used."[39] Rightly determining the difference between use and enjoyment, then, becomes paramount for Augustine, such that use (or abuse) of a thing that is to be enjoyed is the very source of all perversion. Wealth and property are not, therefore, in themselves evil, so long as they are rightly used—but they are dangerous in that they are prone to misuse and can therefore present roadblocks to the spiritual progress of those who have them. Hence, giving to the poor in a spirit of love, and with the aim of putting one's wealth in the service of the enjoyment of God in communion with others, becomes a core aspect of considering the moral status of wealth and property. The morality or immorality of property depends, most fundamentally, on the disposition of the possessor, not on the thing itself.

  It is worth noting that both Augustine and Jerome distinguished between "commandments" and "counsels of perfection".[40] While all believers—and indeed all humans—were expected to adhere to the commandments, counsels of perfection (traditionally poverty, chastity, and

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[38] St. Augustine, Sermon 50.4, quoted in Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth,* 216.
[39] St. Augustine, *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, trans. David L. Mosher (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 56.
[40] See Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth*, 194-195 and 219.

obedience) were only thought to be for a select group whose vocation was to prophetically illustrate a life that closely resembled perfection, that is, that resembled how human beings might have lived in an unfallen world, particularly with regard to the community of property. This distinction between the commandments and the counsels of perfection—if not the terms—was perhaps first laid out in Clement of Alexandra's essay *The Rich Man's Salvation*, in which he sought to demonstrate that Jesus' admonition to the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:21) to sell all he owns and come follow was not to be understood as a literal prerequisite requirement for any who would become a Christian, but rather as an admonishment that Christians should "banish from the soul 'its excessive desire, its morbid excitement over [riches], its anxious cares.'"[41] In short, the division between commandments and counsels of perfection reflects the poles of a tension with which Christians seeking to understand how to live continue to wrestle, and which, at least in some sense, frames the questions that More and Erasmus were asking of each other and of themselves.

The position that More expounds in the *Dialogue of Comfort* reflects this Augustinian-patristic position. In Book II, Chapter 17, the question of wealth and property arise, as we have mentioned, in the context of inquiring about the possibility of the rich being saved in light of the salvific function of suffering that Anthony is explicating. The primary concern, Anthony argues, is with the dangers of pride that can attend wealth, and particularly "the worldly wealth of great power and authority."[42] Those who have great wealth and power, he says, are no doubt vulnerable to the "devil's arrow of pride," but those who resist it, "though they be but tempted therewith and follow it not, albeit . . . they do well to stand ever in moderate fear, the with

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[41] John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2000), 174.
[42] Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, in *The Essential Works of Thomas More* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 1184/44-45.

waxing overbold and setting the things overlight, they might peradventure mishap to fall into yet sore to vex an trouble themselves with the fear of loss of God's favor therefor is without necessity and not always without peril."[43] Here Anthony (representing More) echoes the patristic—and especially Augustinian—position that the primary moral hazard of property and wealth is its potential to corrupt their possessor, especially through pride. After discussing the famous saying of Jesus that "it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God"—noting that in Greek "*camelus*" refers not to a camel but to a "great cable-rope"[44]—he continues: "No marvel now though that good folk that fear God take occasion of great dread at so dreadful words when they see the worldly goods fall to them. And some stand in doubt whether it be lawful for them to keep any goods or no. But evermore in all those places of Scripture, the having of the worldly goods is not the thing that is rebuked and threatened, but the affection of the haver unlawfully beareth thereto."[45] In other words, Scripture never condemns the having of "worldly goods" *as such*, but only condemns undue affection toward them. Finally, he concludes, that the scripture regarding the camel and the eye of the needle does not say that it is only difficult, but is in fact *impossible*—though in the next passage Jesus goes on: "For unto men, he said, it was impossible, but not until God: 'for unto God,' he said, 'all things are possible'; yet over that, he told of which manner rich men he meant that could not get into the Kingdom of Heaven, saying *Filoli, quam difficile est confidentes in pecuniis regnum Dei introire* ('My babes, how hard is it for them to that put their trust and confidence in their money to enter the Kingdom of God')."[46] Anthony, then, espouses the

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[43] Ibid., 1184/45-54
[44] Ibid., 1184/80.
[45] Ibid., 1184/83-1185/1.
[46] Ibid., 1185/12-28.

traditional patristic view that it is not wealth *in itself* that is evil or that makes men evil. Rather, evil comes from an undue reliance on worldly things—including wealth—and therefore recognizes that wealth can make it difficult for men to see the impoverishment of their soul. In fact, he emphasizes this point by noting that it is not only the wealthy who can be unduly attached to riches, but "to the multitude there be very few but that they long sore to be rich; and of those that so long to be, very few reserved also but that they set their heart very sore upon."[47] The problem, then, is a deeply human one, not confined to the rich, but potentially infecting anyone whose heart is set on wealth above all things, whether wealth is actually possessed or not.

With this established, Vincent then moves on to the next question: "I cannot well perceive," he says,

> (the world being such as it is, and so many poor people therein) how any man may be rich, and keep him rich, without danger of damnation therefor; for all the while that he seeth poor people so many that lack, while himself hath to give them, and whose necessity (while he hath threwith) he I bound in such case of duty to relieve—so far-forth that holy Saint Ambrose saith that whoso that die for default where we might help them, we kill them—I cannot see but that every rich man hath great cause to stand in great fear of damnation; nor I cannot perceive, as I say, how he can be delivered from that fear as long as he keepeth his riches.[48]

How, Vincent wants to know, can the rich justly remain rich when there are so many poor in the world? He cites St. Ambrose[49]—who, we have seen, considered the charity of the rich to be the *right* of the poor—in expressing his concern that the rich, so long as they remain rich with poor

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[47] Ibid., 1185/32-35.

[48] Ibid., 1185/39-52.

[49] The editors of the *Essential Works of Thomas More* point out that, while this passage was commonly attributed to Ambrose in the Middle Ages—including by Gratian and St. Thomas Aquinas—it in fact comes from St. Zeno's *De Justitia* (See ibid., 1185n874). Nevertheless, the confusion is understandable and changes little: Zeno and Ambrose were contemporaries, and expressed similar views on property, wealth, and justice. See Norman Cohen, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 193.

in the world, stand in danger of damnation—indeed, stand guilty of murder when the poor die for

lack. Is it not the case, he asks, that anyone who declines to give away all his wealth with so

many poor necessarily and by definition has an "inordinate affection" toward it?[50] Moreover, is

not Anthony's giving of comfort to the rich counterproductive, serving to give false hope to

"good men that are rich"?[51]

Anthony counters this with an appeal to prudence: "Hard is it, Cousin, in many manner of

things, to bid or forbid, affirm or deny, reprove or allow, a matter nakedly proposed and put

forth, or precisely say 'this things is good,' or 'this things is naught,' without consideration of the

circumstances."[52] In support of this, Anthony cites St. Augustine from his Letter to Marcellinus

(Letter 138). He relays the story of a certain physician who had prescribed a remedy for a man's

illness at a particular time. Several years later, the man was ill again and he took the same

remedy as had been prescribed earlier. When he returned to the physician to inquire as to why

he was not getting better, the physician told him "That medicine . . . did thee no good, but harm,

because thou tookest it when I gave it thee not."[53] Anthony continues: "This answer Saint

Augustine very well alloweth. For that thought the medicine were one, yet might there be

peradventure in the sickness some such difference as the patient perceived not—yea, or in the

man himself, or in the place, or the time of the year—many things make the let for which the

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[50] More, *Essential Works*, 1185/52-60.
[51] Ibid., 1185/61-64.
[52] Ibid., 1185/65-70.
[53] Ibid., 1185/77-79. Cf. St. Augustine, "Letter 138: Augustine to Marcellinus," in *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 31. The example is offered in the context of asking why the sacrifices required by God in the Old Testament no longer apply under the new covenant. Augustine offers several examples of how changing circumstances alter what is to be done, from farming, to teaching, to medicine, concluding that "[t]he appropriate . . . the opposite of which is inappropriate, depends on something else as if it were tied to it. It isn't judged in itself, but with reference to the thing to which it is linked. The same is certainly true of 'fitting' and 'unfitting', or so it is thought."

physician would not then have given him the selfsame medicine as before."[54] Hence, the appropriateness of actions vary according to circumstances surrounding them, such that giving a single, univocal assessment is not possible. Something may be effective in one situation, and ineffective in another, and, likewise, something may be moral in one set of circumstances and immoral in another. Therefore, Vincent's universal statement—resting on St. Ambrose's argument—needs to be modified by St. Augustine's observation, taking into account the possibility that circumstances may alter the judgement that is rendered.

Anthony offers several considerations to qualify Vincent's statement. First, he allows, following Augustine, that "he that is rich and keepeth all his good, he hath, I think, very good cause to be feared indeed. And yet I fear me that such folk fear least. For they be very far from the state of good men, since if they keep still all, they are very far from charity, and do, you wot well, almost either little or none at all."[55] Riches, it is true, can be a hinderance, and those who have them should be cautious that they do not fall into pride: a little fear is a good thing for them to have, those who refrain from or neglect giving some portion of their wealth in charity are indeed liable to charges of failing to be "good men". But that, Anthony states, is not the question—the question is whether it is permissible for a rich man to keep "any great part"[56] without fear of damnation.

To answer this question, Anthony raises the question of commandments versus counsels of perfection (without calling it such): "But cousin, though God invited men unto the following of himself in willful poverty, by the leaving of altogether at once for his sake, as the things whereby, with being out of the solicitude of worldly business and far from the desire of earthly

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[54] Ibid., 1185/80-1186/3.
[55] Ibid., 1186/12-18.
[56] Ibid., 1186/22.

commodities, they may more speedily get and attain the state of spiritual perfection and the hungry desire and longing for celestial things, yet doth he not command every man to do so upon peril of damnation."[57] While some may voluntarily commit to a vocation which allows them reprieve from the cares of the world and worldly goods—namely monastics and other religious—to help along their journey to perfection by renouncing the impediments they can place in the path, nevertheless it is not a universal commandment. This must be the case, Anthony reasons, because Christ is not only recorded as saying that discipleship requires the forsaking of all earthly goods (Luke 14:26) but also the hating of his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, and even his own life (Luke 14:26).[58] Yet we know that he cannot actually want us to hate our family or ourselves, and hence, Anthony concludes, "[h]ere meaneth our Savior Christ that none can be his disciple but if he love him so far above all his kin, and above his own life too, that for the love of him, rather than forsake him, he shall forsake them all."[59] Likewise, pertaining to wealth, "meaneth he . . . that whosoever do not so renounce and forsake all that ever he hath in his own heart and affection that he will rather lose it all, and let go every whit, than deadly displease God with the reserving of any one part thereof, he cannot be Christ's disciple, since Christ teacheth us to love God above all things, and he loveth not God above all things that contrary to God's pleasure keepeth anything he hath, for that thing he showeth himself to set more by than by God while he is better content to lose God than it."[60] And yet, while all this is true, "as I said, to give away all, for that no man should be rich or have substance, that I find no commandant of."[61]

[57] Ibid., 1186/34-43.
[58] Ibid., 1186/43-55.
[59] Ibid., 1186/56-60.
[60] Ibid., 1186/60-71.
[61] Ibid., 1186/71-73.

Lest he be misunderstood, Anthony clarifies that his intent in making these arguments is not "to comfort rich men in heaping up of riches."[62] After all, most rich men have little need of comfort given the ease with which they can slip into being "proud-hearted and obstinate"[63]—rich men who are not inclined to goodness rarely need help in finding comfort in their depravity. Rather, his intent is to "say this for that those good men—to whom God giveth substance and the mind to dispose it well, and yet not the mind to give it all away at once, but for good causes to keep some substance still—should not despair of Gods favor for the not doing of the thing which God hath given them no commandment of, nor drawn by any special calling thereunto."[64] In short, while some may be called to renounce wealth altogether—and perhaps join a religious community—it is not commanded by God to do so.

For Anthony (and, we may assume, More), this point is important because it has implications for the question of prudence pertaining to how societies think about economics in the world as it exists. As we have mentioned, Anthony cites St. Augustine to the effect that different circumstances require different actions, such that there is rarely an action that is universally right in all circumstances. In cases where rich men are called to give away their wealth and join a religious community, it would be sinful for them to refrain from doing so.[65] Yet, where they are

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[62] Ibid., 1187/8-9.
[63] Ibid., 1187/11.
[64] Ibid., 1187/13-20.
[65] In his *Life of Pico*, a translation of biography of Giovanni Pico della Marindola written by Pico's nephew, More subtly alters the texts to give a somewhat ambivalent assessment of Pico, particularly in his depiction of Pico in purgatory after his death. While Pico, a wealthy as well as learned man, is praised for the "plenteous alms given out with a free and liberal hand unto poor people" as well as his frequent and devout prayers (see *Essential Works of Thomas More*, 73/3-5), his (as it turned out, permanent) delaying to answer his call to Dominican religious life (see ibid., 71/40-43)—in which he would be required to renounce all worldly possessions—leads him to purgatory. More suggests that Pico's choice to resist either submitting himself to the institution of marriage and family life or of religious life (and, more broadly, to consistently refer his learning to the profit of the Church) are not to be emulated. See Travis Curtright, *The One*

not called to this life, there is no commandment to give away all of their riches at once, so long as they regularly engage in their duty to give some portion of their wealth to charity. This, in fact, turns out to be important for Anthony, because, first, Christ himself has told us that "*Pauperes semper habebitis vobiscum, quibus cum vultis benefacere potestis* ('Poor men shall you always have with you, whom when you will you may do good unto')" such that "if your [Vincent] rule hold, then were there, I ween, no place in no time since Christ's days hither—nor, as I think, in as long before that neither, nor never shall there be hereafter—in which there would abide any man rich without danger of eternal damnation for his riches alone, though he demeaned it never so well."[66]

Yet, Anthony asserts, the conditions on earth being what they are, there *must* be rich men if beggars are to be fed and the proliferation of beggars is to be avoided: "men of substance there must be, for else more beggars shall you have, pardie [certainly], than there be, and no man left to relieve another."[67] And his reasoning is telling:

> For this I think in my mind a very sure conclusion: that is all the money that is in this country were tomorrow next brought together out of every man's hand, and laid all in one heap, and on the morrow after worse than it was the day before. For I suppose when it were all equally thus divided among all, the best should be left litter better than almost a beggar is now. And yet he that was a beggar before, all that he shall be the richer for that he should thereby receive shall not make him much above a beggar still; but many one of the rich men, if their riches stood but in movable substance, shall be safe enough from riches haply for all their life after.[68]

Here, Anthony engages in a thought experiment, supposing that tomorrow all money were put together and then divvied equally amongst all. What would happen under such a scheme? In

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Thomas More (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of American Press, 2012), 27-33, and Gerard Wegemer, *Young Thomas More and the Arts of Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 81.

[66] More, *Essential Works of Thomas More*, 1188/69-79.

[67] Ibid., 1188/79-82

[68] Ibid., 1188/82—1189/4

short, he argues, everyone would become a beggar, with no one to relieve anyone else's

suffering. Moreover, rich men tend to be rich because of their facility with some valuable skill,

and therefore, if all wealth was placed in "movable substance," those who are rich would tend to

become so again, and be "safe enough from riches haply for all their life after," while everyone

else remains poor. The unstated implication here seems to be that, in such a situation, every rich

man would be "self-made" such that it may serve little good but to further instill pride in the rich,

and reduce the likelihood of charity.

This point is reinforced in the next section in which he lays out the social and economic

function of the rich:

> Men cannot, you wot well, live here in this world but if that some one man provide a means of living for some other many. Every man cannot have a ship of his own, not every an be a merchant without a stock. And these things, you wot well, must needs be had; nor every an cannot have a plow by himself. And who might live by the tailor's craft, if no man were able to put a gown to make? Who by the masonry, or who could live a carpenter, if no man were able to build neither church nor house? Who should be the makers of any manner of cloth, if there lacked men of substance to set sundry sorts awork? . . . For surely the rich man's substance is the wellspring of the poor man's living. And therefore here would it fare by the poor man as it fared by the woman in one of Aesop's fables, which had a hen that laid her every day a golden egg, till on a day she though she would have a great many eggs at once; and therefore killed her hen, and found by one or twain in her belly, so that for a few she lost many.[69]

In keeping with the numerous "marry tales" referenced in the *Dialogue*, More here uses the

famous Aesop fable of the golden-egg-laying hen to illustrate the foolishness of schemes that

would "kill" the rich and thereby leave the rest of society worse off in so doing. Implicit in

Anthony's argument is an assumption that there is a dignity in work, and that the crafts and

trades serve an important function in society. Economic exchange, in this conception, provides

an opportunity for members of society to serve one another, with the poor producing valuable

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[69] Ibid., 1189/5-30.

goods and services—and gaining a certain dignity thereby—while the rich supply their living either through patronage or employment. This arrangement, Anthony suggests, is better than a redistribution scheme that leaves him without either money or work: "Some man that hath but two ducats in his house, were better forbear them both and leave himself not a farthing, but utterly lose his own, than that some rich man, by whom he is weekly set a work should of his money lose the one half, for then were himself like to lack work."[70]

Edward Surtz has argued that the above-referenced passage against Luther is much more informative than this section from the *Dialogue of Comfort*, stating that More is dealing, "not with the broad philosophical foundations of communism and property as he did in *Utopia* and in his answer to Luther, but with a particular scheme of some Protestants to 'share the wealth.' The plan plainly envisaged a general census of the money and land in the nation and then a fair and equal division of both among all the citizens."[71] He continues, "what More is here disclaiming and repudiating is not the vision of a perfect commonwealth which can always exist as an ideal to be contemplated, but petty schemes for sharing the wealth."[72] In other words, Surtz contends that More does not mean for this argument to be universalized or that the current arrangement is *ideal*, but instead that the application of prudence counsels that the current arrangement of rich and poor is best *given the alternatives*: "In the *Dialogue of Comfort*, More is writing as a statesman who is scanning closely the contemporary economic setup. His final decision is that for the present a continuation of the existing economic and social organization is best" and that "[t]he most that can be gathered from the *Dialogue* is that More as a statesman finds the retention of private property and private enterprise the best and the most reasonable policy under

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[70] Ibid., 1189/17-22.
[71] Edward Surtz, "Thomas More and Communism," 562.
[72] Ibid., 563.

contemporary circumstances."[73] This is likely true, but Surtz's readiness to take *Utopia* as in

some way representative of More's *actual* ideal political community undermines his ability to

see that the Augustinian More—and Morus—considered such arrangements both impossible and

undesirable, and only contingently so in the sense that it is not a natural arrangement but a

conventional one, resulting from the imperfections brought about by the Fall. A wider view of

More's argument in the *Dialogue*—Surtz begins his analysis with the line "men of substance

there must be"[74] ignoring the broader context in which the topic of wealth and property arises in

the course of the dialogue, namely the question of wealth and its relationship to pride—shows

that More understood the difficulty as going to the very root of the human condition. In this

sense, these considerations cut to the core of More's earlier use of Augustine to highlight the

contingency of *all* matters pertaining to human action—including, notably, matters of worship, at

least in the instance of the shift between the old and new covenants—and the characteristically

Augustinian concern with the problem of pride, which is the root of all other sins.

Utopia and Statesmanship

Returning, then, to *Utopia*, we can now see that Morus' position reflects the position that More

later reveals himself to have held. While the arguments he uses in *Utopia* for private property

are purely prudential and derived from natural reason, they follow closely those made by

Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica* who combines, in typical fashion, points from Aristotle,

scripture, and from the Church Fathers—notably Augustine, in this case[75]—to argue that not

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[73] Ibid., 563-564.

[74] Ibid., 562.

[75] See *Summa Theologica* II-II, Qu. 66, Art 2., *Sed Contra*. Aquinas cites Augustine from *On Heresies* stating: "Augustine says 'The 'Apostolici' are those who with extreme arrogance have given themselves that name, because they do not admit into their communion persons who are

only is the possession of property not a sin, but that it in fact crosses into heresy to insist otherwise, as some sects have done. And, while later works by More, including *Responsio ad Lutherum* and *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, will contextualize property within broader theological reflections, the nature of property as a "human agreement which belongs to positive law"[76] suggests that its justification rightly derives from natural reason and prudence and that it can therefore be considered *in itself*, without explicit reference to the theological framework. In *Utopia*, then, the reader is presented with a concise recitation by Morus of the basic prudential reasons why "[l]ife cannot be satisfactory [*commode*] where all things are common."[77]

Hythloday, for his part, does not counter these arguments—at least not directly. Instead, he claims that the only reason why Morus—and, by extension, Aquinas, Augustine, Aristotle, and all others who have presumed that common property was impossible or at least unsatisfactory, given the imperfections inherent in the given world—believes as he does is because he is "a person who has no picture at all, or at least a false one, of the situation I mean."[78] If only he had been with Hythloday in Utopia, Morus "unabashedly would admit that you had never seen a well-ordered people anywhere but there."[79] In other words, Hythloday appeals, neither to public reasons which are, in principle, accessible to all interlocutors, nor to common experience, but to private experience which he expects will be accepted on nothing more than his authority alone.

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married or possess anything of their own, such as both monks and clerics who in considerable number are to be found in the Catholic Church.' Now the reason why these people are heretics was because severing themselves from the Church, they think that those who enjoy the use of the above things, which they themselves lack, have no hope of salvation. Therefore it is erroneous to maintain that it is unlawful for a man to possess property."

[76] Ibid., Reply Objection 1.

[77] CW 4, 107/5-6.

[78] Ibid., 107/17-19.

[79] Ibid., 107/22-23.

Yet, as we have seen, there are substantial reasons to question his authority and reliability—not least his utter lack of institutional ties. There is nothing to recommend his word but himself.

While Hythloday's interlocutors graciously indulge him despite his growing lack of credibility, Giles objects:

> it would be hard for you to convince me that a better-ordered people is to be found in that new world than in the one known to us. In the latter I imagine there are equally excellent minds, as well as commonwealths which are older than those in the new world. In these commonwealths long experience has come upon very many advantages for human life—not to mention also the chance discoveries made among us, which no human mind could have devised.[80]

Giles' question places the epistemological problem faced by Hythloday in stark relief: how will he go about convincing those who have not seen, and cannot even conceive of, a social arrangement in which the community of property is likely to work *in practice*? The consensus of known wisdom is that private property is essential to well-ordered *actually existing* political communities, even, as we have seen, among its detractors such as Plato. As John D. Schaeffer has observed, "Giles is asking why the account of Utopia should receive a welcome different from the one the Morton household gave the account of the Polylerites: that it's all very nice but it won't work here."[81]

Again Hythloday responds, not with commonly accessible reasons or experiences that can be examined and debated, but with appeals to his own authority, calculated, it seems, to undercut the possibility to rational deliberation: Giles is unable to give an informed opinion because he has not "read the historical accounts of that world."[82] At any rate, he says, those accounts ("if

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[80] Ibid., 107/24-31.
[81] John D. Schaeffer, "Socratic Method in More's *Utopia," Moreana* Vol. 18, No. 69 (March 1981), 15.
[82] Ibid., 107/33-34.

we must believe them"[83]) state that "there were cities among them before there were men among us" and that "even though we surpass them in brains [*ingenio*], we are far inferior to them in application [*studio*] and industry [*industria*]."[84] Hythloday then relays a detail from their chronicles: the fact that twelve hundred years prior, a ship filled with Romans and Egyptians had wrecked in the island, where they had remained. The Utopians had eagerly adopted the suggestions of the strangers, such that "[t]he Roman empire possessed no art capable of any use which they did not either learn from the shipwrecked strangers or discover for themselves after receiving hints for investigation."[85] But imagine, he laments, what would have happened if any one of them had been driven to the shores of Europe: "just as they immediately at one meeting appropriated to themselves every good discovery of ours, so I suppose it will be long before we adopt anything that is better arranged with them than with it."[86] This is, Hythloday admonishes, "the chief reason why, though we are inferior to them neither in brains nor in resources, their commonwealth is more wisely governed and more happily flourishing than ours."[87] As Schaeffer points out, we see here that what Hythloday means by "application and industry" (*studio . . . atque industria*) is in fact "an ability to increase technical control".[88] Raphael praises the Utopians willingness to "immediately at one meeting" (*uno statim congressu*) unquestioningly take on board the everything that the strangers presented to them. Hythloday praises this trait because it is precisely how he wishes to be received in the courts of European kings, as well as by his interlocutors Giles and Morus: immediately, at one meeting, and

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[83] Ibid., 107/34.
[84] Ibid., 107/38-39.
[85] Ibid., 109/1-11.
[86] Ibid., 109/12-17.
[87] Ibid., 109/17-20.
[88] Schaeffer, "Socratic Method in More's *Utopia*," 15.

unquestioningly taking on board everything he says, on nothing more than his authority. While prudent political action in ordinary times requires careful examination of various courses of action to ascertain their advantage and disadvantages, Hythloday cannot bear to have his ideas interrogated, and any hesitation or deliberation—much less any thought that some things may be appropriate at some times and places but not in others—is dismissed as irrational and unjustified. He is completely blind to the epistemological problem that he faces, insisting that he be given the right to upend entire social systems—eliminating private property and instituting common property—on the authority of his private experience alone. In this sense, despite his earlier claim to have devoted himself to philosophy,[89] we find that he is not, in fact, interested in philosophy, or the philosophic pursuit of truth—which, as Sheldon Wolin has noted "can be distinguished from other methods of eliciting truth, such as the mystic vision, the secret rite, truths of conscience or private feeling . . . [by] its claims to deal with truths publicly arrived at and publicly demonstrable"[90]—but is instead intent on exerting his *will* over others.

   Hythloday's position is absurd: he demands deference that he cannot command, given his refusal to take on the responsibility of an institutional position and the authority that it brings. As Socrates illustrates, the tools of the gadfly philosopher are necessarily different from those of the dictator[91]: not all things are appropriate or effective in every place, and those lacking the institutional authority to command –whether on the streets of Athens or in the councils of kings—must learn the art of dialectic, deliberation, and persuasion. While Hythloday considers this method to be little more than lying and dissembling, a more genuinely Platonic position

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[89] CW 4, 51/1-2.
[90] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, Expanded Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 4.
[91] In the original sense, the word indicates "one who rules by the word alone".

would recognize that accessing truth requires a dialectical examination of not only one's interlocutors' presuppositions, but one's own as well. In this sense, Hythloday creates a nearly perfect contrast with Plato's Athenian Stranger who represents Plato in the *Laws*: While the Stranger likewise points to his interlocutors' lack of experience with a properly-ordered and educationally beneficial drinking party as their reason for rejecting its possibility,[92] he is, unlike Hythoday, sensitive to the difficulty of arriving at a single truth regarding matters about which there are many different opinions ("to be sure of the truth in these matters, when so many disagree, would belong to a god"[93]) and notes his duty to "strive somehow or other to make [his argument] clear".[94] Viewed in this light, it becomes plain that Hythloday is altogether incapable of genuine Socratic dialectic, because, taking the position which the Athenian Stranger ascribes to a god, he is convinced that he already knows the truth concerning contested matters such as the meaning of virtue and justice, and, like Meno, refuses to succumb to the sting of the torpedo fish, would enable a productive examination of the matter.[95]

Morus perceives this unwillingness and relents. Hythloday has left his interlocutors with little choice—given his appeals to privileged private knowledge, they must either break off the conversation or hear him out. Hence, rather than continue to press Hythloday on his presuppositions, Morus agrees to give Hythloday was he wants: the opportunity to dictate his vision without being challenged or questioned. "[M]y dear Raphael," he says, "I beg and beseech you, give us a description of the island. Do not be brief, but set for in order the terrain, the rivers, the cities, the inhabitants, the traditions, the customs, the laws, and, in fact, everything

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[92] Plato, *Laws*, translated by Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 639d-e and 640e.
[93] Ibid., 641d.
[94] Ibid., 641e.
[95] See Plato, *Meno* 80a-d.

with you think we should like to know. And you must think we wish to know everything of which we are still ignorant [*nescimus*]."[96] Unsurprisingly, Hythloday jumps at the chance, relishing in his interlocutors' admission of ignorance: "'There is nothing,' he declared, 'I shall be more pleased to do, for I have the facts ready at hand [*Nam haec in promptu habeo*].'"[97] With this, the dialogue breaks off as the interlocutors pause their discussion to dine, and, upon returning, Hythloday begins his lengthy declamation on Utopia.

The purpose of his declamation is ostensibly to convince Giles and Morus of the feasibility of the community of property. But by asking Raphael to describe Utopia in such detail, Morus reveals his understanding that political communities are unified *wholes*, such that each part interacts with every other, forming and being formed by the citizens that comprise them. In this sense, Morus is inquiring as to the *conditions* that enable an institution like the community of property to exist in a society. He is indicating that, contrary to Hythloday's assumption, social and political reform is not simply a matter of transplanting institutions from one place to another, but have to be considered and weighed with reference to the whole—terrain, inhabitants, traditions, laws, and so forth—as well as their relative advantages and disadvantages. Even if such an arrangement were possible *somewhere*, it does not follow that it is possible *everywhere* (though always lurking behind the description is More's pun indicating that it is, in fact, possible *ou-topos*—nowhere). And, even if it were made possible, the conditions for its possibility may present substantial drawbacks that rightfully cause statesmen to pause and consider whether whatever gain there might be is worth the cost. The rash—and, we might suggest, tyrannical— Hythloday fails to see that this careful balancing of options the proper work of statesmanship,

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[96] CW 4, 109/21-26.
[97] Ibid., 109/27-28.

and insists that his word alone should be reason enough for others to adopt his recommendations, even as Morus illustrates the open, but skeptical, attitude proper to a statesman. And, there is much in Hythloday's description to give a prudent statesman pause, particularly a statesman steeped in the political and theological thought of St. Augustine.

The "Serpent from Hell"

Upon the completion of his description of Utopia, Hythloday immediately launches into a peroration in praise of Utopia. Utopia, he exclaims, is the "commonwealth which I judge not merely the best but the only one which can rightly claim the name of commonwealth [*Reipublicae*]."[98] While in other places "men talk freely of the public welfare" they instead "look after their private interests only. In Utopia, where nothing is private, they seriously concern themselves with public affairs."[99] Compared to all other nations, Hythloday contends, Utopia is the only one which has any semblance of justice or fairness: "in other nations . . . I cannot discover the slightest trace of justice and fairness [*iustitiae, aequitatisque*]."[100] Everywhere but Utopia, Hythoday contends, the rich divert the laws to their own interests, allowing them to exploit the poor to such an extent that, "when I consider and turn over in my mind the state of all commonwealths flourishing anywhere today, so help me God, I can see nothing else than a kind of conspiracy of the rich [*conspiratio divitum*], who are aiming at their own interests under the name and title of the commonwealth."[101] This occurs because money and private property have an integral role in the structure of virtually every known political

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[98] Ibid., 237/37-39.
[99] Ibid., 238/1-3.
[100] Ibid., 239/27-29.
[101] Ibid., 241/24-29.

community. The only way to eliminate these injustices, for Hythloday, is to do away not only with property and money, but with everything private. Hence, Hythloday stakes out a maximalist position, excluding any possibilities between societies which are corrupt and decadent due to their countenancing of private property, and those that are virtuous because they are wholly public, excluding the private entirely. For Hythloday, there seems to be no such thing as a basically decent and just society which also allows private property to exist.

Yet, Aristotle shows that one may still be concerned about the problems associated with corruption, decadence, and vice and yet refrain from insisting on such extreme measures. In fact, Aristotle argues, extreme measures such as these are likely to cause more problems than they solve. As a student of Plato, Aristotle was aware of the Platonic arguments against private property, and shared Plato's concerns with the ethical implications of a society in which, as Hythloday puts it, "all men measure all things by cash values".[102]   Contrary to Hythloday's argument, Aristotle does not agree that this condition obtains "wherever you have private property".[103] For Aristotle, the acquisition of the goods necessary for survival is natural, effected through activities such as hunting and gathering. But the acquisition of money is not natural—it is rather a product of artifice.[104] Money was invented to make exchange—which is also natural—more convenient, but it also leads to the art of moneymaking which allows acquisition without limit.[105] It is acquisition without limit, not acquisition *as such*, that Aristotle finds to be problematic, and as Mary Nichols has noted, he criticizes it on account that "unnatural moneymaking" can be attributed "to the desire for life rather than the good life" such that

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[102] Ibid., 103/25-26.
[103] Ibid., 103/25.
[104] Aristotle, *Politics* 1257a1-30.
[105] Ibid. 1256b26-29 and 1257b23-30.

"[m]oneymakers desire unlimited life, or immortality . . . their end is not living well, but merely living; they live in slavery to their bodies since they are moved by their desire for eternal preservation."[106] In short, he argues that "[u]nlimited moneymaking is unnatural because it represents a denial of necessity, while it binds a person all the more to necessity," and in this sense, Aristotle's "project could be considered an attempt to teach human beings to accept death so that they can turn from moneymaking to other goods, such as politics and philosophy."[107] Hence, like Hythloday, Aristotle also criticizes the subordination of higher ends to "cash values". Yet, he does not for that reason presume that the only remedy is the elimination of money and property. Instead, he argues that moneymaking can in fact be useful—and even can serve as a challenge to tyrants[108]—if it is properly subordinated to higher ends.

Likewise, Aristotle also recognizes the dangers of a political community with high levels of material and social inequality. As he notes: "[t]hus it is the greatest good fortune for those who are engaged in politics to have a middling and sufficient property, because where some possess very many things and other nothing, either rule of the people in its extreme form must come into being, or unmixed oligarchy, or—as a result of both of these excesses—tyranny."[109] Aristotle agrees with Hythloday that inequality creates factions and tends to undermine political order, promoting the (likely tyrannical) rule of either the rich or the poor. But for Aristotle the solution to this danger is not to eliminate property altogether—a proposition he utterly rejects in Book II

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[106] Mary P. Nichols, *Citizens and Statesmen: A Study of Aristotle's* Politics (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992), 26. Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1257b41-1258a2.
[107] Ibid, 26-27.
[108] Aristotle tells of a man in Sicily who purchased all the iron from the foundries, and, without increasing the price was able to make "a hundred talents' profit out of an original fifty." But "[w]hen Dionysius heard of this, he ordered him to take his money and leave Syracuse, on the ground that he had discovered a way of raising revenue that was harmful to Dionysius' own affairs" See *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1259a24-33.
[109] Aristotle, *Politics* 1295b40-1296a4.

through the refutation of Socrates' arguments in its favor[110]—but instead recommends the promotion of a strong middle class to obtain the "middling regime". This is because, following his concept of virtue as a median between extremes, those of middling status are "readiest to obey reason"[111] and are capable of both ruling and being ruled in turn, thereby allowing for a city of free persons rather than one comprised only of slaves and masters.[112] Yet, for Aristotle, even though middling regime is best regime—the most "choiceworthy" in an absolute sense— nevertheless, "there is often nothing to prevent another regime from being more advantageous for certain cities."[113]

Still, Hythloday tacitly rejects Aristotle's position, insisting that the slavish city is avoided not by the promotion of a reasonable and moderate middle class, but by the *total* elimination of money and property—and he maintains that this solution ought to be applied everywhere immediately, without regard to the circumstances. Extreme inequality and rigging of the legal system to the benefit of the rich do not obtain in Utopia, he claims, because "[i]n Utopia all greed for money was entirely removed with the use of money."[114] He despairs of moderating greed through the promotion of virtue, and instead fixates on the most extreme remedy. Eliminating money, Hythloday exclaims, does away with a host of evils—and here his tone begins to take on a fever pitch:

> What a mass of troubles was then cut away! What a crop of crimes was then pulled up by the roots! Who does not know that fraud, theft, rapine, quarrels, disorders, brawls, seditions, murders, treasons, poisonings, which are avenged rather than restrained by daily executions, die out with the destruction of money? Who does not know that fear, anxiety, worries, toils, and sleepless nights will also perish at the same time as money? What is more, poverty, which money alone seemed to make poor, forthwith would itself dwindle and disappear if

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[110] See *Politics* 1250b28-1267b21.
[111] Ibid. 1295b6.
[112] Cf. Ibid. 1295b10-34.
[113] Ibid. 1296b2-13.
[114] CW 4, 241/39-243/1.

money were entirely done away with everywhere.[115]

It is a statement that seems calculated to counter Morus' earlier argument, which presumed the impossibility of "pluck[ing] up wrongheaded opinions by the root".[116] Hythloday's ultimate answer to Morus' Augustinian understanding of the intractability of the human condition expressed throughout Book I is, effectively, that "money in the root of all evil" and, as such, eliminating money *would* in fact pluck up many evils by the root.[117]

Yet, the position that More ascribes to Hythloday is more complicated than it appears. Hythoday asserts that "[e]ven the rich, I doubt not, feel that it would be a much better state of affairs to lack no necessity than to have abundance of superfluidities—to be snatched from such numerous troubles rather than be hemmed in by great riches."[118] While his position could be described as Epicurean, in the sense that it traffics in a distinction between necessary and unnecessary goods such that even the rich are happiest if they have their natural needs met and are rid of unnatural luxuries,[119] it is also reminiscent of the interpretation that St. Augustine gives

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[115] Ibid., 243/1-10.

[116] Ibid., 99/31-32.

[117] Cf. 1 Tim. 6:10: "The love of money is the root of all evil." The Greek reads "ῥίζα γὰρ πάντων τῶν κακῶν ἐστιν ἡ φιλαργυρία". While Hythloday does not quote the scripture here, his focus on money as the source of all kinds of evil suggests a common elision—St. Paul actually stipulates that it is the *love* of money (or, literally, silver) that is the root of all evil. It is worth noting that St. Jerome's vulgate translates φιλαργυρία as *cupiditas*, which can refer to a disordered love toward worldly things in general, rather than money in particular.

[118] CW 4, 243/22-25. This harkens back to Aristotle's observation that "money seems to be something nonsensical and to exist altogether by convention, and in no way by nature, because when changed by its users it is worth nothing and is not useful with a view to any of the necessary things; and it will often happen that one who is wealthy in money will go in want of necessary sustenance." See *Politics*, 1257b10-14.

[119] As J.M. Rist notes, for Epicurus, "All desires . . . are either natural and necessary, natural and unnecessary, or natural and unnecessary." Happiness is found in pleasure, and pleasure consists in a life free from worry, hence the ethical life for Epicurus is in rightly distinguishing natural and necessary desires, and satisfying them in a natural, non-excessive way, such that "[i]t is therefore aim of the wise man to so control his desires that he demands only katastematic [or

to St. Paul's dictum regarding the love of money, in which he suggests that it is the desire of the will to live in excess of nature which is the true source of evil. "The will is the cause of sin," says Augustine, and therefore, to find the root of evil "[y]ou should not search for anything beyond the root of the matter."[120]

> Be careful that you not think anything more true than the dictum that the root of all evils is greed, that is, to will to have more than is enough. Now 'enough' is exactly as much as is required for a nature of a given kind to preserve itself. 'Greed' (or φιλαργυρία in Greek) should not be understood only with respect to silver, or rather coins, from which the Greek name is derived – coins happened to be made of silver, or a silver alloy, more commonly in the past – but in all cases of immoderate desire, wherever it may be that anyone wills to have more than is enough. This greed is desire. Desire, moreover, is a wanton will. Therefore, a wanton will is the cause of all evils. If the will were in accordance with nature, surely it would maintain the nature and not be destructive of it; hence it would not be wanton. Accordingly, we may conclude that the root of all evils is *not being in accordance with nature*, which is a sufficient rejoinder to all those who want to lay the blame on natures. But if you ask again about the cause of this root, how will it be the root of all evils? The root will be that which is its cause![121]

For Augustine, the root of evil is not money or even greed but "wanton will" which promotes desires that are not in accordance with nature, thereby causing greed and the love of money. Hence, the problem is deeper than money—it resides in the disordered loves of the will. This points to a deeper problem, one which both Augustine[122] and More[123] considered to be the true source of sin and evil: Pride.

Hythloday is cognizant enough of the teachings of orthodox Christianity—despite his own apparent but latent Pelagianism—to recognize this deeper source of human depravity. He

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well-balanced] pleasures of both mind and body." See J.M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 117-119.
[120] St. Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, *On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter King (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 106.
[121] Ibid., 106-107.
[122] See *City of God*, 14.13.
[123] See "Treatise upon the Passion of Christ," in *Essential Works of Thomas More*, 1028/24-84 and 1032/38-1033/84.

argues, in fact, that whether one is inclined simply to regard one's own interests or to take the teachings of Christ as authoritative, both in fact counsel the same thing, namely the adoption of the laws and institutions of the Utopians, and the only reason why it has not yet happened is the persistence of pride in humans:

> Nor does it occur to me to doubt that a man's regard for his own interests or the authority of Christ our Savior—who in His wisdom could not fail to know what was best and who in His goodness would not fail to counsel what He knew to be best—would long ago have brought the whole world to adopt the laws [*leges*] of the Utopian commonwealth, had not one single monster, the chief and progenitor of all plagues, striven against it—I mean Pride [*superbia*].[124]

The reason for this is that, on Hythloday's account, pride cares less about gaining *advantages for itself*, than about measuring itself against the *disadvantages of others*. Pride would not deign to become "even a goddess" if there was no one to lord it over, "if the display of her riches did not torment and intensify their poverty."[125] Hythloday, then, takes a Augustinian—or, perhaps better, pseudo-Augustinian[126]—tone regarding pride: "This serpent from hell [*auerni serpens*] entwines itself around the hearts of men [*mortalium pererrans pectora*] and acts like a suckfish

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[124] CW 4, 243/25-32.

[125] Ibid., 243/37-38.

[126] While Hythloday is concerned with pride, it is primarily pride in *others*, preventing them from uncritically accepting his opinions on what a more just society might look like. A truly Augustinian position would point to the need for self-knowledge and humility, neither of which Hythloday seems to recognize. While Hythloday presents his position as humane and charitable, Augustine emphasizes the wily nature of pride in its ability to imitate works of charity: "How can we know or see that it not be pride which governs the good deed? Where is the proof? We see the works: hunger is fed by compassion, but also by pride; strangers are entertained by compassion, but also by pride; poverty is protected by compassion, but also by pride. In the works themselves we can see no difference." Quoted in John M. Parrish, *Paradoxes of Political Ethics: From Dirty Hands to the Invisible Hand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 78. Parrish provides a helpful analysis of this aspect of Augustinian thought, highlighting the opacity which Augustine ascribes to political and social life, due to the inscrutability of human motivations. See ibid., 76-81.

[*remora*[127]] in preventing and hindering them from entering on a better way of life [*meliorem vitae capessant viam*]."[128] And he goes on to concede, now apparently in tacit agreement with the Augustinian Morus, that "Pride is too deeply fixed in men to be easily plucked out."[129] Yet, he does *not* agree with Augustine that plucking out pride—such that "a better way of life" becomes possible—is achievable only with grace: it has, in fact, been achieved by the pagan Utopians through their laws and social structure. In this sense, Hythloday reveals that, for him and contra Augustine, the pagan philosophy and the teachings of Christianity both point in the same direction: toward earthly laws and institutions which aim at the earthly perfection of humankind, at least in the sense of perfect *action*. Hythloday, therefore, views Christianity primarily as a mode of moral instruction, consistent with Pelagius rather than as a sacramental regeneration of the spirit, as Augustine taught. Christianity, in other words, becomes little more than a rival of, but not fundamentally different from, classical political and moral philosophy in its goals and effects. As Leo Strauss has argued,

> the best regime, as presented by classical political philosophy, is the object of the wish or prayer, of gentlemen as that object is interpreted by the philosopher. But the best regime, as the classics understand it, is not only the most desirable; it is also meant to be feasible or possible, i.e. possible on earth. It is both desirable and possible because it is according to nature. Since it is according to nature, no miraculous or nonmiraculous change in human nature is required for its actualization; it does not require the abolition or extirpation of that evil or imperfection with is essential to man and to human life; it is therefore possible. And, since it is accordance with the requirements of the excellence or perfection of human nature, it is most desirable.[130]

In other words, the best regime according to classical political philosophy does not require human transformation and regeneration through sacramental grace, but instead requires only that

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[127] "Remora" is a type of fish that attaches to sharks and other large marine animals, as well as ships. The Latin also indicates "hinderance" or "delay".
[128] CW 4, 243/39-245/2.
[129] Ibid., 245/3.
[130] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 139.

the philosopher articulate and interpret that which is to be prayed for, and then that the

philosopher's insights be applied to the political regime. But, Strauss notes,

> while the best regime is possible, its actualization is very difficult, hence improbable, even
> extremely improbable. For man does not control the conditions under which it could become
> actual. Its actualization depends on chance. The best regime, which is according to nature,
> was perhaps never actual; there is no reason to assume that it is actual at present; and it may
> never become actual. In a word the best regime is, in itself—to use a term coined by one of
> the profoundest students of Plato's *Republic* [i.e. Thomas More]—a "utopia."[131]

The best regime, for the classical philosophers, is constituted by "the rule of the wise" such that

"wisdom appeared to the classics as that title to rule which is highest according to nature."[132]

And yet "[t]he few wise cannot rule the many unwise by force. The unwise multitude must

recognize the wise as wise and obey them freely because of their wisdom."[133] And, because "the

ability of the wise to persuade the unwise is extremely limited," "it is extremely unlikely that the

conditions required for the rule of the wise will ever be met."[134] In this sense, there is a tension

between the claim of the wise to rule and of the unwise multitude to be able to consent to their

being ruled. As Strauss articulates it, then, "[t]he political problem consists in reconciling the

requirement for wisdom with the requirement for consent."[135]

But, Hythloday insists, the best regime *has* become actual in Utopia, and therefore, he

intimates, the political problem has been solved. In Utopia the wise rule because all that is

private has been eliminated, and men no longer "measure all things by cash values,"[136] therefore

"virtue has its reward."[137] Hence, they have "laid the foundations of the commonwealth not only

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[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid., 140.
[133] Ibid., 141.
[134] Ibid., 141.
[135] Ibid..
[136] Ibid., 103/26.
[137] Ibid., 103/34.

most happily, but also to last forever [*aeternum duratura*], as far as human prescience can forecast," because "[a]t home they have extirpated the roots of ambition and factionalism along with all the other vices [*caeteris vitiis*]."[138] Therefore, "there is no danger of trouble from domestic discord, which has been the only cause of ruin to the well-established prosperity of many cities. As long as harmony is preserved at home and its institutions are in a healthy state, not all the envy of neighboring rulers, though it has rather often attempted it and has always been repelled, can avail to shatter or to shake that nation."[139]

Even on classical terms (to say nothing of Augustinian terms) we may doubt Hythloday's judgement about the ability of any regime—even the best constituted—to last forever without discord and decay. Both Plato and Aristotle viewed corruption as an ever-present danger to which no regime is immune: Plato's cycle of regimes in Book VIII of the *Republic* describes the inevitable decline of the ideal regime—from the polity to timocracy, oligarchy, democracy and finally to tyranny[140]—and Aristotle's schema of good regimes—monarchy, aristocracy, and polity—coupled with their corrupt counterparts—tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy—suggests that every regime could move relatively easily from just to unjust, hinging largely on whether it is ruled for the public good or for some private interest.[141]

While classical political philosophy understood corruption as an ever-present possibility undermining the justness and legitimacy of regimes, St. Augustine identifies the anthropological reasons for the corruption—namely, human fallenness. For Augustine, as we have seen,

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[138] Ibid., 245/6-10.

[139] Ibid., 245/10-16.

[140] See 543a-569c. See especially 546a: "A city so composed is hard to be moved. But since for everything that has come into being there is decay, not even a composition such as this will remain for all time; it will be dissolved." Allan Bloom's translation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 225.

[141] See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1160a31-1161a9 and *Politics* 1279a23-1280a6.

fallenness leads to human pride, which is the root of all kinds of sin, and which gives a certain darkness to social and political life.[142] This opacity leads, not only to mistaken judgements, but also to distrust between societies, and even between friends, resulting in disturbances and wars.[143] In this sense, Augustine argues, it is only the City of God which can hope for eternal peace and, therefore, *aeternum duratura.*[144]

However, despite Hythloday's enthusiasm for the Utopian regime as *the* solution to the political problem—dubious on both classical and Christian terms—and despite his concomitant desire that the ideal regime of the Utopians should be implemented everywhere, he now concedes that its coming into being, if it is to happen at all, can only be a matter of chance: "For this reason, the fact that this form of a commonwealth—which I should gladly desire for all—has been the good fortune [*contigisse*] of the Utopians at least, fills me with joy [*gaudeo*]."[145] He therefore tacitly concedes Morus' earlier point: even if what he says is true, and Utopia does, in fact, represent the actualization of the classical best regime, there is still no reason to expect that it would be implemented everywhere—or, indeed, anywhere but Utopia. Hence, he admits, the political problem has not, in fact, been solved—nor can it be, in any permeant, universal way.

Even granting that Utopia is an instantiation of the best regime—which itself is dubious, as we will see—there is no way to bring it into being by artifice; it can only be the product of chance. Because, as Strauss notes, "[t]he best regime is possible only under the most favorable conditions . . . [i]t is therefore just or legitimate only under the most favorable conditions."[146] Where less-than-favorable conditions obtain, "only more or less imperfect regimes are possible

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[142] *City of God* 19.4-6.
[143] Ibid., 19.5, 19.7.
[144] Ibid., 19.11.
[145] CW 4, 245/3-6.
[146] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 139.

and therefore legitimate."[147] This means that "there is only one best regime, but there is a variety of legitimate regimes. The variety of legitimate regimes corresponds to the variety of times of relevant circumstances. Whereas the best regime is possible only under the most favorable conditions, legitimate or just regimes are possible and morally necessary at all times and in all places."[148] Contrary to Hythloday's stated position, but in line with the arguments advanced by Morus, the element of contingency and chance in political life means that regimes which are less than perfect may still be just and legitimate relative to the circumstances. The fact that the political community in which one lives is not privileged with a regime that one might "pray for"[149] does not mean that the regime is therefore illegitimate—or even unjust—or that citizens can be excused from their duty to engage in political action. The function of statesmanship is the determination of right action with reference to the contingency of political possibility. In this sense, even if Utopian institutions—including, most conspicuously, common property—were shown to be desirable and were proven to be possible, at least in Utopia, it does not follow that it could be put into practice in *any* other political communities, much less *all* other political communities. In fact, it would only show that it is possible according to the particular set of arrangements that are in place precisely "*nowhere*."

There is good reason, however, to suspect that Utopia is not even intended to represent the best regime *as such*.

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[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid., 139-140.
[149] See, e.g., Aristotle, *Politics* 1295a29.

Absurde Instituta

At the end of Book I, despite Morus' reservations about Hythloday's ideas, he ultimately agrees

to hear Hythloday out, allowing him the opportunity to describe, in great detail, Utopia as he

experienced it. Book II proceeds with Hythloday's uninterrupted description of the social and

political institutions in Utopia, followed by his peroration in its praise—no other voices are heard

challenging or even questioning him, though Morus and Giles are present, listening. The

purpose of Hythloday's tale is to convince Morus and Giles that common property is not only

possible, but that it is, in fact, the only just and legitimate social system, given the tendency of

money and private property to undermine public-spiritedness and for the rich to manipulate the

laws for their own benefit. Morus, does not disagree with Hythloday's assessment of the

situation or deny that this often occurs, but based on Aristotelian and Thomistic arguments, he

fears that the remedy is worse than the disease.

Only upon the completion of Hythloday's oration does the voice of Morus reappear—but not

to challenge Hythloday directly. Rather he turns and addresses the reader stating:

> When Raphael had finished his story, many things came to my mind which seemed very absurdly established [*perquam absurde videbantur instituta*] in the customs and laws of the people described—not only in their method of waging war, their ceremonies and religion, as well as their other institutions, but most of all in that feature which is the principle foundation of their whole structure. I mean their common life and subsistence—without any exchange of money [*victuque communi, sine ullo pecuniae commercio*]. This latter alone utterly overthrows all the nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty which are, in the estimation of the common people [*ut publica est opinio*], the true glories and ornaments of the commonwealth.[150]

Despite Raphael's lengthy and detailed description of Utopia, Morus appears to remain unmoved

in his opinion about common property: the social and political institutions which would be

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[150] CW 4, 245/17-26.

required in order to bring it about create absurdities and that it would tend to undermine the "true glories and ornaments [*vera . . . decora atque ornamenta*]" of political communities, at least in common opinion.

This passage is one of the most contentious among scholars of *Utopia*, largely because of its ambiguous character and the way that it seems to undermine the entire thrust of the work, in the mouth of the author's own character. It has occasioned intense debates regarding its level of earnestness or irony. Some scholars have argued that it is intended wholly ironically—and that the relative weakness of the argument in comparison with the stronger argument offered at the end of Book I indicates that More the author is suggesting that Hythloday's discourse has demolished those reasonable objections, leaving only this "palpably silly and insincere" argument".[151] Others have interpreted it sincerely, arguing instead that Morus' objections reflect More's own opinions of Utopia's institutions.[152] While we should stipulate that a certain level of caution about too-closely identifying More with Morus is warranted, given what we have already seen about More's opinions, it seems most likely that he intended this final objection to be taken quite seriously.

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[151] J.H. Hexer, *More's* Utopia*: The Biography of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 39. For Hexter's full argument see ibid., 35-43. For other examples, see Thomas I. White, "*Festivitas, Utilitas, et Opes*: The Concluding Irony and Philosophical Purpose of Thomas More's 'Utopia,'" *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, Vol. 10, Quincentennial Essays on St. Thomas More (1978), 135-150; and Quentin Skinner, "Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*," in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Padgen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 152-157.

[152] See, e.g., Ward Allen, "The Tone of More's Farewell to *Utopia*: A Reply to J. H. Hexter," *Moreana* Vol. 13, No. 51 (September 1976), 108-118; James Nendza, "Political Idealism in More's 'Utopia,'" *Review of Politics* Vol. 46, No. 3 (July 1984), 428-458; and most recently, Giulia Sissa, "*Familiaris reprehensio quasi errantis*: Raphael Hythloday, between Plato and Epicurus," *Moreana* Vol. 49 (2012), 121-150.

We can concede that, in general, *Utopia* is a philosophical reflection on and exploration of "conventional ideas of worldly riches"[153] and that this was a question which interested More throughout his writings, including in the period in which he authored *Utopia*.[154] As we have seen, worldly riches have always been a point of difficulty for Christian moral and political thought, and More, as an astute Christian moral and political thinker (not to mention a powerful and wealthy Christian) was concerned with these questions—both their meaning for him personally, and for society at large. Some commentators have argued that More's inclusion of the phrase "in the estimation of the common people [*ut publica est opinio*]," definitively illustrates the irony of the passage, given the humanist interest in overthrowing the common opinions about the "true glories" of a commonwealth.[155] But, we see the question better if we apply here the reading we have already suggested: that *Utopia* should be understood as More's friendly engagement with the implications of Erasmus' political ideas, and that Hythloday represents, not More's opinions, but rather a kind of exaggerated form of those held by Erasmus.

While Erasmus' elitist and moralistic Stoic-tinged Epicurean Christianity led him to take a generally disparaging the view of common opinion and what he considered to be

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[153] Thomas I. White, "*Festivitas, Utilitas, et Opes*," 136.

[154] See ibid., 137: "A good indication that *Utopia*'s criticism of wealth is serious is that the theme of the proper use of wealth and material goods is echoed in other writings from the same period of More's career."

[155] See, e.g., Skinner, "Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*," 154: "All [Morus] says is that the Utopian system would overthrow 'the commonly accepted opinion' of these values [nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty] that they are all indissolubly linked with each other. As I have labored to demonstrate, however, it was one of the characteristic ambitions of humanist political theory to dissolve these very links in the same of upholding the rival opinion that true nobility derives from virtue alone. To suppose that More, at this crucial summarising point in his argument, was aligning himself with the very orthodoxy his fellow humanists were overwhelmingly concerned to attack is not merely to go beyond anything he actually says in the text; it is also to make nonsense of the fundamentally humanist allegiances he displays throughout the book."

superfluidities,[156] More understood that the nature of political order requires concessions to common opinion in order to remain stable. Erasmus' exacting moralism had little patience with the concrete needs of political order such as institutions and symbols of authority. Both Erasmus and More considered education of the individual and personal moral development to be the *sine qua non* of social and political renewal—but Morus draws attention to the fact that personal morality, while a *necessary* but not *sufficient* condition for social and political renewal and therefore cannot simply be *presumed* to translate into a rejuvenation of the institutions of social and political order.[157] In this sense, *Utopia* can be understood as More's reflection on the institutional requirements for Erasmus' moralistic vision to be translated into a real political order. Because Erasmus' overwhelming concern is with individual morality, the fundamental problem that More points to in his final objection is the difficulty of translating *individual* morality into the requirements of *political* morality.

This is of a piece with the broader theme, highlighted by the exchange between Hythloday and Morus, regarding the necessary concessions that political order must make to the demands of reality—and, in particular, fallen human nature—and the function of prudence and statesmanship in navigating the perils it presents. Even if private property is a concession to fallen human

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[156] See Chapter 2.

[157] As Fritz Caspari has noted: "Erasmus often seems to assume that the spirit which animates him and to which he gives expression in what he considers to be perfect style will create, by its own impetus, the institutions it needs to propagate itself. His rational idealism, his frail constitution, his great intellectual ability and capacity for work led him to an overestimation of the power of pure intellect in man. For better or for worse, *ratio* is not, as he wishfully thinks, the sole determining factor and guiding principle for individuals, in human affairs and societies. As an educational optimist, he fails to see that there are very definite limitations to the effectiveness of education; that it is, after all, unlikely that by it all men can be made food and filled with love for each other as they would have to be in his ideal state." See "Erasmus on the Social Functions of Christian Humanism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 8, No. 1 (January 1947), 92.

nature—as the Church Fathers had suggested—More recognized that it was now, given the fact of fallenness, a necessary aspect of rightly ordered political communities, as Morus argues at the end of Book I, and the statesman must consider its function in the maintenance of that order. Similarly, even if "nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty" are concessions to irrational common opinions, their maintenance is not, for that reason, an irrelevant consideration for the prudent statesman.

Hythloday's (and, we might suggest, Erasmus') rationalism tends toward reductionism regarding politics, such that concessions to "nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty" might seem unnecessary and even actively harmful when they serve as a rationale for declining to attempt a social arrangement deemed more desirable. Yet, this view neglects the point that Morus brings out in his comment: The translation of individual morality to a political and social order necessitates, as a prerequisite, the development and maintenance of shared *symbols* of order. These cannot be reduced away or replaced by individual moral development. A genuinely social and political order—as opposed to a mere aggregation of individuals—requires that there be a truly *common* good, which, in turn, requires that there be a system of symbols denoting the things that political communities must hold in common: a shared geographic location, a shared structure of legitimate authority, a shared system of institutions, a shared language with which to reason and deliberate together, a shared history, and so forth. In short, it requires mediation between the internal consciousness of the individual citizen and the objective, external structure of order, such that an identity between the individual and the common is developed and sustained. As Eric Voegelin has pointed out

> Human society is not merely a fact, or an event, in the external world to be studied by an observer like a natural phenomenon. Though it has externality as one of its important components, it is as a whole a little world, a cosmion, illuminated with meaning from within by the human beings who continuously create and bear it as the mode and condition of their

realization. It is illuminated through an elaborate symbolism, in various degrees of compactness and differentiation—from rite, through myth, to theory—and this symbolism illuminates it with meaning in so far as the symbols make the internal structure of such a cosmion, the relations between its members and groups of members, as well as its existence as a whole, transparent for the mystery of human existence. The self-illumination of society through these symbols is an integral part of social reality, and one may even say its essential part, for through such symbolizations the members of a society experience it as more than an accident or a convenience; they experience it as of their human essence. And, inversely, the symbols express the experience that man is fully man by virtue of his participation in a whole which transcends his particular existence, by virtue of his participation in the *xynon*, the common . . .[158]

Hence, the function of symbols denoting "nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty" in a political community is not to be discounted as extraneous to the maintenance of political order, but rather is of its very essence.

Still, there is an interesting paradox that Morus' comment suggests: a common political order requires a social order in which all is not common, that is, where room is provided for the private sphere—and this private sphere must be centered fundamentally on private property. Contrary to Hythloday's contention, Morus suggests that a system in which property is common tends to undermine its own ability to maintain a genuinely political community. This is because, as Hannah Arendt has noted, "the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised . . . Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those gathered around the know they see sameness in utter diversity can worldly reality truly and reliably appear."[159]

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[158] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 27-28.

[159] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 57.

In other words, the existence of a private realm, afforded by private property, is the condition for the reality of the public realm to appear.

While Hythloday (and Erasmus) could afford to be dismissive of the "common opinion" regarding the shared symbols underpinning and sustaining the commonwealth, or their reliance on the stability of the private sphere for their continued appearance, the statesman Morus (and More) has no such luxury. This is not to say, of course, that the statesman ought *only* to be guided by the common opinion—common opinions often serve to distort the perception of reality, and political thinkers have long recognized the dangers associated with "the cave," to use an image from Plato's *Republic*, the first work of political philosophy. Nor is it to say that statesmanship does not need to aim for justice, goodness, or virtue. The philosophical and political problem that Morus identifies (a problem elided in Plato's *Republic* as much as in Erasmus' political thought[160]) is the difficulty of translating individual morality—that is, justice, goodness, and virtue in an individual—into a morality capable of sustaining political order or a *political* morality, and the need for symbols of order—of nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty—to mediate the transition without collapsing the distinction.[161]

Understanding this transition is crucial for comprehending the structure of the Utopian commonwealth, and for interpreting what Morus (and likely More as well) sees as its absurdities. The edifice of the Utopian commonwealth rests on a foundation of moral philosophy that is rooted in pleasure, though an understanding of pleasure that emphasizes virtue as the path to its

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[160] See Plato, *Republic* 368c-e.

[161] Cf. Aristotle's comment in *Politics* 1261a16-22: "it is evident that as [a city] becomes increasingly one it will no longer be a city. For the city is in its nature a sort of multitude, and as it becomes more a unity it will be a household instead of a city, and a human being instead of a household; for we would surely say that the household is more a unity than the city, and the individual than the household. So even if one were able to do this, one ought not do it, as it would destroy the city."

achievement. In short, it is a strange blend of Epicurean and Stoic ideas. The problem consists in precisely this: even if they present a firm basis on which to build a system of *individual* morality, Epicurean pleasure and Stoic virtue, whether on their own or combined, are fundamentally incapable of providing a basis for a genuinely *social* morality, much less a *political* morality, because they are moral systems which are fundamentally a- or even anti-political by nature. This difficulty results in a political community which contains many absurdities because it is, at its core, anti-political.

Chapter 5

Fines Bonorum: Politics, Moral Philosophy, and Religion in Utopia

Except for Hythloday's peroration condemning pride and recommending the Utopian

commonwealth and Morus' whispered objections to what he has heard, the entirety of Book II is

comprised of Hythloday's description to the island of Utopia. While many of the particular

features of the Utopia civilization resemble the cities in speech found in Plato's *Republic* and

Laws, the form and structure of the description most closely resembles Aristotle's attempt to

ascertain an image of the best regime in Book VII of the *Politics*. Yet, Aristotle's inquiry begins

first with a consideration of the best life for the individual (Chapter 1-3), and then of the number

of citizens that is most desirable (Chapter 4). Hythloday's description begins instead at the point

that Aristotle reaches only in Chapter 5, namely a description of the ideal terrain on which a best

regime should be founded, and only later does he double back to discuss the Utopians' vision of

the best life. As we will see, the Utopians consider pleasure (*voluptas*) to be the highest end for

human beings, though they consider virtue (*virtus*) to be the primary means for achieving

genuine pleasure. All of the features of Utopia, then, are directed at that end.

Utopiae Novae Insulae

"The island of the Utopians," Book II begins, "extends in the center (where it is broadest) for

two hundred miles and is not much narrower for the greater part of the island, but toward both

ends it gradually begins to taper. These ends form a circle five hundred miles in circumference

and make the island look like a new moon [*lunae speciem renascentis effigiant*], the horns of

which are divided by straits about eleven miles across."[1] These straits open into a bay which is navigable by the inhabitants. But, we learn, the mouth of the bay "is rendered perilous here by shallows and there by reefs" and while a tall rock juts up from the mouth, capped by a garrison, and, being visible, is not dangerous, "other rocks are hidden and therefore treacherous."[2] The ways into the island are known only to the native Utopians, and therefore anyone who would enter the island must be led by a Utopian pilot. What's more, even the Utopians themselves navigate the passage with some difficulty, relying on established landmarks which "if these were removed to other positions, they could easily lure an enemy's fleet, however numerous, to destruction."[3] The marginal gloss here observes that the way into Utopia is guarded by "A Stratagem Based on the Shifting of Landmarks [*Stratagema ex mutatis signis*]"[4] and the perceptive reader will note the warning: things are not as they seem, and the way into Utopia— for the reader as much as an invading navy—is hazardous, based on shifting signs.

The reader is soon presented with the first of these shifting signs: Utopia, Hythloday states, was not always an island, but was made one when its early conqueror, a philosopher-ruler-general named Utopus, ordered the excavation of a fifteen-mile-wide channel, carving the island from the continent and renaming it "Utopia" in the place of its original name "Abraxa".[5] It so

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[1] CW 4, 111/7-13.
[2] Ibid., 111/19-24.
[3] Ibid., 111/29-30.
[4] Ibid., 111/27-28.
[5] Ibid., 113/1-5. "Abraxa" seems to be a reference the Gnostic teachings of Basilides, an early Christian Gnostic teacher who posited that there were 365 heavens, and that the highest of the all was called "Abraxas," which can be interpreted according to its Greek letters which totaling 365: α=1, β=2, ρ=100, α=1, ξ=60, α, 1, ς=200. The reference is obscure, but suggests perhaps that More wanted to illustrate the mythical nature of Utopia, as well as that More intended to associate Utopia with unorthodox mysticism, rather than Christian orthodoxy, and to indicate that Utopian wisdom is in fact to be understood as prideful like that of Gnostic heresies. See

doing, Utopus "brought the rude and rustic people to such a perfection of culture and humanity as makes them now superior to almost all other mortals".[6] Utopus is clearly meant to evoke the classical image of the founding legislator, greater even than Lycurgus of Sparta and Solon of Athens: the entire commonwealth is a work of his artifice, not only the laws and the cultivated character of its citizens, but even the island itself.[7] Utopus is the only Utopian who is given a proper name in the text.

The cities, as described by Hythloday, evince the rationalistic foundation of the island: there are fifty-four city states, which are all "identical in language, traditions, customs, and laws" and they are "similar also in layout and everywhere, as far as the nature of the ground permits, similar even in appearance."[8] Hence, while nature precludes total uniformity, the Utopian commonwealth promotes sameness, at least as an ideal. The cities are said to be distributed.

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note on CW 4, 386. See also Blandine Perona, "Between Erasmus and More, Abraxa(s), an Anamorphic Name," *Erasmus Studies* Vol. 39, No. 1 (March 2019), 93-96; and Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, Second Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 133. Interestingly, similar to Utopia's paradoxical name which indicates "no place," Basilides' First Cause is paradoxically called the "Non-Existent". See Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 135n5.

[6] CW 4, 113/5-8.

[7] As noted above, the name Abraxa suggests a connection to the Hermetic tradition which was extremely popular in throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, especially amongst Platonist humanists in Florence, including Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and others. The discovery of the Hermetic texts in the mid-fifteenth century led to an interest in combining the wisdom found in Christianity, Platonism, Hermeticism, Kaballah, and other theosophical traditions. The idea of transforming things using magic was an integral part of this tradition, and Utopus' transforming of Utopia into an island may constitute a reference this tradition. See David Walsh, "Revising the Renaissance: New Light on the Origins of Modern Political Thought," *Political Science Reviewer* 11 (1981), 27-5 and After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom (San Francisco: Harper San Fransisco, 1990), 107-123. See also Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964) and D.P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (London: Warburg, 1958).

[8] CW 4, 113/19-23.

nearly evenly, with no less than twenty-four miles between them[9]—twelve miles on all sides—

and "none is so isolated that a person cannot go from it to another in a day's journey."[10]

Yet, while all cities are the same, not all cities are equal. Once a year, each city sends "three

old and experienced [*terni senes ac rerum periti*] citizens"[11] to the central city called

Amaurotum[12] to "discuss the affairs of common interest to the island".[13] Amaurotum is

"considered the chief as well as the capital city [*prima, princepsque habetur*]" and because of

this (and the fact that it is where he lived during his time there), it is the city that Hythloday

chooses to describe: "The person who knows one of the cities will know them all, since they are

all exactly alike insofar as terrain permits. I shall picture one or the other (nor does it matter

which), but which should I describe rather than Amaurotum? First, none is worthier, the rest

deferring to it as the meeting place of the national senate; and secondly, none is better known to

me, as being one in which I had lived for five whole years."[14] As described, the city in some

ways resembles More's London (for example, with regard to the bridge that crosses the river

Anydrus[15] which flows along the town) but the specific features appear to be drawn broadly from

a wide range of classical, medieval, and contemporary sources—including Plato's *Laws*,

Aristotle's *Politics*, Roman architect Vitruvius' *De Architectura*, Roman military author

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[9] Ibid., 113/23-24.

[10] Ibid., 113/25-26. This comment is interesting in light of the severe restrictions placed on travel between cities. See CW 4, 147/8-12.

[11] Ibid., 113/26-27.

[12] The name indicates "shadowy" or "dark" from the Greek "ἀμαυρός". See note on CW 4, 388.

[13] CW 4, 113/28-29.

[14] Ibid., 117/25-31.

[15] The Greek "ἀνυδρος" indicates that it is "without water". See note on ibid., 392.

Vetegius' *De Re Militari*, Aquinas' *De Regimine Principum*, and fifteenth century Italian writer Francesco Patrizi's *De Institutione Reipublicae*, among others.[16]

   Hythloday notes that, according to the annals (which record a history of 1760 years[17]), Utopus himself sketched the plan of the city.[18] Houses are arranged in blocks which open at the back to a shared garden, and even houses are considered to be public property, with doors that are "easily opened by hand and then closing of themselves," so as to "give admission to anyone."[19] This feature helps to ensure that "nothing is private property anywhere [*nihil usquam privati est*]," and, further reinforcing the point, houses are exchanged by lot every ten years.[20] The shared gardens, however, occupy an important place in the Utopian scheme—so important, in fact, that "[t]here is nothing which their founder [Utopus] seems to have cared [*curam*] so much for as these gardens."[21] While the gardens afford the inhabitants pleasure, linking them with the garden of Epicurus,[22]they also provide an outlet for competition: "Their zest in keeping them [the gardens] is increased not merely by the pleasure [*voluptas*] afforded them but by the keen competition [*certamen*] between blocks as to which will have the best kept garden."[23] This seems to be a concession to the natural competitiveness in human nature—or as St. Augustine

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[16] See notes on ibid., 392-397.

[17] As R. J. Schoeck has observed, this date is significant because when traced back from 1516, 1760 years lands on 244 B.C.—the year that King Agis IV ascended to the kingship of Sparta, who proposed that "everyone should be free from their debts; all the lands be divided into equal portions" and was subsequently put to death for the suggestion. See R. J. Schoeck, "More, Plutarch, and King Agis: Spartan History and the Meaning of *Utopia*," *Philological Quarterly* 35 (1956), 366-357.

[18] CW 4, 121/26-27.

[19] Ibid., 121/11-12.

[20] Ibid., 121/12-15.

[21] Ibid., 121/24-25.

[22] See Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* 5.1.3

[23] CW 4, 121/19-22.

might suggest, the tendency toward *libido dominandi*—which is often satisfied through conquest or the pursuit of property, but which in Utopia is given expression in this relatively benign way. While Augustine had pointed out that the Romans satisfied their *libido dominandi* through conquest, More here seems to subtly draw a connection between that impulse to conquest and the impulse toward the acquisition of property.

Utopian Institutions

Strikingly, the shortest section in the book, titled "The Officials [De Magistratibus],"[24] is the one that deals with Utopia's specifically *political* institutions. Their political system is broadly a federalist representative republic. It appears to be a kind of mixed regime, with thirty families choosing a representative called, Hythloday notes, a "syphogrant" in the old language, but a "phylarch" in the new language,[25] and over ten syphogrants[26] sits an office "once called a tranibor but now a protophylarch."[27] All of the syphogrants—numbering 200—are sworn to

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[24] Ibid., 123/7.

[25] Many speculations regarding the etymologies for these words have been put forth. Syphogrant may indicate "wise elders" (see note on ibid., 399), but it may also indicate "ruler of a pig-sty," which may be a reference to Plato's *Republic* in which Glaucon rejects Socrates' initial description of a "true . . . healthy state" as a "city of pigs" (see Colin Starnes, *The New Republic: A Commentary on Book I of More's Utopia Showing its Relation to Plato's Republic* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990), viii). Phylarch seems to mean "head of a tribe" but can also indicate "fond of rule or power" (see note on CW 4, 389). These duel meanings seem to be strategic on the part of More, perhaps illustrating the Augustinian point about the inherent opacity and ever-present darkness of social and political life. See James Romm, "More's Strategy of Naming in the Utopia," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* Vol. 22, No. 2 (Summer 1991), 173-183.

[26] Strangely, despite Hythloday's pointing out that the modern Utopian language refers to these leaders as phylarchs, he persists in referring to them as syphogrants throughout the passage.

[27] CW 4., 123/11-12. "Tranibor" may suggest "bench-eater," perhaps a reference to the common meals in Utopia, but in More's England (as in modern Angelo-American language), "bench"

"choose the man whom they judge the most useful" then "by secret balloting appoint a governor [*principem*], specifically one of the four candidates named to them by the people, for one is selected our of each of the four quarters of the city to be commended to the senate."[28] This governor (*principis magistratus*) is elected for life (*perpetuus*) unless "ousted on suspicion of aiming at tyranny."[29] All other officials in Utopia hold their posts for a year, though Hythloday points out that tranibors are "not changed without good reason."[30]

The procedures of the political institutions seem specifically calculated to ensure deliberation amongst the officials: the governor consults with the tranibors at least every other day (and more often if necessary); two syphogrants are admitted into the senate chamber every day but always a different two; no proposal may be ratified before it has been debated for three days, and no proposal is discussed on the same day that it is proposed. This is latter is said to prevent haste in decision-making, as well as to create some separation between the person making the proposal and the proposal itself:

> lest anyone, after hastily blurting out the first thought that popped in his head, should afterwards give more thought to defending his opinion than supporting what is good for the commonwealth, and should prefer to jeopardize the public welfare rather than to risk his reputation through a wrongheaded and misplaced shame, fearing he might be thought to have shown too little foresight [*prospixisse*] at first—though he should have been enough foresighted at the first to speak with prudence [*consulto*] rather than with haste![31]

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references the courtroom where a judge presides. "Protophylarch" indicates "first among the chieftains". See note on ibid., 398.

[28] CW 4, 123/14-18. But, see note on ibid., 400: "There is room for debate here. Is this 'senate' composed of the two hundred syphogrants or does the assembly of the syphogrants elect the prince and then propose him to the senate for confirmation? Grammar favors the former view, but consistency in the use of the term *senatus* the latter view."

[29] Ibid., 123/19-21.

[30] Ibid., 123/22-23.

[31] Ibid., 125/14-24.

The concern with tyranny, understood in the Aristotelian sense of "a monarchy with a view to the advantage of the monarch,"[32] as well as a general concern that private interests will overwhelm concern for the public good seems to be the underlying rationale for the structure of the Utopian political order. Yet, the institutional checks stemming from this concern also have a dark side, as is evidenced by two features. First, the senate is apparently responsible for settling disputes between private persons, and yet, we are told, disputes between private persons are very few and that those that do arise are settled "without loss of time [*mature dirimunt*]".[33] As a lawyer who often handled disputes between private citizens, More was well aware of both the infinite number of ways that disputes can arise between persons and the fact that many are quite time-consuming to handle, with legitimate claims being made by both parties. This indicates, perhaps, that in Utopia the precedence of the public sphere over the private can serve to undermine justice at the interpersonal level, lest private disputes distract from public business. Second, and even more strikingly, however, is the observation that in Utopia, "[t]o take council on matters of common interest [*rebus communibus*] outside the senate [*senatum*] or the popular assembly [*comitia*] is considered to be a capital offense."[34] The rationale given is "to prevent it from being easy, by conspiracy between the governor and the tranibors and by tyrannous oppression of the people [*oppresso per tyrannidem populo*], to change the order of the commonwealth [*statum reipublicae mutare*]."[35] These harsh measures appear to apply equally to elected officials as well as the general public, given the prohibition both on consulting outside

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[32] Aristotle, *Politics* 1279b6-7.
[33] CW 4, 123/29.
[34] Ibid., 125/1-2.
[35] Ibid., 125/3-6.

the senate and the "public assembly."[36] Hence, despite their official purpose as preventing a conspiracy of the senate and the governor against the people, their actual purpose seems to include the prevention of the people conspiring against the government or the possibility of altering the regime in the event that they should find it oppressive.

The price of ensuring the primacy of the public good in Utopia is the undermining of both an aspect of justice and of civic friendship. While citizens rely on the senate for the redress of grievances between each other, the senate dispatches with their cases quickly, giving short shrift to the private aspect of justice, which includes the equitable resolution of disputes between private citizens. And, the application of the death penalty to discussions of issues pertaining to the commonwealth outside of official channels all but undermines the possibility of genuine civic friendship. This is because civic friendship is the consideration of common things among equals in such a way that it is directed at, but not reducible, the political. As John von Heyking notes, "[b]eing habituated in conversation is indispensable for citizenship, deliberation, and self-government."[37] Civic friendship underpins the political regime because it is directed at achieving like-mindedness in considerations of what is good and advantageous for the political community.[38] The capacity for speech is the condition for politics. Speech about what is common cannot exist only at the political level, because the habits of deliberation begin at the

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[36] See note on ibid., 400: "This would appear to be the gathering of the citizens by themselves, not through their representatives."

[37] John von Heyking, "Friendship: The Horizon of Our Common Life," in *Reflections on Religion and Public Life*, ed. Catherine Caulfield (Edmonton, AB: The Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life, 2017), 60.

[38] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1167a22-b3. See also Matthew D. Wright, *A Vindication of Politics: On the Common Good and Human Flourishing* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2019), 91-119.

personal and the private, and are then carried into the public sphere as the condition for its existence: "Political friendship is not the object of political action or deliberation so much as their condition."[39] Hence, a regime which prohibits these considerations in any but a public setting tends to, in a sense, create shallow citizens, because, as Hannah Arendt notes, "[a] life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow." Hence "the elimination of the private realm, for which the intimate is not a very reliable substitute," poses a genuine "danger to human existence"[40] because "it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real, non-subjective sense."[41] Here, the function of property connects back to the maintenance of civic friendship and its' underpinning of both the political community and the depth of the person: "The only efficient way to guarantee the darkness of what needs to be hidden against the light of publicity is private property, a privately owned place to hide in."[42] While Utopian society allows marriage for all (unlike Plato's *Republic*, which considers it a problem to eliminated as far as possible[43]), and therefore retains what Arendt calls the "intimate," the elimination of private property eliminates the private realm—extending even to the home with doors that do not lock and houses exchanged by lot every ten years.[44]

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[39] John von Heyking, "Friendship: The Horizon of our Common Life," 62.
[40] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 70
[41] Ibid., 71.
[42] Ibid.
[43] See *Republic* 423e-424a.
[44] CW 4, 121/9-15.

Utopian Social Relations

This lack of pre-political civic friendship established through discourse about common things,

therefore, necessitates other means of holding the political community together. One of the ways

that the Utopians achieve this is through the elevation of work: all Utopians participate in

agriculture having been instructed in it from childhood,[45] and each has a craft of their own

(selected from a limited number of trades—wool-working, or linen-making, or masonry, or

metal-working, or carpentry—"[t]here is no other pursuit which occupies any number worth

mentioning"[46]) which they practice for the benefit of the whole community. Children are

"brought up in their father's craft, for which most have a natural inclination," though "if anyone

is attracted to another occupation, he is transferred by adoption to a family pursuing that craft for

which he has a liking."[47] While the semblance of the family remains, the whim of the individual

and the manufacturing needs of society are enough to override the familial bond. This principle

is further developed by the system of transferring individuals between families and even between

cities when a household grows beyond the prescribed limit (no fewer than ten, nor more than

sixteen adults, with six thousand households for each city[48]), and the transferring of excess

population off the island to colonies on the mainland.[49]

The structure of life in Utopia, then, revolves around work, and the days are highly

regimented, such that "[t]he chief and almost the only function [*unicum negocium est*] of the

syphogrants is to manage and provide that no one sit idle [*desideat ociosus*], but that each apply

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[45] Ibid., 125/26-31.
[46] Ibid., 125/39-127/1.
[47] Ibid., 127/13-17.
[48] Ibid., 135/35-137/6.
[49] Ibid., 135/7-11.

himself industriously to his trade [*suae quisque arti sedulo incumbat*]".[50] Yet, the stated intent

of this is to reduce working for or everyone, allowing the work day to be reduced to six hours:

three before noon, and three after noon, with a one-hour lunch break in between and followed by

the evening meal. They go to bed at eight o'clock and sleep for eight hours.[51] The remaining

time is used according to each person's discretion, but it is not allowed to be "waste[d] in revelry

or idleness".[52] Rather, it is expected that each person will "devote the time free from work to

some other occupation according to taste".   Free time is "commonly devoted to intellectual

pursuits," including daily pre-dawn lectures, which are only required for the scholar class ("those

who have been specially chosen to devote themselves to learning") but which are voluntarily

attended by many others, male and female alike.[53] Aside from these lectures, Utopian leisurely

pursuits are conducted for one hour after dinner, and consists either in playing music or

"entertain[ing] themselves with conversation [*se sermone recreant*]".[54] They do not play dice,

"and that kind of ruinous game," but they do play games "not unlike chess," one of which pits

numbers against one another, and another which pits virtues against vices, and which "is

exhibited very cleverly, to begin with, both the strife of the vices with one another and their

concerted opposition to the virtues; then, what vices are opposed to what virtues, by what forces

they assail them openly, by what stratagems they attack them indirectly, by what safeguards the

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[50] Ibid., 127/24-28.
[51] Ibid., 127/32-37.
[52] Ibid., 127/39
[53] Ibid., 129/1-8.
[54] Ibid., 129/16.

virtues check the power of the vices, by what arts they frustrate their designs; and, finally, by what means the one side gains victory." [55]

Here, Hythloday launches into a lengthy discussion of how a mere six hours of work for each citizen can effectively supply all of the material needs of the community. The key, he argues, is the elimination of idle hands. In Europe, there are large numbers of idlers, from women who do not work, to men who send women to work in their stead, the "lazy . . . crow of priests and so-called religious," to the rich ("especially the masters of estates, who are commonly termed gentlemen and noblemen"), plus the retainers of the rich, and finally the "lusty and sturdy beggars who make some disease their an excuse for idleness".[56] Moreover, a taste for luxury in European society leads to many being employed in trades that are ultimately unnecessary, because "in a society where we make money the stand of everything, it is necessary to practice many crafts which are quite vain and superfluous, ministering only to luxury and licentiousness [*luxus tantum ac libidinis ministras*]."[57] In contrast to this, the Utopians distribute their production "over only as few crafts as the few needs and conveniences demanded by nature"[58] thereby freeing up a great many who in European society are occupied with "unnecessary" production. With so few exempted from labor—only a total of about five hundred citizens incuding those whose age and strength would otherwise require them to work, the syphogrants (though they rarely take advantage of the privilege in order to provide an example for others), dedicated scholars who are recommended by the priests and voted on by the syphogrants, as well

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[55] Ibid., 129/17-29.
[56] Ibid., 129/38-131/11.
[57] Ibid., 131/12-15.
[58] Ibid., 131/16-17.

as those other offices which are selected from among the scholarly class: ambassadors, priests, tranibors, and the governor[59]—there remain more than enough hands to do the work required to supply these essential material needs with each doing six hours of work per day. Furthermore, Hythloday says, they keep labor to a minimum by ensuring that preventative maintenance is done on buildings, and they keep their clothing minimalist—throughout the island, it is cut in the same pattern and is kept in the natural color of the materials—and each garment generally lasts for several years. [60] They give no mind to the fineness of thread, nor to color in their clothing. Hence, in a manner consistent with their (and Hythloday's) rationalistic reductionism, they view clothing as nothing more than a utilitarian device for protecting against the elements, and see no reason why anyone should desire more than a single garment.[61]

Ultimately, the arrangement points to the purpose—indeed, the "sole object [*unum scopum*]"—of the Utopian constitution: "that for all the citizens, as far as the public needs permit, as much as time as possible should be withdrawn from the service of the body and devoted to the freedom and culture of the mind [*animi libertatem cultumque*]. It is in the latter that they deem the happiness of life [*vitae felicitatem*] to consist."[62] In short, the constitution aims at providing the opportunity for *leisure*, in the classical sense of having the opportunity to pursue the liberal arts, for as many as possible.[63]

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[59] Ibid., 131/29-133/9.
[60] Ibid., 133/39-39; see also 127/1-7.
[61] Ibid., 135/9-11.
[62] Ibid., 135/20-24.
[63] See Joseph Pieper's comment in *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*: "Idleness, in the old sense of the word, so far from being synonymous with leisure, is more nearly the inner prerequisite that renders leisure impossible: it might be described as the utter absence of leisure, or the very opposite of leisure. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 46.

The Utopians, then, both venerate labor as dignified (perhaps following Utopus, who, recall, required his soldiers to labor alongside the natives in digging the channel, "to prevent them from think the labor a disgrace"[64]) while at the same time considering it as something to be kept to a minimum, in order to maximize the time available for leisure. In one sense, this tension is the same as that also present in later communist thought, most notably Karl Marx.[65] But in another sense, it is broadly consistent with the Ciceronian concept of *humanitas*: notably, even the work that is mentioned as common to all in Utopia—agriculture—is considered by Cicero to be among the liberal arts, because it requires a great degree of *prudentia* and therefore, "of all the occupations by which grain is secured, none is better . . . none is more becoming to a freeman."[66] The Utopian constitution, therefore, ostensibly aims at creating a city in which *all* are—or can be—*liberos*.[67]

Yet, there are reasons to suspect that they have not succeeded in this aim, and that all is not as it seems. First, even if a society is perfectly ordered toward the opportunity for leisure and the cultivation of the mind for all, it is, at best, only a necessary condition for actuating true leisure.

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[64] CW 4, 113/12-13.

[65] Hannah Arendt notes: "While [labor] was an 'eternal necessity imposed by nature' and the most human and productive of man's activities, the revolution, according to Marx, has not the task of emancipating the laboring classes but of emancipating man from labor; only when labor is abolished can the 'realm of freedom' supplant the 'realm of necessity'" . . . The fact remains that in all stages of his work [Marx] defines man as an animal laborans and then leads him into a society in which this greatest and most human power is no longer necessary. We are left with the rather distressing alternative between productive slavery and unproductive freedom." See *The Human Condition,* 104-105

[66] Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), 155.

[67] See Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, 63: the central problem of liberating men from this condition [being fettered to the process of work] lies in making the whole field of significant activity available and open to the working man—of activity which is *not* 'work'; in other words: in making the sphere of real leisure available to him."

As Joseph Pieper points out, "[l]eisure is a mental and spiritual attitude—it is not simply the result of external factors, it is not the inevitable result of spare time, a holiday, a weekend or a vacation. It is, in the first place, a condition of the soul".[68] The social and political arrangement can only provide the *conditions* for leisure—the actualization of leisure must be effected in each soul.[69] On the other hand, the actualization of leisure is not strictly a task of the individual. Rather, as Pieper argues, it consists in coming together with others, and, in particular, in the act of divine worship. The structure of culture is preconditioned on the existence of leisure and the collective ordering of each soul toward what exists and is done *for its own sake*. Hence, it can never be done for the *purpose* of creating, renewing, or sustaining culture, nor can it be expected "to arise on purely human foundations, on foundations made by man; it is of the very nature of religious worship that its origin lies in a divine ordinance": "Worship is either something 'given', divine worship is foreordained—or it does not exist at all."[70]

There are indications, however, that the Utopians view their religious worship and feasts as both of human origin and instrumentally directed at the sustaining of their social order. We are told, for example, that their ethical theory is underpinned and constrained by certain religious beliefs: "They never have a discussion of philosophy without uniting certain principles taken

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[68] Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, 46.
[69] See ibid., 63: "This end cannot be attained by purely political measures and by widening and, in that sense, 'freeing' the life of the individual economically. Although this would entail much that is necessary, the essential would still be wanting. The external opportunity for leisure is not enough; it can only be fruitful I the man himself is capable of leisure and can, as we say, 'occupy his leisure'". The Utopians seem to recognize this point by noting that there are "many minds which do not reach the level for any of the higher intellectual disciplines," and these are permitted to "devote [the early morning time in which public lectures are given] to his trade"—and is actually even "praised as useful to the commonwealth." CW 4, 129/8-12.
[70] Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, 72.

from religion as well as from philosophy"—namely the immortality of the soul and the rewarding of virtue and punishment of vice after death—for "[w]ithout these principles they think reason is insufficient and weak by itself for the investigation of true happiness."[71] Despite the Utopian belief that these things they "belong to religion," the Utopians believe that they are derived from reason, "that reason leads men to believe and admit them."[72] The reason they give for including these principles in their moral philosophy is not, it seems, to further the pursuit of truth and goodness *as such*. Rather, they are aimed at maintaining social order: "Once these principles are eliminated, the Utopians have no hesitation in maintaining that a person would be stupid not to seek pleasure by fair means or foul".[73] We are also told that "their view of virtue and pleasure" is derived from human reason, and that "no truer view" is possible, "unless a heaven-sent religion inspire man with something more holy."[74] Similarly, in Hythloday's description of the Utopian religious practices, he notes that their holidays include a confession ritual. But the confessions are not made to God—instead they are made by wives to husbands and children to parents[75]. This suggests that Utopian confession is aimed not at a purification of the soul before God, but likewise at the maintenance of social order. Finally, Hythloday recounts how Utopian religious services all end with a prayer in which they pray in unison, each thanking God "for all the benefits received, particularly that by the divine favor he has chanced on that commonwealth which the happiest and has received that religion which he hopes to be truest," and that "if he errs in these matters or if there is anything better and more approved by God than

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[71] CW 4, 161/32-163/3.
[72] Ibid., 163/4-5.
[73] Ibid., 163/6-8.
[74] Ibid., 179/12-15.
[75] Ibid., 233/24-35.

that commonwealth or that religion, he prays that He will, of His goodness, bring him to the knowledge of it, for he is ready to follow in whatever path He may lead him."[76] The explicit connection the form of the commonwealth with the religious practices in their collective prayer indicates that, in Utopia, religion is used primarily, if not exclusively, for the purpose of propping up the social order. If this is correct, and Pieper's analysis holds, the Utopians, in the final analysis, have no capacity for genuine leisure, no ability to be *liberos*, because nothing exists for its own sake: every aspect of Utopian life, from worship to the study of the liberal arts, is fed back into the system as a means for sustaining their political and social arrangement.

Second, despite the Utopian arrangement's apparent aim of minimizing work and providing opportunity for liberation, their society still reliant on slave labor. In particular, we are told, slave labor is used for the slaughtering of animals,[77] and "all menial offices which to some degree involve labor or soil the hands" in the common dining halls.[78] In the section titled "*De Servis*"[79] Utopian slavery is presented as a relatively benign institution which does not claim prisoners of war, nor the children of slaves (no one is a slave by birth), but instead criminals serving sentences for crimes committed. They may be criminals taken from other countries (though it is not clear how they are acquired) or they may be native to Utopia—though native-born slaves are

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[76] Ibid., 237/14-21.

[77] "They do not allow their citizens to accustom themselves to the butchering of animals, by the practice of which they think that mercy, the finest feeling of our human nature, is gradually killed off." CW 4, 139/18-21. Compare this with St. Augustine's discussion of the killing of animals in the context of suicide in *City of God* 1.19. The Utopians view the killing of animals to be beneath the dignity of non-slaves, but they approve of suicide for those who feel that they cannot bear their suffering. (see CW 4, 187/4-17.) This is a reversal of Augustine, who argues that the killing of animals is acceptable, but suicide, which is the killing of a human being, is not (see *City of God*, 1.20).

[78] CW 4, 141/32-33.

[79] Ibid., 184/14.

treated more harshly because, they reason, despite their having been raised under Utopian institutions (and thus, they think, "having had an excellent rearing to a virtuous life"[80]) were still unable to refrain from crime.[81] Moreover, slaves are not necessarily bound in slavery for life: they may be released from slavery "if they show such repentance as testifies that they are more sorry for their sin than for their punishment,"[82] though "if they rebel and kick against this treatment, they are thereupon put to death like the untamable beasts that cannot be restrained by prison or chain."[83] In fact, Utopian slavery is apparently so benign, that on occasion, poverty-stricken citizens of other countries freely offer themselves up for slavery in Utopia rather than remain poor in their own countries, though the difference in treatment between these "slaves" and ordinary slaves suggests that they are more akin to servants—an elision that may reference Hythloday's earlier refusal to distinguish between voluntary servitude and slavery.[84]

Moving through the text, however, we are surprised to learn that slavery not only results from crimes such as killing or injuring another person,[85] adultery, and other of the "worst offenses [*gravissima quaeque scelera*],"[86] but even from such seemingly minor offenses as "contend[ing] too vehemently in expressing [one's] views" regarding religion[87] and even for a person

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[80] Ibid., 185/29.

[81] Ibid., 185/16-30.

[82] Ibid., 191/39.

[83] Ibid., 191/35-36.

[84] "These individuals are well treated and, except that they have a little more work assigned to them as being used to it, are dealt with almost as leniently as citizens. If anyone wishes to depart, which seldom happens, they do not detain him against his well nor send him away empty-handed." See Ibid., 185/31-37; cf. 55/29-34.

[85] Strangely, the murder and or maiming of Utopian citizens is not mentioned as a domestic issue—it is only discussed in the context of military affairs, as an aspect of international relations and causes for war. See Ibid., 203/10-15.

[86] Ibid., 191/28-29. Theft is not a crime, of course, because all things are held in common.

[87] Ibid., 221/8-9.

repeatedly "giv[ing] himself leave to stray out of his territorial limits and is caught without the governor's certificate".[88] Other offenses that are listed under the heading *De Servis*—without mentioning a specific penalty, but seemingly implying that slavery is at least potentially associated with it—include insulting fools [*moriones*] or to "take pleasure from their foolery",[89] to "deride a man for disfigurement"[90] or to even to apply cosmetics [*fucis*], which constitutes a failure to "preserve natural beauty" and which "is the sign of a sluggish and feeble mind."[91]

Slavery, then, is part of a strict apparatus of social control employed in Utopia. Because even the smallest infractions can upset that order, seemingly minor deviations can incur severe penalties. Moreover, we are told that, for crimes which do not automatically bring on a penalty of slavery or death, "there is no law prescribing any fixed penalty, but the punishment is assigned by the senate according to the atrocity, or venality, of the individual crime."[92] To be sure, this *may* indicate a recognition that justice requires equity—that is, allowing for those charged with enforcement of the laws to exercise judgement in application of penalties with due consideration of mitigating circumstances.[93] But, when coupled with the observation that there are very few

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[88] Ibid., 147/8-9.
[89] Ibid., 193/9-12
[90] Ibid., 193/18.
[91] Ibid., 193/21-24. Compare the rationale for this—"Experience itself shows them how no elegance of outward form recommends wives to husbands as much as probity and reverence. Some men are attracted only by handsome shape, but no man's love is kept permanently except by virtue and obedience" (193/25-28)—with the rationale for their strange custom of showing those betrothed to be married to one another naked in order that any deformities may be spotted before being married, discussed only two pages prior: "All men are not so wise as to regard only the character of the woman, and even in marriages of wise men bodily attractions are no small enhancement to the virtues of the mind." (189/18-20).
[92] Ibid., 191/22-25.
[93] According to Aristotle's notion of equity (*epieikeia*), justice sometimes demands that mitigating factors be taken into account, given the inherently general nature of law and the specific nature of real political and social relations. Yet, true equity can never *contradict* the

laws in Utopia ("because very few are needed for persons so educated [*institutis*]"[94]) necessitating, it would seem, a high level of abstraction and generality in the laws, it also serves to introduce a large measure of arbitrariness Utopian penal system, potentially *undermining* the rule of law, rather than upholding it. As a result of their few laws, there are no lawyers in Utopia: they "consider it a good thing that every man should plead his own cause"[95] because "there is less ambiguity and the truth is more easily elicited when a man, uncoached in deception by a lawyer, conducts his own case and the judge carefully weighs each statement and helps untutored minds to defeat the false accusations of the crafty."[96] The effect of this, however, is to leave citizens with little buffer between themselves and the exercise of raw power by the state— and therefore little protection against arbitrary rule. This runs directly counter to much of the Anglo legal system in which More was steeped. As More himself recognized, one function of positive law is to restrain tyranny and provide protections for those accused.[97] While Hythloday's reductionistic rationalism views the elimination of laws only as an opportunity for the truth to come out, he characteristically fails to recognize the potential for abuse given the

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principles of the common law—it is rather aimed at more fully instantiating those principles. Hence, it should not be arbitrary, but instead aimed at preserving the legitimacy of the rule of law. See Anton-Hermann Chroust, "Aristotle's Concept of Equity (Epieikeia)," *Notre Dame Law Review*, Vol. 18, Issue 2 (1942), 126. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q 120.

[94] CW 4, 195/8-9. The stated rationale is that they "think it most unfair that any group of men should be bound by laws which are either too numerous to be read through or too obscure to be understood by anyone" (195/11-13).

[95] Ibid., 195/18.

[96] Ibid., 195/19-23.

[97] More's son-in-law William Roper records that More once stated that even the devil should receive the benefit of the law. He quotes More as saying "I assure thee on my faith, that if the parties will at my hands call for justice, then, all were it my father stood on one side and the devil on the other, his cause being good, the devil should have right." See William Roper, *The Life of Sir Thomas More*, ed. E.E. Reynolds (New York: Everyman's Library, 1963), 21-22.

inherent disparity of power that is inevitable when a man is left to plead his own case, protected by nothing but the whims of the judge.[98]

To say the least, this arbitrary character of Utopian law exists in tension with the ostensible aim of creating liberated human beings capable of the cultivation of the mind. It is, however, consistent with the institutional requirements of creating a political and social order founded on the conflicting principles that we find in Utopia: on one hand, it is a social order which demands that all be held in common; yet on the other hand, it is based on a moral system that is fundamentally individualistic. Because Utopian moral philosophy can admit to no *truly* common good—being founded on a combination of Epicurean hedonism and Stoic virtue-centrism—its social and political system must supply the default through *force*, both implicit and explicit.

Virtue and Pleasure: Utopian Moral Philosophy

Midway through his description of the Utopian commonwealth, Hythloday undertakes a lengthy exposition of Utopian moral philosophy. It is, as George M. Logan has pointed out, the "cornerstone of the Utopian edifice," such that virtually every aspect and feature of Utopian life can be traced back to it in one way or another.[99]

Moral philosophy in Utopia is, according to Hythloday, very similar to that found in the Old World, at least in the sense that the debates are the fundamentally same:

> In that part of philosophy which deals with morals [*moribus*] they [the Utopians] carry on the same debates as we do. They inquire into the good [*bonis*]: of the soul [*animi*] and of the

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[98] To say nothing of the difficulty that St. Augustine identifies in *City of God* 19.6: the inherent limitations on judges' ability to ascertain the truth given the inscrutability of the human heart and the darkness of social life.

[99] George M. Logan, *The Meaning of More's "Utopia,"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 144.

body [*corporis*] and of external gifts [*externis*]. They ask also whether the name of good may be applied to all three or simply belongs to the endowments of the soul. They discuss virtue and pleasure, but their principle and chief debate is in what thing or things, one or more, they are to hold that happiness consists.[100]

Despite these debates, however, Hythloday informs us that the consensus view seems to be one that considers "pleasure as the object by which to define either the whole or the chief part of human happiness."[101] In fact, so given are they to this view, that it is one of the few places where Hythoday mildly critiques the Utopians, stating "[i]n this matter they seem to lean more than they should"[102] toward that view of pleasure. Yet, this view is balanced by a concomitant view that true pleasure is found in virtue, such that "happiness rests not in every kind of pleasure [*voluptate*], but only in good and decent [*bona, atque honesta*] pleasure."[103] Hence, "[t]o such [pleasures], as to the supreme good, our nature is drawn by virtue itself, to which the opposite school [*adversa factio*] alone attributes happiness."[104] For the Utopians, virtue consists in "living according to nature since to this end we were created by God."[105] A margin note observes that this definition of virtue is "The Definition of the Stoics [*Hox iuxta Stoicos*]" and the reference to the "*adversa factio*" seems to reference the ancient debates between the Epicurean and Stoic schools of moral philosophy, the former of which held that human happiness consists solely in pleasure (ἡδονή), while the latter held that it consists solely in virtue

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[100] Ibid., 161/17-25. For an excellent consideration of these debates as they relate to Aristotelianism, Stoicism, and Cynicism see J.M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 1-21.
[101] CW4, 161/27-29.
[102] Ibid., 161/25-26.
[103] Ibid., 163/18-19.
[104] Ibid., 163/19-21.
[105] Ibid., 163/21-23.

(ἀρετή). This disagreement led ancient Epicureans and Stoics to vigorously oppose one another, and they engaged in epic debates over whether the proper end of human life was found in virtue or in pleasure.

Yet, the Utopians elide this apparent tension, stitching together virtue and pleasure into a unified moral theory. For the Utopians, virtue leads to the recognition of that "good and decent pleasure," which in turn leads to true happiness, "as to the supreme good [*summum bonum*]". The Utopians, then, hold to a hierarchy of pleasures, and the "individual, they say, is following the guidance of nature who, in desiring one thing and avoiding another, obeys the dictates of reason [*obtemperat rationi*]."[106]

Reason, in the Utopian schema, serves two primary purposes with regard to moral philosophy. First, it "inflames men to a love and veneration of divine majesty, to whom we owe both our existence and our capacity for happiness."[107] Second, "it admonishes and urges us to lead a life as free from care and as full of joy as possible, and because of our natural fellowship, to help all other men, too, to attain that end."[108] The "virtue most peculiar to men [*qua virtute nulla est homini magis propria*]" is "humanity [*humanitum*]" which leads man "to relieve the misery of others and, by taking away all sadness from their life, restore them to enjoyment, that is, to pleasure."[109] This being the case, they hold that they likewise ought to do the same for themselves, "[f]or either a joyous life [*vita iucunda*], that is, a pleasurable life [*voluptaria*], is evil, in which not only ought you help no one to it but, as far as you can, should take it away

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[106] Ibid., 163/23-25.
[107] Ibid., 163/26-28.
[108] Ibid., 163/28-31.
[109] Ibid., 163/35-39.

from everyone as being harmful and deadly, or else, if you not only are permitted but are obliged to win it for others as being good, why should you not do so first of all for yourself, to whom you should show no less favor than to others?"[110] The result of this reasoning, is that "nature herself . . . prescribes for us a joyous life or, in other words, pleasure, as the end of all our operations. Living according to her prescription they define as virtue."[111]

Ultimately, despite their distinctive combination of Stoicism and Epicureanism, the Utopians side with the Epicureans who hold that virtue is not an end in itself, but a means to a greater end—namely pleasure. But the pleasure principle is limited by the natural injunction that "you take constant care not so to further your own advantages as to cause disadvantages to your fellows."[112] This creates certain duties toward one's fellow citizens, including the upholding of private contracts, as well as obedience to laws which pertain to "the distribution of vital commodities, that is to say, the matter of pleasure, provided they have been promulgated by a good king or ratified by the common consent of the people neither oppressed by tyranny nor deceived by fraud."[113] Moreover, they maintain, adhering to these standards of conduct is "a duty of humanity and a kindness [*humanitatis ac benignitatis officium*] which never takes away as much advantage as it brings back."[114] Doing so "is compensated by the return of benefits as well as by the actual consciousness of the good deed. Remembrance of the love and good will [*charitatis eorum & benevolentiae*] of those whom you have benefited gives the mind a greater

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[110] Ibid., 165/3-11.
[111] Ibid., 165/13-15.
[112] Ibid., 165/21-22.
[113] Ibid., 165/25-29.
[114] Ibid., 165/33-35.

amount of pleasure than the bodily pleasure which you have foregone would have afforded."[115]

And not only is one rewarded in this life, but "God repays, in place of a brief and tiny pleasure, immense and never-ending gladness" a point which "religion easily brings . . . home to a mind which readily assents."[116] All these considerations put together bring the Utopians to believe, "having carefully considered and weighed the matter, that all our actions, and even the very virtues exercised in them, look at last to pleasure as their end and happiness [*voluptatem tandem velut finem, felicitatemque respicere*]."[117] In short, all human action, including actions ostensibly rooted in benevolence or duty, is given a self-interested rationale, such that the *summum bonum* of the Utopian moral imagination is self-directed pleasure. In this sense, their basic philosophical anthropology is one that views human beings as intrinsically and irrevocably self-interested, such that all justification for considering something "moral" is given in self-interested terms.[118]

The remainder of the discussion of the Utopians' moral philosophy consists in drawing out the implications of this view. Pleasure is now defined: "every movement and state of body or mind in which, under the guidance of nature, man delights to dwell."[119] Hence, against the common and simplistic view of Epicureanism—which supposes that Epicurean *voluptas* pertains only to pleasures of the body[120]—we learn that the Utopian brand of hedonism is expansive,

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[115] Ibid., 165/35-167/1.
[116] Ibid., 167/1-4.
[117] Ibid., 167/4-6.
[118] See Logan, *The Meaning of More's Utopia*, 148.
[119] CW 4, 167/7-9.
[120] This view, however, is not accurate: Epicurus also considered pleasures of the mind to be an important part of a right view of pleasure. Freeing oneself from mental afflictions and promoting peace of mind is at the core of Epicurus' concept of pleasure and happiness. In fact, Epicurus "regards pleasures of the mind to be *greater* than those of the body" and likely was influenced by

taking into account both pleasures of the body *and* pleasures of the mind. Moreover, they hold

that "just as the senses as well as right reason aim at whatever is pleasant by nature [*natura*]—

whatever is not striven after through wrong-doing nor involves the loss of something more

pleasant nor is followed by pain—so they hold that whatever things mortals imagine by a futile

consensus to be sweet to them in spite of being against nature (as though they had the power to

change the nature of things as they do their names) are all so far from making for happiness that

they are even a great hindrance to it."[121] In this sense, the Utopians appear to hold to a kind of

moral realism, such that the experience of pleasure may be directed rightly or wrongly, that is,

directed toward things which *truly* give pleasure, and those which only *appear* to give pleasure:

"In fact, very many are the things which, though of their own nature they contain no sweetness,

nay, a good part of them very much bitterness, still are, through the perverse attraction of evil

desires, not only regarded as the highest pleasures but also counted among the chief reasons that

make life worth living."[122] Hence, they develop a distinction between genuine pleasures and

false pleasures. False pleasures are developed in a person by "perverse habit" which "makes

them take what is bitter for sweet, just as pregnant women by their vitiated taste suppose pitch

and tallow sweeter than honey."[123] They therefore hold pleasure to be a fixed thing, not

susceptible to change with the whims and misperceptions of individuals: "it is impossible for any

man's judgement, depraved either by disease or by habit, to change the nature of pleasure any

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Aristotle in his distinctions between various kinds of pleasure. See J.M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 103.
[121] Ibid., 167/10-19.
[122] Ibid., 167/22-26.
[123] Ibid., 173/2-5.

more than that of anything else."[124] Several examples of false pleasures are enumerated, all of

which seem calculated to shame some aspect of European culture: taking pride in fine clothing or

honors or nobility; doting on gems, jewels, and gold; and indulging in pastimes like dicing and

hunting.

    False pleasures being established, Hythloday then discusses the various kinds of genuine

pleasure that the Utopians recognize: those belonging to the body [*corpori*], and those belonging

to the soul [*animo*].[125] The pleasures of the soul include "intelligence and the sweetness which is

bred of contemplation of truth" as well as "pleasant recollection of a well-spent life and the sure

hope of happiness to come."[126] Those of the body are again separated into two types: "that

which fills the sense with a clearly perceptible sweetness"[127]—these are "low" pleasures such as

itching, copulating, and excreting, but also, strangely, from music—and "that which consists in a

calm and harmonious state of the body. This is nothing else than each man's health undisturbed

by any disorder."[128] In sum, "they cling to above all to mental [*animo*][129] pleasures, which they

value as the first and foremost of all pleasures" and these pleasures are attained by "the practice

of the virtues and the consciousness of a good life."[130] And, "Of those pleasures which the body

supplies, they give the palm to health [*sanitati*]."[131] A view of pleasure which inverts this

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[124] Ibid., 173/5-8.
[125] Ibid., 173/9-12.
[126] Ibid., 173/12-15.
[127] Ibid., 173/16-18.
[128] Ibid., 173/32-34.
[129] It is not clear why the translator renders *animo* "mental" here but "soul" previously (Cf. Ibid, 173/11). While *animo* can mean "mind" it is more typically associated with "soul" (sometimes as a translation of the Greek ψυχή) while *mentis* is more often associated with "mind". See, e.g. Aristotle's Περὶ Ψυχῆς, rendered *De Anima* in Latin.
[130] Ibid., 175/34-37.
[131] Ibid., 175/39-177/1.

view—which considers the greatest pleasure to be the alleviation of some pain—will lead to a

view of life that is "not only disgusting but wretched," consisting in nothing more than

"perpetual hunger, thirst, itching, eating, drinking, scratching and rubbing".[132]

While Utopian ethical system is clearly closely related to that of the Epicureans given its

overriding emphasis on pleasure as the *summum bonum* of human life, its distinctive

combination of pleasure, virtue, and the "hope of happiness to come" in the afterlife suggest an

admixture of both Stoicism and Platonism.[133] Still, its hedonistic principle requires that all

things—truth, knowledge, virtue, and hope for immortality—must be referred back to the self-

interest of the agent. This is, they say, the view of virtue and pleasure that is most reasonable,

and therefore that "human reason can attain no truer view, unless a heaven-sent religion inspire

man with something more holy."[134] Whether they are right or wrong (*rectene an secus*)

Hythloday declines to examine—"[w]e have taken upon ourselves only to describe their

principles, and not to defend them"[135]—but nevertheless, he is certain that "whatever you think

of their ideas, there is nowhere in the world a more excellent people nor a happier

commonwealth [*nunsquam neque praestantiorem populum, neque feliciotem esse

rempublicam*]."[136]

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[132] Ibid., 177/10-13.

[133] Ernst Cassirer notes that "if one studies in detail the Utopian ethics, one finds that it is by no means orientated to Epicurus alone, but that it contains genuine Platonic thought. One is reminded, even in details, of the foundation and structure of the doctrine of the highest good as developed by Plato in the *Philebus*." See *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, trans. James P. Pettegrove (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1953), 110. Compare also with J.M. Rist: "There is no doubt that Plato as well as Aristotle has contributed to Epicurus' theory of pleasure." See *Epicurus: An Introduction*, 107.

[134] CW 4, 179/13-15.

[135] Ibid., 179/17-18.

[136] Ibid., 179/

Yet, we are entitled to doubt whether this is—or can be—the case: even if Epicurean principles could provide a firm basis for an individual ethic, it ultimately provides no basis for justice. In fact, as J.M. Rist notes, according to Epicurus "[i]njustice . . . is no bad thing in itself. If an Epicurean could be certain of avoiding detection, he would act illegally."[137] Moreover, Epicurus condemns "crowns and the setting of statues in one's honor" as being among the false pleasures which the wise man should jettison, a reference that is "doubtless chose with reference to political life—and for the Epicurean such a life is too dangerous, too exposed to be worthwhile."[138] Even counterbalanced by the Stoic focus on virtue[139] and Platonic belief in the immortality of the soul, the insistence on subordinating all things to pleasure provides no basis for a truly social, much less political, community.

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[137] J.M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction*, 116.

[138] Ibid., 119. Granted the Utopians do not appear to agree with Epicurus on the point about statues: "Not merely do they discourage crime by punishment but they offer honors to invite men to virtue. Hence, to great men who have done conspicuous service to the country they set up in the market place statues to stand as a record of noble exploits, and at the same time, to have the glory of their forefathers serve their descendants as a spur to virtue." See CW 4, 193/29-35. The Epicurean point about statues, however, appears to refer to the false pleasure of seeing a statue of *one's self* erected. These statues appear to be part of a larger apparatus of social control employed in Utopia, aimed at counteracting their Epicurean principles, along with, for example, the belief that the souls of their ancestors "move about the living and are witnesses of their words and actions," a belief which serves to "keep men from any secret or dishonorable deed." See CW 4, 225/13-17.

[139] Epicureanism also had a role for virtue, but for Epicurus, virtue that did not lead to pleasure was to be "spit on" and thus "although virtue is inseparable from pleasure and necessary if we are to be happy, it is to be chosen not for its own sake but for the sake of pleasure. Beauty (τὸ καλòν) and the virtues and the like are honored if they provide pleasure, but, if they do not, we must say goodbye to them." J.M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction*, 124.

Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Utopian Anti-Politics

On the surface, the combination of Epicureanism and Stoicism by the Utopians seems unlikely

at best, and oxymoronic at worst. Yet at a deeper level Epicureans and Stoics were more similar

than they appeared on the surface. As Alasdair MacIntyre has noted, "what is striking about

Epicureanism is in the end not the contrast with, but resemblance to Stoicism."[140] While the

difference between Epicureanism and Stoicism is "verbally wide," it is "practically narrow"

because in Epicureanism "[a]ll the conventional virtues are reinstated as a means to pleasure."

Hence, the Stoic emphasis on individual virtue and the Epicurean emphasis on individual

pleasure come to the same thing: "the regard for the quiet life, and the detachment of the

individual from the Platonic-Aristotelian morality of social life is as complete [for the

Epicureans] as it is in the Stoics."[141] Utilitarian philosopher Henry Sidgwick similarly notes that

"Stoics and Epicureans made rival offers to mankind of the same kind of happiness; the

philosophical peculiarities of either system may be equally traced to the desire of maintaining

that independence of changes and chances of life which seemed essential to the settled serenity

of the soul."[142] Hence, despite the common perception, "the Epicurean sage, no less than the

Stoic, is to be happy even on the rack . . . his happiness, too depends almost entirely upon insight

and right calculation, fortune having very little to do with it; and is unimpaired by being

restricted in duration, when his mind has apprehended the natural limits of life . . . in short,

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[140] Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Collier Books, 1966), 107.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Henry Sidgwick*, Outlines of the History of Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), 83-84.

Epicurus makes hardly less strenuous efforts than Zeno to eliminate imperfection from the condition of human existence."[143]

The attempt to eliminate the exigencies of fortune and contingency led both Epicureans and Stoics to a certain disdain for the *vita activa*, given the inherently contingent nature of politics, and ultimately, they both agreed that the highest and best life entailed withdraw from public life in order to live in accordance with nature. While Stoicism affirmed the natural sociability of man and Epicureans praised the goodness of friendship, both ethical systems ultimately referred to the individual in terms of the highest good.

This emphasis on the individual in both philosophies can be understood, at least in part, as a response to the decline of the polis and the rise of empires, first that of Alexander the Great and later that of Rome. So long as it lasted, the small scale of the polis offered opportunities for individuals to exercise some control over their political and social condition, thereby underpinning an emphasis on political action as the baseline for ethics. While Plato and Aristotle's political philosophies had both recognized the ultimate superiority of contemplation to action, they both began from an assumption that man was by nature social and *political*. For Plato, this manifested in his idea that the best life—the philosophic life—can only be fully lived in the best regime, and that any other regime is dangerous to the philosopher. For Aristotle, this manifested in his contention that any animal that can live outside the polis is either a beast or a god—human beings are beings which by nature and by definition live in political communities. Ethics, for both Plato and Aristotle, pertained mostly to how one should best live in the polis.

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[143] Ibid., 84.

Yet, with the rise of empires, individuals and political communities alike were subsumed into a structure far removed from their concrete existence, creating a shift in consciousness: unable to effect influence on a distant ruling order, philosophies of withdraw—what R.W. Dyson calls "philosophies of distress," including Cynicism, Epicureanism, Scepticism, and Stoicism[144]—became increasingly attractive. As Sheldon Wolin has noted, "if the historical task of Greek political theory had been to discover and to define the nature of political life, it devolved upon Hellenistic and later Roman thought to rediscover what the meaning of political existence might have in an age of empire."[145] In this period "the important development that had taken place in political thought since the time of Aristotle had come down to this: the distinctively political elements in political philosophy had becomes swallowed up in an undifferentiated whole."[146] W.T. Jones describes this development thus: "In a large-scale organization like the Empire it was obvious that one did not control one's own destiny. It was necessary therefore either to abandon or alter radically the old ideal [found in Plato and Aristotle] of self-improvement. One could teach oneself to accept passively whatever life brought, instead of seeking actively to alter the course of events in one's own favor. Or one could give up the attempt to achieve an harmonious, all-round development and concentrate on the inner life and one's private sensibilities."[147] Moreover, James Schall observes that the turning away from politics was exacerbated doing the Roman period by the "attempt to deify the imperial state"—including Diocletian's bidding "his

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[144] R.W. Dyson, *Natural Law and Political Realism in the History of Political Thought, Vol. 1: From the Sophists to Machiavelli* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 104.
[145] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, Expanded Edition (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 69.
[146] Ibid., 74.
[147] W.T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy Vol. I: The Classical Mind*, Second Edition (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 316.

subjects to regard him as the earthly vicar and emanation of the 'Unconquered Sun'".[148] This "further disillusioned men about the politics of this world. As a result, there arose a general philosophical turning away from the realities of political life as it was being lived."[149]

This, then, is the milieu in which both Epicureanism and Stoicism arose. Both are primarily and fundamentally individualistic ethical theories, with the former relying on egocentric hedonism as the primary determinant of moral rightness, and the latter looking to the development of individual virtue as its primary end. While both recognize social interaction with others as a good—Epicurus considered friendship to be among the highest pleasures and thought it preferable to have friends rather than enemies[150], and the Stoics held all humans be kin who participate in a kind of brotherhood[151]—both were primarily concerned "to teach the individual how to live a life of self-sufficiency."[152] In a sense, both Epicureanism and Stoicism developed the earlier Cynic attack on conventional morality, which itself developed as a response to the crisis of membership that occurred with the decline of the polis and the rise of empire, all of which leveled "critical attacks . . . upon the customary ties of relationships that had defined the individual's status and role in society"[153] with the result that, even though the Epicureans were slightly more sanguine about the utility of the political order than the Cynics, they nevertheless still worked at "whittling down the claims of family, society, and political life

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[148] James V. Schall, *Reason, Revelation, and the Foundations of Political Philosophy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univesity Press: 1987), 74.
[149] Ibid.
[150] See John H. Hollowell and Jene M. Porter, *Political Philosophy: The Search for Humanity and Order* (Scarborough, ON: Prentice Hall Canada, 1997), 101.
[151] Ibid., 106.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 71.

until all that remained was the irreducible minimum necessary to sustain peace."[154] These

attacks had the effect of "dissolv[ing] political relationships into a condition of 'political nature,'

into mere phenomena without stability or inner coherence, into the political counterpart of a

purposeless universe."[155] For their part, the Stoic response to this "was dictated by the need to

ease men's fears and uncertainties, and this they tried to do by summoning men back to

membership," albeit membership in an abstract universal and transcendent society premised on

following "nature" and participating in the "logos". [156] In this way, "the authentic relationships

lacking in the existential political societies were re-created in the image of a larger order; the

natural order was not only the realm of value, but also a society, indeed the highest form of

society".[157] Commenting on Cicero's account of these "Stoic dreams" in *De natura rerum*, Eric

Voegelin contends that this resulted from a "spiritual disturbance" which was "caused by the two

events of Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy and Alexander's imperial expansion, both of which

close old horizons by opening new ones": while Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy achieved new

("noetic") differentiations pushing philosophy beyond the bounds of "intracosmic gods,"

Alexander's conquest pushed the Greek world beyond its bounds and brought it into contact with

other "ethnic units" and their respective gods, such that "one could only advance toward a

culture of an ecumenic society under the universal god of all men." [158] Pierre Manent makes a

similar point in discussing the transformation of the religion of the cities in this period: "[these

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[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid., 72.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Eric Voegelin, *Order and History Vol. 4: The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 40-41.

religions underwent] two important and related transformations, the intellectual transformation produced by Platonism and the political transformation produced by the passage from city to empire. The two transformations are connected, since they involve two ruptures in the closedness of the city, the perspective or horizon of philosophy as well as that of empire being humanity as a whole or the 'world'."[159]

In this sense, Stoic political philosophy did not—could not—achieve a return to the pre-political thought of the Presocratics, in which "the distinction between nature and political society had become blurred" but instead "philosophy had socialized and politicized nature while denaturing the political."[160] Stoicism, in all its stages[161]—including its later period in which it was drawn into the Roman legal apparatus—"always retained some measure of the anti-political bias of its origins. Although it had sprung from dominantly Greek modes of thought, it did not carry the imprint of the intensely political world of Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle, but of the Hellenistic world where absolute monarchy had withered the roots of political participation and imperial organization and made a mockery of the educative mission of the *polis*."[162] Hence, even Stoicism—the most politically amenable of the "philosophies of despair"—still had a persistent difficulty articulating a genuinely *political* vision, given its origins in the recognition of the insufficiency of political thinking in light of the rise of empire, and the inherent ambiguities of a "universal society".[163] The result was that the "tension between philosophy and

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[159] Pierre Manent, *Metamorphoses of the City: On the Western Dynamic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 307.
[160] Wolin, *Vision and Politics*, 74.
[161] See, e.g., Dyson: "The history of Stoicism is most conveniently treated as having three phases." *Natural Law and Political Realism in the History of Political Thought*, 109.
[162] Wolin, *Vision and Politics*, 74.
[163] Ibid., 73.

society was abolished under the happy coincidence that both were apolitical."[164] Despite

claiming an emperor among its adherents (Marcus Aurelius), and even providing some of the

concepts that would become fundamental to Roman law, Stoicism remained essentially

individualistic ethic, and the three greatest proponents in its late phase—Marcus Aurelius,

Epictetus, and Seneca—can all be understood as responding to the disorientation brought about

by the lack of moral and spiritual unity that had been possible in a genuinely political order.[165]

If the development of these a- or anti-political ethical systems was predicated on the

expansion the horizon of consciousness brought about through the rise of empire, it is perhaps

not surprising that these systems should have again gained popularity with an analogous

expansion of the horizon of consciousness brought about by the discovery and exploration of the

New World. It is therefore no accident that More explicitly places Utopia in the New World, and

puts its exposition in the mouth of a sailor who had explored the New World with Amerigo

Vespicci. As Eric Voegelin points out, the device of developing a fictional political community

as a means to examine fundamental questions of political order "was not used between Hellenic

antiquity and More's *Utopia*."[166] The connection between Utopia and the Hellenic "philosophies

of distress," it would seem, is more than incidental.[167]

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[164] Ibid., 75.

[165] See James L. Wiser, *Political Philosophy: A History of the Search for Order* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983), 78-80.

[166] Eric Voegelin, "The Order of Reason: Erasmus and More," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 22: History of Political Ideas, Vol. IV: Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. David L. Morse and William M. Thompson (Columbia, MO and London: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 111.

[167] It should be noted that this may have also been suggested to More directly by a (possibly spurious) 1504 letter in which Vespucci states of the inhabitants of the New World "I deem their manner of life to be Epicurean." See Amerigo Vespucci, *Letter to Piero Soderini*, trans. George Tyler Northup (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1916), 9.

The Utopian commonwealth, then, is premised in its moral orientation on a combination of Hellenic ethical theories—Epicureanism and Stoicism—that are most fundamentally a- or even anti-political at their core. Nevertheless, the difficulty—not to say impossibility—of founding a political order on ethical theories that are a-political at best becomes apparent in the coercive measures that are utilized to ensure that the Utopian regime remains stable and unified. The paradox that More presents us, then, is that ethical individualism leads ultimately to a coercive state, because there is no principle of the common built into the foundational structure of the Utopian system: in the end, the social and political order of Utopia is held together by a seemingly subtle but ultimately heavy-handed coercion—both psychological and physical. While this is often connected with Thomas Hobbes' theorizing of absolute kingship in his 1651 treatise *Leviathan*,[168] its presence in *Utopia*—well over a century prior to its formulation by Hobbes—suggests that this outcome is the perennial and necessary result of attempting to build a political order, theoretical or otherwise, on individualist principles. More precisely, both Hobbes and the Utopians build their theories of politics on *Epicurean* principles.

Leo Strauss argues that Hobbes rejected the assumption made by "traditional political philosophy" which "assumed that man is by nature a political or social animal. By rejecting this assumption, Hobbes joins the Epicurean tradition. He accepts its view that man is by nature an a-political and even an a-social animal, as well as its premise that the good is fundamentally identical with the pleasant."[169] Yet, Hobbes "uses that a-political view for a political purpose.

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[168] See, for example, Robert Nisbet, The Quest for Community (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), especially Chapter 8 "The Total Community". See also Patrick Deneen's chapter "Uniting Individualism and Statism" in *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 43-63.
[169] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 169.

He gives that a-political view a political meaning. He tries to instil [*sic*] the spirit of political idealism into the hedonic tradition. He thus becomes the creator of political hedonism, a doctrine which has revolutionized human life everywhere on a scale never yet approached by any other teaching."[170] Yet, Hobbes did not reject the classical tradition entirely: rather "[b]y being both mathematical and materialistic-mechanistic, Hobbes' natural philosophy is a combination of Platonic physics and Epicurean physics."[171] In developing this synthesis, Hobbes' "philosophy as a whole may be said to be the classic example of the typically modern combination of political idealism with a materialistic and atheistic view of the whole."[172] The combination of the opposed traditions, Platonism and Epicureanism—like the Erasmian/Utopian combination of Stoicism and Epicureanism[173]—is unlikely, but it is made possible, Strauss argues, by moving the original philosophies onto a different "plane"[174] and "[t]he abandonment of the primacy of contemplation or theory in favor of the primacy of practice is the necessary consequence of the abandonment of the plane on which Platonism and Epicureanism had carried out its struggle. For the synthesis of Platonism and Epicureanism stands or falls with the view that to understand is to make."[175] In short, while Platonism had asserted the intelligibility of nature, and found ethical meaning in the transcending of material existence, Epicureanism had drawn out the

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[170] Ibid.
[171] Ibid., 170.
[172] Ibid.
[173] And, as we have seen, there is a great deal of Platonic influence in both Erasmus' and Hythloday's philosophies, and *Utopia* is closely related to Platonic political philosophy, taken both directly from Plato, as well as the strong Platonic influence on Cicero and Seneca (recall Hythloday's invocation of these two Romans at the outset of *Utopia*, see CW 4, 51/1-4), as well as other Hellenistic Stoics.
[174] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 170.
[175] Ibid., 177n11.

ethical implications of materialism and, despairing of understanding nature in itself, had re-founded knowledge on an individualist ethic of detachment and pleasure—effectively, the making of one's own reality.

Hobbes created a synthesis by shifting the terms of the disagreement, creating the possibility for a science of politics rooted in the mathematical control of nature: "There is no natural harmony between the human mind and the universe . . . [and m]an can become sovereign only because there is no cosmic support for his humanity. He can be sovereign only because he is absolutely a stranger in the universe."[176] If Strauss' interpretation of Hobbes' philosophy as a combination of Platonic idealism and Epicurean materialism—premised most fundamentally on a rejection of man as a political or social animal—is correct, then we should not be surprised to find similarities between his political philosophy and the political practice of the Utopians, who combine a Platonic-Stoic ethic with Epicureanism—and we do. Hobbes' conceptual starting point in a kind of social atomism—aimed at developing a natural science of politics—results ultimately in the conclusion that social and political order can only be held together with force exerted by an overawing power.[177] Likewise, the individualistic moral foundation on which the

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[176] Ibid., 175.

[177] See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter 17: "[A commonwealth] is a real unity of [every man], in one and the same person, made by covenant of every man with every man, in such manner, as if every man should say to every man, *I authorize and give up my right of governing myself, to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy right to him, and authorize all his actions in like manner.* This done, the multitude so united in one person, is called a COMMONWEALTH, in Latin CIVITAS. This is the generation of that great LEVIATHAN, or rather, to speak more reverently, of that *mortal god*, to which we owe under the *immortal God*, our peace and deference. For by this authority, given him by every particular man in the commonwealth, he hath the use of so much power and strength conferred on him, that by terror thereof, he is enabled to for the wills of them all, to peace at home, and mutual aid against their enemies abroad" (New York: Touchstone Books, 2008), 132-133.

Utopian system rests offers no principle of association, and while its use of force and terror to create order is more veiled than it comes to appear in Hobbes' thought, it nevertheless comes to the same conclusion: political Epicureanism necessitates a politics based on power rather than justice.[178]

This point is reinforced by the fact that the discussion of Utopian moral philosophy comes in a long section titled "Utopian Travel [*De Peregrinatione Utopiensium*]"[179] which, despite its title, also includes discussions of Utopian trade and commerce; the disdainful attitude of the Utopians toward gold, silver, and gemstones; the Utopians' pursuit of philosophic and scientific learning; and their willingness to incorporate new ideas and skills brought by Hythloday and his companions into their way of life. The discussion of travel promised by the title is surprisingly short—less than twenty lines in the Latin text—and in fact consists only in a description of the social and legal *restriction* of travel—not to the nature of Utopian travel itself. From there it flows into a discussion of the disallowance of wine shops, alehouses, brothels, or any other "opportunity for corruption [*nulla corruptelae occasion*]."[180]

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[178] As J.M. Rist notes, for Epicurus, "we properly use the word 'justice' to mean a pledge of mutual advantage between men by which they agree not to harm one another so that they may not be harmed themselves. Thus justice is no kind of transcendent norm—the Platonic view is specifically rejected—and we can only use the words 'just' and 'unjust' correctly where such contracts for mutual advantage have been made. Justice therefore is rigidly subordinate to claims of personal security. If such security could be attained without it, it would have no meaning at all. Society is an empty concept; each man is concerned with himself." See *Epicurus: An Introduction*, 124. Cf. Hobbes: "And in this law of nature, consistith the fountain and original JUSTICE. For where no covenant hath preceded, there hath no right been transferred, and every man has right to every thing; and consequently, no action can be unjust. But when a covenant is made, then to break it is *unjust*: and the definition of INJUSTICE, is none other than *the not performance of covenant.* And whatsoever is not unjust, is just." *Leviathan*, 108.

[179] CW 4, 145/32.

[180] Ibid., 147/24.

Unrestricted travel, it becomes clear, is linked to the opportunity for corruption, and, more importantly, to the opportunity to avoid working. The restriction on travel is ultimately connected to the need to ensure that there is "no lurking hole, no secret meeting place" where anyone might shirk.[181] This negation of corruption is not for its own sake: the moral corruption associated with unrestricted travel, alehouses, brothels, and the like, is not presented as an evil *in itself*, but instead is subordinated ultimately to an economic purpose: "being under the eyes of all, people are bound either to be performing the usual labor or enjoying their leisure in a fashion not without decency. This universal behavior must of necessity lead to an abundance of commodities."[182] This restrictive police state, where there is no private space and therefore no opportunity for sin, is ultimately the condition for the possibility of Utopia's most prominent feature, common property: "Since the latter are distributed evenly among all, it follows, of course, that no one can be reduced to poverty or beggary [*ut inops esse nemo aut mendicus possit*]."[183]

The fact that the section which contains the discussion of the core the Utopian edifice—that is, their conception of the highest end of human life—begins with a discussion of the draconian restrictions on the Utopians' freedom of movement suggests that More took seriously the task of illustrating the necessary outcome of Erasmus' Epicurean-Stoic rationalism when translated into the terms of social and political order, and the emphasis on *work* as the principle toward which these restrictions are directed illustrates, as Strauss points out, the necessity of elevating practice over theory in order to effect the synthesis of Epicurean materialism and Platonism or Stoicism.

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[181] Ibid., 147/24-25.
[182] Ibid., 147/25-28.
[183] Ibid., 147/28-32.

It is, in this sense, a unified whole, with each part depending on all the others, and with their moral philosophy constituting the cornerstone.[184] Erasmus' reliance on exhortation to virtue to secure a just social and political order is shown to be incapable of ensuring a functioning political order, because the gap between individual morality and political morality does not allow for the reduction of the latter to the former.

Hythloday's view that the total elimination of the private sphere is only way to ensure a serious concern for public affairs[185] suggests that attempts to construct political communities on moral individualism—whether that of the Utopians or that of Hobbes—inevitably result in the idea that anything less than *total* identification of the person with the social order tends to undermine that order, by reverting each person back to his own solipsistic being.[186] The fact that, 135 years later, Hobbes' similar premises resulted in theorizing a regime which—though markedly different in form—relies on similarly restrictive measures and the reduction of the private realm to make possible a commonwealth suggests that More was largely correct in his suggestion that any regime which begins with individualistic moral premises regime would, paradoxically, necessitate intrusive restrictions on individual liberty in order to effect the

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[184] This is the basic argument of Logan's *Meaning of More's Utopia*, and it is correct as far as it goes. It fails, however, to identify Erasmus as the target, such that Utopia ends up as a friendly critique of Erasmus' political ideas by way of thought experiment. We can affirm with Logan that it is a "best commonwealth exercise" but its purpose is ultimately to illustrate the weaknesses of the Hellenistic moral philosophies to which Erasmus was drawn, particularly with regard to establishing and sustaining a reasonably just social and political order.
[185] "In Utopia, where nothing is private, they seriously concern themselves with public affairs." See ibid., 239/2-3.
[186] Compare also with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theorization of the "general will" (*volonté général*) in his 1762 *The Social Contract*, which requires, as an outgrowth of his individualistic view of human nature, that individuals must be completely subsumed by and identified with the political order that a political order be just.

necessary. Hence, while Strauss famously argues with some plausibility that "[i]t was

Machiavelli, that greater Columbus, who had discovered the continent on which Hobbes could

erect his structure"[187]—and, by extension, on which all distinctly *modern* political philosophy is

founded—we may also consider Erasmus as an unlikely precursor as well: as anti-Machiavellian

as his *Education of a Christian Prince* was *in principle*, the peculiar combination of Christianity

with Epicureanism, Stoicism, Platonism which Erasmus unsystematically proposed ultimately

contained no basis for the reform of decaying institutions and little basis for a *genuinely* social

and political order. Pagan rationalism fails, by its own standards, to ground the commonwealth

in a principle of common life. While they may be more or less effective as *individual* ethical

systems—and even possibly compatible in some ways with Christian ethics, as Erasmus had

sought to show—neither Stoic virtue nor Epicurean pleasure can ultimately provide either the

framework for political order or guidance for effective political action, because they were

formulated *explicitly* as a retreat from the *vita active* into private life and the interiority of the

individual. Therefore, social and political institutions premised on either of these ethical

systems—or a combination thereof—can scarcely be expected to result in a stable political

community, much less the *optimo reipublicae statu.*

   As we have noted, at the end of Hythloday's description of the Utopian opinions on moral

philosophy, he observes that their view of morality is based on human reason (*humana ratione*),

and that, they believe, there is "no truer view, unless a heaven-sent religion (*caelitus immissa

religio*) inspire man with something more holy."[188] This statement parallels the prayer said to be

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[187] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 177.
[188] CW 4, 179/14-15.

offered by the Utopians at the end of Hythloday's description of the Utopian institutions. Just

before he launches into his peroration, Hythloday states that at the end of their religious services,

each prays (individually but together) recognizing "God to be the author of creation and

governance" and thanking Him "for all the benefits received, particularly that by divine favor he

has chanced upon that commonwealth which is the happiest and has received that religion which

he hopes to be truest."[189] Finally, each prays that "[i]f he errs in these matters or if there is

anything better and more approved by God than that commonwealth or that religion, he prays

that He will, of His goodness, bring him to knowledge of it, for he is read to follow in whatever

path He may lead him."[190] While we may (perhaps rightly) interpret this ritual prayer as a

representation of the use of civil-religious practice to reinforce the regime that was common in

pagan societies, its construction is notable because it leaves open the possibility of revelation

instructing the Utopians in a better way of living. This seems calculated by More to draw

attention to the shortcomings of the regime, and to bring to mind St. Augustine, the greatest critic

of pagan moral and political philosophy, to his Christian humanist readers. Even if Utopia is in

fact the best regime that human reason can conceive, it still fails on its own terms because it still

fails to provide a basis for a community founded on a genuinely *common* good, much less

instantiate true justice or secure the *beata vita*. Only revelation beyond—but not opposed to—

what is ascertainable through human reason can supply even a glimpse of what a truly just

political community, founded on genuine virtues, might look like. This had the effect, not only

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[189] Ibid., 237/10-17.
[190] Ibid., 237/17-21.

of providing a vision of the eschaton, but also of re-founding, and thereby revitalizing, political philosophy itself.

Augustine and *Utopia*

The meaning of Augustine's thought for political philosophy has been much debated and remains controversial.[191] Nevertheless, we will conclude by offering some reflections on how the application of Augustinian political thought to *Utopia* can shed light on its meaning. We have already suggested that when we examine in detail More's character "Morus," there emerges a distinctly Augustinian critique of Hythloday's enthusiastic endorsement of the Utopian regime as "the only [commonwealth] which can rightly claim the name".[192]

As we have also seen, Utopia is explicitly described as a regime founded on a moral philosophy which is grounded in what is ostensibly the truest view that human reason alone—without "heaven-sent religion"—can achieve. Yet, in his *City of God*, St. Augustine presents an unflinching critique of pagan moral and political philosophy, seeking to show that classical philosophy, while in some ways anticipating Christianity, was nevertheless unable to fulfil its own aspirations. Those aspirations, he contends, could only be fulfilled with the coming of Christianity and its revelation of the true *telos* of history, creation, and human life. Augustine's critique is sometimes taken to be a comprehensive dismissal of political life as hopelessly mired in the evil wrought by the *libido dominandi*, such that Christians should refrain from participation lest they become soiled by the wretchedness of political life. It is true, of course,

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[191] For a review of these debates, see Michael J.S. Bruno, *Political Augustinianism: Modern Interpretations of Augustine's Political Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).
[192] CW 4, 237/38-39. For a study of the character Morus, see Chapter 3.

that compared with classical culture which often associated politics with religion, thereby creating rulers and regimes in which there was little distinction, Augustine downgrades earthly political life relative to the life of the spirit and the Earthly City relative to the City of God. As Charles Norris Cochrane has argued, "[t]he history of Graeco-Roman Christianity resolves itself largely into a critique of [the Augustan project of "creative politics"] and the ideas upon which it rested; viz. that it was possible to attain a goal of permanent security, peace and freedom through political action, especially through submission to the 'virtue and fortune' of a political leader."[193] Certainly Augustine's *City of God* represented the crowning achievement of this Christian critique.

Yet, Augustine does not, in fact dismiss politics as worthless, nor does he hold that there is nothing redeeming whatsoever in the virtue ascertained by the philosophers or put into action by political actors. Indeed, in Book V of the *City of God*, he goes so far as to hold up the actions of certain Romans as worthy of emulation even by Christians: "If we do not display, in the service of the most glorious City of God, the qualities of which the Romans, after their fashion, gave us something of a model, in their pursuit of the glory of their earthy city, then we ought to feel the prick of shame."[194] That the virtues are not rightly ordered to their true final end is a mark against them—they are not truly virtues in the fullest sense—but they nevertheless bear a *semblance* to virtue. In Chapter 12 of Book V, Augustine goes so far as to say that due to their "moral qualities," "the true God deigned to help the Romans in the extension of their empire".[195]

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[193] Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), vi.
[194] St. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Battenson (New York: Penguin University Press, 2003), 211.
[195] Ibid., 5.12, 196.

Indeed, the Romans played a crucial part in God's ultimate plan, according to Augustine, and Rome is even said to present a "shadowy resemblance" to the City of God in its "offer of impunity for crimes of every kind collected in a multitude which was to result in the foundation of the city of Rome."[196]

Augustine's view nevertheless challenges the classical and Hellenic view of political philosophy, which had largely become sclerotic, particularly with the advent of the empires. As Sheldon Wolin points out, "Hellenic and Roman thinkers had struggled to account for the new magnitudes of politics, the extension of space, the centralization of power, and the unprecedented enlargement of constituency."[197] While Augustus had attempted a revival through what Cochrane calls "creative politics,"[198] it ultimately "fell to Christianity to revivify Christian thought."[199] But, it did so in an oblique way:

> The significance of Christian thought for the Western political tradition lies not so much in what it had to say about the political order, but primarily in what it had to say about the religious order. The attempt of Christians to understand their own group life provided a new and sorely needed source of ideas for Western political thought. Christianity succeeded where the Hellenistic and late classical philosophies had failed, because it put forward a new and powerful ideal of community which recalled men to a life of meaningful participation Although the nature of this community contrasted sharply with classical ideals, although its ultimate purpose lay beyond historical time and space, it contained, nevertheless, ideals of solidarity and membership that leave a lasting imprint . . . on the Western tradition of political thought.[200]

The life of the Church, therefore, comes to supply the basis for a rethinking of politics and the relationship of politics to both to human life and to the divine.

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[196] Ibid, 5.18, 207.
[197] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 86.
[198] See Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, v.
[199] Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 86.
[200] Ibid., 87.

Politics, for Augustine, is ultimately directed at the same end as all human endeavors: peace. Peace, he argues, is the thing most desired by human beings—even wars are ultimately about securing peace.[201] Political regimes are established on earth, not ultimately to give humans happiness from themselves, but rather, in the first place, to maintain peace so that the City of God can advance, and secondly to institute justice and draw men to lives of virtue where possible—and though he is aware that this will ultimately be a failing task, he nevertheless holds that humans should not shrink from the task of improving social and political life where possible. Stoics and Epicureans withdraw from public life into the private sphere and ultimately themselves—even to the point of suicide when they are overcome by life—as a result of their search for peace, but it will not ultimately be found there.[202] Augustine "heartily" affirms the philosophers' view that "the life of the wise man [as well as the saints] should be social".[203] Yet, human beings are "more than any other species, at once social by nature and quarrelsome by perversion."[204] And hence, despite the "darkness" that attends social life, the wise man will serve society: "for the claims of human society constrain him and draw him to this duty; and it is unthinkable to him that he should shirk it."[205]

Augustine engages Cicero's classical definition of a commonwealth, put in the mouth of Scipio, in his *De Re Publica*: a commonwealth is the "weal of the people" and a "people" is defined as "a multitude 'united by association by a common sense of right and a community of

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[201] See ibid., 19.12, 866-870.
[202] See ibid., 19.4, 852-857.
[203] Ibid., 19.5, 858.
[204] Ibid., 12, 28, 508.
[205] Ibid, 19.6, 860.

interest".[206] A commonwealth, according to Cicero (via Scipio), cannot be maintained without justice, and justice is "that virtue which assigns to everyone his due."[207] But a commonwealth which neglects true worship cannot be called just, because it has failed to render its due to God. Hence, "where this justice does not exist, there is certainly no 'association of men united by a common sense of right and by a community of interest'."[208] Thus there is no "people"—there is only an amalgamation of individuals. Therefore, "there never was a Roman commonwealth answering to the definitions advanced by Scipio in Cicero's *On the Republic*"[209] for "where there is no 'people', there is no 'weal of the people'.[210]

In the place of Cicero's definition, Augustine offers an alternative—and somewhat less rigorous—one: "'A people is an association of a multitude of rational beings united by a common agreement in the objects of their love'".[211] Thus, for Augustine, a people can be formed without a perfect instantiation of justice, which would require giving due worship to God. By this definition, Augustine says, it can be said of Rome that it is a commonwealth, as well as of "the Athenians and any other Greeks, or of that former Babylon of the Assyrians, when they exercised imperial rule, whether on a small or large scale, in their commonwealths— and indeed about any other nation whatsoever."[212] All of these can be said to be commonwealths, because they each can be said to be "an association of some kind of other between a multitude rational beings united by a common agreement on the objects of its love."

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[206] Ibid., 19.21, 881.
[207] Ibid., 882.
[208] Ibid., 19.23, 890.
[209] Ibid., 881.
[210] Ibid., 19. 23, 890.
[211] Ibid., 19.24, 890.
[212] Ibid., 891.

And, therefore, "to observe the character of a particular people we must examine the objects of their love . . . And, obviously, the better the objects of this agreement, the better the people; the worse the objects of this love, the worse the people."[213]

Hence, Augustine inaugurates an interior dimension to social and political organization: the nature of a given social or political order is directly related to the objects that each individual within that order loves.[214] But it is the crucial step of *uniting* those loves that creates a social and political order—a *people.* And yet he argues that the Earthy City is formed by those who love self above God—even to the point of contempt for God.[215] Hence, any city that is not founded on the love of the true God is founded on the (somewhat paradoxical) idea of loving the self together. As Robert Louis Wilken has observed, "[t]hat is why the book discusses two cities. [Augustine] wants to draw a contrast between the life of the city of God, a life centered on God and genuinely social, and life that is centered on itself. Augustine wished to redefine the realm of the public to make place for the spiritual, for God."[216]

Plato and Aristotle had pointed beyond the political realm to something higher, but for both of them transcending the city was ultimately a lonely endeavor, rooted in the solitary philosophical contemplation of an impersonal, or at least uncaring, Good or First Cause. The Hellenistic systems—especially Epicureanism and Stoicism—had turned inward, promoting self-sufficiency as an ideal, and downgrading social and political life to a hinderance to happiness at best.

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[213] Ibid., 890.
[214] For a consideration of how Augustine relates to the development of the self and moral reasoning in the Western tradition see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 127-142.
[215] See *City of God*, 14.28, 593.
[216] Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 208.

Augustine, however, revealed the limitations of all of these classical systems of thought, and showed the way to a more genuinely social conception of happiness, one in which human beings could be united in their shared love for God and thereby for each other. Only the Christian life can therefore claim to be truly social, and only the political community which rendered due worship to God could be called just, having created a true people.

How, then, does Augustine's thought relate to *Utopia*? As we have already seen, the Utopian commonwealth is a pagan society, premised on a combination of pagan moral philosophies which boasted a number of adherents in the Greco-Roman world, namely Epicureanism and Stoicism, while some elements of Plato and Aristotle's "best regimes" can be detected in Utopian institutions. Beyond this, in its particulars, Utopia is in many ways evocative of Rome, from its imperialistic foreign policy[217] to its cult of Mithras,[218] to its use of penal slavery,[219] and even its use of interior gardens as an architectural feature.[220] In short, with Utopia, More constructs a "living" representation of the ancient world, which culminated in the Roman Empire, ruled by the "Eternal City," which even Augustine likely would have struggled to imagine passing away despite its having been sacked in 410 AD by the Visigoths.[221] Just as

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[217] CW 4, 135/7-22.
[218] Ibid., 233/14-15.
[219] See ibid., 185/15-39; cf. the description of the Polylerite system which is explicitly compared with the Roman system (ibid., 75/18-23).
[220] Ibid., 121/9-23. See, e.g. Linda Farrar, *Ancient Roman Gardens* (Stroud, UK: The History Press, 1998).
[221] See Robert Louis Wilken: "Raised on the certainty that the city of Rome, the empire, the institutions and conventions that ordered the rhythms of society, the Latin language and Roman culture had been there for centuries, Augustine lived with the quiet confidence that the world that was in place would last indefinitely, a belief he held until his death. Augustine could no more conceive of Rome passing away than Americans can imagine our way of life and institutions fading into oblivion or being displaced by another form of government, another language, another way of life." See *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 187-188.

many of More's fellow humanists were scouring ancient pagan texts for the seeds of social,

cultural, and political renewal, many in Augustine's time were clamoring for a return to classical

paganism as a solution to the social, cultural, and political sclerosis that had set in, weakening

the Roman Empire. Yet, Augustine's deconstruction of Roman history and critique of classical

philosophy was calculated to probe the *limits* of classical thought and action, showing that even

if certain aspects of its actions as worthy of notice (and even emulation) by Christians,[222] and

certain aspects of its thought might serve as worthy *praeambula fidei*,[223] true hope lay not in a

return to classical antiquity, but in joining the City of God

   More portrays Utopia as a kind of pagan ideal society, which, like Augustine's Rome,

contains elements that are worthy of consideration by Christians to correct some of the

corruptions of Christendom,[224] and which contains elements that serve to prepare the Utopians to

hear the Gospel of Christ,[225] but which also has very real limitations imposed by their reliance on

inferior moral doctrines to ground their social life. Like the *City of God*, *Utopia* "can be read as

a Christian response to Plato's *Republic*."[226] More's *Utopia* (as Robert Louis Wilken says of the

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[222] See *City of God,* 5.12-18, 196-212.

[223] See ibid., 8.5-11, 305-315.

[224] Recall R.W. Chambers: "When a Sixteenth-Century Catholic depicts a pagan state found on Reason and Philosophy, he is not depicting his ultimate ideal . . . The underlying thought of *Utopia* always is, *With nothing save Reason to guide them, the Utopians do this; and yet we Christian Englishmen, we Christian Europeans* . . . More did not mean that Heathendom is better than Christianity. He meant that some Christians are worse than heathen." *Thomas More* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958), 128.

[225] See CW 4, 217/36-219/20.

[226] See Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 190; and Leo Strauss: "The Platonic tradition has been for many centuries a tradition of Christian Platonism. The blessings which we owe to that tradition must not blind us however to the fact that there is a difference between Christian and primitive Platonism. It is not surprising that perhaps the greatest helper in the effort to see that difference should be a Christian saint. I have in mind Sir Thomas More. His

City of God) "does not present a model city, a society which human beings should strive to build in this world," (at least not in its verisimilitudinous presentation), but instead claims to show "a living community to which one belongs".[227] In this sense, More sets up a dialectic between Augustine's City of God, comprised of those who love God more than self, and Utopia, the philosophic city in action.[228] Hence, in *Utopia*, More re-presents in "living" form the classical ideal against which Augustine had contended. In this way, he was able to illustrate both the possibilities and, more importantly, the *limits* of classical thought, which Augustine's deconstruction and critique in the *City of God* had brought into stark relief.

What, then, was More's purpose? As Paul Kolbet has shown, one of St. Augustine's great intellectual achievements was the revision of a classical ideal which he describes as "psychogogy"—that is, "philosophic therapy" for the soul.[229] According to Kolbet

> psychagogy refers to those philosophically articulated traditions of therapy—common in Hellenistic literature—pertaining to how a mature person leads the less mature to perceive and internalize wisdom for themselves. These traditions, moreover, stress that for therapeutic speech to be effective, it must be based on knowledge and persuade by adapting itself in specific ways both to the psychic state of the recipient and to the particular occasion. Thus, as a contemporary investigative category, psychagogy is a distinctive use of rhetoric for philosophic or religious ends.[230]

Utopia is a is a free imitation of Plato's *Republic*." *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 61.

[227] Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 190.

[228] See the two prefatory poems *Quatrain in the Utopian Vernacular* and *Six Lines on the Island of Utopia*, especially, from the former, "Alone above all lands, without the aid of abstract philosophy, I have represented for mortals the philosophical city" (CW 4, 19/24-25); and from the latter "I am a rival of Plato's republic, perhaps even a victor over it. The reason is that what he has delineated in words I have exhibited in men and resources and laws of surpassing excellence." (CW 4, 21/5-8).

[229] Paul R. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls: Revising a Classical Ideal* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2010), 7.

[230] Ibid., 8-9.

Moreover, "to understand ancient psychagogy requires one to set aside such polarities and imagine the possibility of a kind of speech whose persuasiveness does not diminish its truthfulness. In this case words would lead to, or even mediate, the apprehension of 'things as they are.'"[231] Kolbet cites Plutarch's essay as representative of the Hellenistic reconsideration of the uses of poetry for training minds in the discernment of truth and falsehood: "The good and the bad are both depicted in poetry, and the reader must make choices regarding what is to be imitated or admired. Plutarch's guide will make use of the inherent psychagogic persuasiveness of the ancient poets in order to 'convey the reader by poetry into the realm of philosophy.'"[232] Kolbet shows, then, that "rather than rejecting his earlier ideals, Augustine adapted them to inform his mature pastoral theory and his homiletical practice"[233] while "simultaneously point[ing] out their limitations and relativity"[234]

This recovery of rhetoric as useful to the philosophic "cure of souls" was, of course, central to the humanist project, such that the distinction between poetic form and the philosophic search for truth—referenced in the full title of *Utopia*: "A Truly Golden Handbook No Less Beneficial than Entertaining [*libellus vere aureus nec minus salutaris quem festivus*]"[235]—was diminished, or elided entirely. Like Augustine, More considered classical ideas to be useful but ultimately insufficient to the curing of souls or of societies. As he states at the beginning of *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, the "natural wise men of this world,' those "old moral philosophers, labored much" using their "natural reason" to show how souls and societies might

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[231] Ibid., 9.
[232] Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*, 58.
[233] Ibid., 12.
[234] Ibid., 13.
[235] CW 4, 1.

be cured.[236] And yet, though they have "some good drugs have they yet in their shops, for which they may be suffered to dwell among our apothecaries," they "be far unable to cure our disease of themselves, and therefore are not sufficient to be taken for our physicians".[237] Hence, "we shall neither fully receive those philosophers' reasons . . . nor yet utterly refuse them, but, using them in such order as shall beseem them".[238]

Viewed in this light, then, *Utopia* appears as More's philosophical-rhetorical tool to direct his fellow humanists—using the "psychagogic" poetic/rhetorical methods of humanism itself—back to the limitations of classical philosophy in terms of morality, and, by extension, in terms of political and social order. By encouraging them to work though his imaginative account of a well-ordered pagan society, discerning the good and the bad, he utilizes this psychagogic method to direct them ultimately back to Augustine's account of moral and political order in *City of God*. More leaves clues along the way, placed in the mouth of his character Morus, which subtly point his readers beyond the possibilities that are available to the statesman—and even the philosopher—in a fallen world, and suggest that a better world is to come, transcending the limitations of the current one.[239]

Augustine's deconstruction the classical tradition allows him to then re-establish it by showing that Christianity completes what it had aspired to. As Ernest Fortin notes, for

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[236] Thomas More, *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, in *Complete Works of Thomas More*, ed. Gerard B. Wegemer and Stephen W. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 1114/29-31..

[237] Ibid., 1114/78-81.

[238] Ibid., 1115/8-11.

[239] E.g. "For it is impossible that all should be well unless all men were good, a situation which I do not expect for a great many years to come!" (CW 4, 101/2-4) and "I readily admit that there are very many features in the Utopian commonwealth which it is easier for me to which for in our countries that to have any hope of seeing realized (CW 4, 246/39-247/3).

Augustine, "[c]lassical thought has failed, not because it expected too much of most men, but because it was compelled to rely on purely human means to bring about the realization of the noble goals that it set for them."[240] Augustine shows that "[d]ivine grace and not human justice is the true bond of society. It alone fulfils both the ideals of pagan philosophy and the prescriptions of the Old Law".[241]

Likewise, in *Utopia*, More reminds his Christian humanist friends—including and especially the Prince of Humanists, Erasmus—that although natural virtue is important, it can never substitute for divine grace in bringing about a true and eternal commonwealth. As long as we are faced with the challenge of maintaining peace, establishing order, and striving for justice in a fallen world, we cannot afford to neglect the institutions that make possible some pale semblance the *true* peace, order, and justice which is to come.

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[240] Ernest L. Fortin, *Political Idealism and Christianity in the Thought of St. Augustine* (Villanova, PA: Villanova University, 1972), 16.
[241] Ibid.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

For more than 500 years, St. Thomas More's *Utopia* has puzzled and intrigued readers. The continued interest in *Utopia* indicates that, despite the varied and contradictory interpretations that it has received, it remains a perennial source for reflection on fundamental issues pertaining to the relationship between politics, moral philosophy, and religion. At its core, *Utopia* presents readers with a dialectical meditation on the tension between political idealism and political prudence—a tension that lies at the heart of the tradition of political theory, beginning with Plato and Aristotle. The advent of Christianity further complicates this tension, by shifting the terms. Rather than a dynamic tension between the philosophic life and the city, St. Augustine's critique of classical political philosophy reframes the tension as between two cities, formed by two loves: the love of self and the love of God. *Utopia*, I have argued, should be seen in this light. In *Utopia*, More presents his audience—primarily his fellow Christian humanists, with Erasmus at their head—with an imaginative vision of a society premised on the moral principles of the classical and Hellenistic philosophies to which they were drawn. In so doing, he leads them through a psychagogic exercise aimed at probing the limits of classical and Hellenistic thought, thereby directing them back to Augustine's critique. This was necessary both because the ubiquity of Augustinian categories in late-medieval political thought made viewing the power of Augustine's critique difficult, and because, as a student of Plato, More understood that leading others through the educative process, such that they come to grasp truth by their own process of reasoning is, in general, a far more effective educational method than is polemic.

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Yet, this method also leaves open the possibility that the meaning of the teaching will not be understood. And, indeed, this has often been the case with *Utopia*. Interpreters have often failed to grasp the subtle teaching that More presents because they have too often focused on More's interlocutor, Raphael Hythloday—presuming that he must, in some way represent the authorial voice—rather than on the objections to Hythloday given my More's character Morus. As a result, the book has often been taken as a straight-forward exposition of More's own political ideals. It has also, for that reason, been taken as a precursor or a part of the rise of modern political thought. This is at least partly because of its use of Epicurean materialistic hedonism as a basis for political order, a tendency which becomes more pronounced and explicit in architects of modern political thought such as Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza,[1] and exponents of utilitarianism such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stewart Mill.[2]

The revival of Epicureanism by Erasmus, Valla, and others *did* prove to be the means by which the modern re-grounding of political philosophy was made possible. And, while More may have been intrigued by it, he also seems to have intuited both its intrinsic philosophical difficulties, as well as the implausibility of grounding political morality on it. Moreover, the Stoic strain in Christian humanism, also represented by Erasmus, proved too flimsy a ground to underpin a genuine revival of social and political order, because despite its focus on virtue, it was also inherently individualistic and a- or anti-political at its core. It provided little means for individual virtue to be translated into collective action at the social and political level. It also

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[1] See, for example, Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2011), 228-233.
[2] See, for example, Frederic Seebohm, *The Oxford Reformers: Colet, Erasmus, and More* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1929), 222-225.

tended to downplay the constraints of fallen human nature, presuming that lack of education was the primary hindrance to social and political reform, and therefore, that education would be the primary means to effect it. In short, it failed to take seriously enough the implications of Augustinian anthropology for social and political order. The depravity inherent in human beings requires that institutions constrain, shape, and channel human action. Just as religious reform cannot neglect the reform of the institutions through which sacraments and authoritative teaching are protected and made available to successive members of the religious community, so political and social change must take shape in and through institutions, because institutions are the means by which individual morality is transformed into collective action. A serious program for social and political reform, therefore, had to consider the institutional requirements that would make it possible, and it had to think carefully about the moral premises on which those institutions would be based.

While the moral-educative program of Christian humanism, particularly as espoused by Erasmus, was attractive to More in many ways, it seems likely that he doubted whether Erasmus' focus on virtuous exhortation was sufficient to effect genuine and lasting social reform. While education in virtue—including the study of the classics—was no doubt important for More, it was only through active engagement in the give-and-take of political life that real reform could hope to take hold. And, he seems to have doubted whether a stable political order could be founded on individualistic moral premises, whether Stoic or Epicurean. Even combined with Christianity, they remained insufficient to ground a *genuinely* social or political order.

To be sure, the Church fathers, including St. Augustine and St. Jerome, advocated incorporating the insights available in pagan philosophy—using an image that suggested a

comparison of the incorporation of truths discovered by pagan philosophers and poets to the

Israelites' plundering of the riches of Egypt[3]—a perspective which, as a Christian humanist,

More deeply imbibed. Yet, the comprehensive critique of classical and Hellenistic thought that

Augustine offered provided a guide to the limits of the classical paradigm, both in terms of its

moral philosophy and its ability to create a truly just political and social order. The critique of

his fellow humanists that More offers in *Utopia* is aimed at directing their attention to precisely

the same point that Augustine illustrates, namely the limits of classical and pagan rationalism,

even in terms of building a temporal political order. The recognition of these limits, however,

does not mean—for More or for Augustine—that one can withdraw from political life or cease

working to improve temporal order in whatever way possible. But it does mean that political and

social life should be understood as operating according to a distinctive logic of their own, one

that is not reducible to, and therefore not improvable by, individual virtue alone, as necessary as

individual virtue might be. In other words, individual virtue is necessary but not sufficient to

effect lasting social and political reform. The statesman must pay careful attention to the

functioning of institutions and think carefully about the potential real-world effects of proposed

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[3] See St. Augustine *De Doctrina Christiana*, 2.40: "Any statements by those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, which happen to be true and consistent with our faith should not cause alarm, but be claimed for our own use, as it were from the owners who have no right to them. Like the treasures of ancient Egyptians, who possessed not only idols and heavy burdens, which the people of Israel shunned, but also vessels ad ornaments of silver and gold, and clothes, which on leaving Egypt the people of Israel, in order to make better use of them, surreptitiously claimed for themselves . . . similarly all branches of pagan learning contain not only false [things]. . . which each of us must loathe and avoid . . . but also studies for liberated minds which are more appropriate to the service of the truth, and some very useful moral instruction, as well as the various truths about monotheism to be found in their writers." See *De Doctrina Christiana*, translated by R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 64-65.) More quotes St. Jerome's Epistle 70 to make the same point in *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* I.23.

reforms, considering political things according to the logic of politics, while chastening their expectations for perfect and permanent solutions to political and social problems. Proposed reforms or new social or political arrangements, therefore, cannot neglect the prudential consideration of the concrete institutional requirements that would affect their coming into being. Without this grounding, such proposals are, at best, benignly ineffectual, and, at worst, actively dangerous to social peace and order.

While Raphael Hythloday takes center stage, the key to interpreting *Utopia* is a close and careful consideration of the objections raised by the statesman Morus, whose interest in the concrete particulars of the Utopian institutions, common-sense objections, and modest expectations reveal the nature of More's challenge to Erasmus and others like him: do not expect that reform will come easily or will be without trade-offs. In this fallen world there is no perfect commonwealth, and so there are many things that we "wish for rather than hope to see". True hope lies, not in the earthly city, but only in the City of God—perfect in justice, united in love, and truly *aeternum duratura.*

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