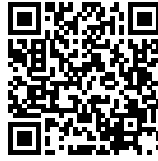




THOMAS MORE IN HIS UTOPIA

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Thomas More's *Utopia* is a work that is a complex critique of sixteenth-century northern European society. This critique is accomplished by way of postulating various ideal conditions that exist on an imaginary island called Utopia, and then these conditions are contrasted with the conditions prevalent in the Europe of More's day.

One of these ideal concepts that *Utopia* gives us is the description of how perfection has been achieved, namely, through the eradication of pride – the root of all evil in humankind.

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Renaissance was coming into its own in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and England (although it was waning in Italy), by way of humanist thinkers.

These northern humanists are sometimes called, "Christian humanists" in that they believed that it was a human being's privilege to seek happiness in this life, and that this true happiness was based on reason; however this happiness was only truly attained by divine grace.

The northern Renaissance particularly focused on a program of practical reform in a wide range of areas, including religion, education, and government. But there was an inherent tension in this position, since often these humanist reformers were also members of the political establishment – in brief, most were courtiers.

The key ideology of the Renaissance was a conscious turning away from scholasticism and the espousal of particular models. But this turn to the Classics was not a rejection of Christianity; rather it was an attempt to find material with which to reinterpret the essential message of Christianity – the destruction of pride that leads to estrangement of man from God and man from man.

In fact, for the Christian humanists, pride was the root of all evil; it was the grand paradigm wherein the Fall of Man and his salvation could be explained.

Thus rhetoric (the study of communication and persuasion) was associated with eloquence – and to a humanist, eloquence presupposed a nobility in the communication of one's ideas as well as wisdom, as eloquence was the outward sign of inner wisdom. Beauty was derived from the Classics and wisdom acquired from Christianity.

Therefore, for the humanists, reason was innate in man's soul, and through reason man could free himself from the grosser bonds of pride and become a creature not far below God himself.

Of course, the program of reform was greatly enhanced by the availability of the printing press. Thus, Desiderius Erasmus wrote continually for the printing press, and the humanists were generally able to promulgate their ideas (and propaganda) more widely than had been previously possible. They also utilized Latin, which served as an international language of Europe. It is within this context of

Renaissance humanism that More's *Utopia* needs to be read.

The important theme within this context is the use of pride both as an example of what is to be avoided in order to arrive at the perfected state, and as a tool to critique the idea of society itself, which is built upon the largely evil manifestations of pride. More attempts to put his humanist vision within the parameters of practical application, by way of social critique.

In *Utopia* three characters converse: Thomas More appears as a fictionalized version of himself; Raphael Hythlodæus is the fictional traveler to exotic worlds; and Peter Giles, More's young friend from Antwerp, throws in an occasional word or two. The premise of the work seeks to dispense with the entire order based on private property, which is an extension of greed and rooted in civic pride.

More also takes the liberty to suppose a commonwealth based on the pessimism that there is a real need for secular government, which keeps fallen mankind from hurtling into the vortex of perpetual violence.

Of course, the prime source of violence among mankind is pride: sinful human beings have an insatiable desire for things, and this desire translates into pride when those that have more look down upon those who have less, social pride.

Thus we have in *Utopia* a play on how life might develop in a state that tries to balance human depravity of pride and a communal system that aims to check the destructive individualism of corrupt human nature.

Raphael entertains us by bringing our experience in the ordinary world up against an ideal that we cannot really reach, but one that has about it a certain plausibility. Utopia is a mirror held up to nature, and we see ourselves reflected in it.

The key question that *Utopia* asks concerns the relationship between our possessions and our souls. Are the conspicuous illusions of wealth (pride) a type of injustice? They are, according to *Utopia*: "In fact, when I consider any social system that prevails in the modern world, I can't, so help me God, see it as anything but a conspiracy of the rich to advance their own interests under the pretext of organizing society."

If pride is measured by a sterile metal like gold, are the people who wear chains of gold not prisoners of their pride? And is it possible, in a zero sum world, where one person's gain is another person's loss, that the people who sport such finery are not in fact beggaring others? Thus the root of man's injustice to man is pride, a conspiracy of those who seek to further their own egos.

If we measure worth by possession, are we not driven by a peculiar and implacable logic to put people

to death for theft? More's work raises this very fundamental question in regard to pride: what is it about possession that distorts vision and makes one person feel better than another?

The six-hour working day in *Utopia* also represents a perpetual check on an acquisitive society to turn human beings into beasts of burden to be worked as if they had no claim over themselves. For life is an end in and of itself, and not merely an instrument to be used for someone else's gain.

Without pride, the force of such an imperative to use other people's lives for personal gain is completely blunted. Thus for More, the root of human depravity is pride, and by eliminating private property, the root of civic and social pride is vanquished.

However, it is important to keep in mind that *Utopia*, from the beginning is an artificial construct. Some 1760 years earlier, Utopus had dug a channel to separate Utopia from the corrupting lands nearby. As the wise lawgiver, he imposed laws on people who could not or would not create those laws themselves.

But Utopia is afloat in world that is not Utopia: the fear of contamination is very much prevalent. Thus even if civic and social pride within is eliminated, it can still come from without.

This is why the Utopians give great weight to military matters, for a virtuous nation unarmed is quickly swallowed by the voraciousness of the outsider. Thus, there are massive walls around their towns on their island.

Since pride of possession has been vanquished, no locks bar Utopian doors, which open at a touch. The only reason Utopians can imagine the need for privacy is if they had pride: to guard what other do not have. Therefore, conformity is the rule of every house: "When you've seen one of them, you've seen them all."

Raphael believes societies other than Utopia are merely conspiracies of the rich. These societies are realms of greed and pride. And pride causes men to measure their welfare not by their well-being, but by having things that other lack, which is irrational and unchristian. Only in Utopia has pride and all its attendant vices been eviscerated from society.

It is because of this evisceration that Utopian polity rests upon common ownership. Through this idea, More could have it both ways: he could explore the implications of a communal way of living without necessarily proposing it, however much he may have felt emotionally or intellectually inclined towards it.

Raphael's summation of the general advantage of the Utopian way of life betrays the reason for its attractiveness: although no man owns anything, all are rich – "for what can be richer than to live with a

happy and tranquil mind, free from anxiety?"

In effect, the Utopians' repudiation of private property is a remedy that frees them from pride and allows them to live a life that is at once religious and secular, private and public.

Consequently, their world consists of: equality of all things among citizens; love of peace and quiet; and contempt for gold and silver. In short, they have imported the ideals of the monastic life into political and social affairs.

A large part of Book 2, then, describes the happy place freed from the vices of the real world. But here we see that pride is also used to critique the Europe of More's day. As happy as Utopia is, it is also "No place," a land that will never be.

At one level, particularly with respect to geography, England and Utopia share a shadowy identity. Utopia is an island separated from the continent by a channel (Amaurotum), its capital city, together with the tidal river Anydrus, and the magnificently arched stone bridge across it, resemble London and the Thames, and the houses reflect those in England.

Thus it is not long before the Utopian illusion dissolves into the reality of England and Europe – places where pride certainly holds sway, and governs all aspects of civil, private, political, and social life.

The importance of pride comes through strongly in Raphael's description of the Utopians' distrust of treaties. In fact, the Utopians never make treaties with any nation, because "in those parts of the world treaties and alliances between kings are not observed with much good faith."

He then draws a satiric contrast with Europe, meaning the exact opposite of what he says: "In Europe, however, and especially in those parts where the faith and religion of Christ prevails, the majesty of treaties is everywhere holy and inviolable, partly through the justice and goodness of kings, partly through the reverence and fear of the Sovereign Pontiffs."

Of course, the reality in Europe is otherwise: pride makes all treaties cheap. Thus *Utopia* gradually describes the polity that an optimistic humanist might envision for England in the context of the contemporary historical Renaissance, through the eradication of pride.

However, the perfected state of Utopia is not without its contradictions, and these contradictions arise from the paradox that lies at the very heart of the book: that rational action can give rise to unreasonable consequences; the Utopians' most determined efforts to fulfill the most laudable of intentions often meet with failure.

The most striking example of this is the war they fight on behalf of the Nephelogeates against the Alaopolitans – the Utopians are being good neighbors. Thus the Utopians went to the assistance of the

Nephelogeates, who claimed that they had suffered injustice at the hands of the Alaopolitans under the pretext of law.

The outcome was catastrophic: "...whether right or wrong, it was avenged by a fierce war. Into this war the neighboring nations brought their energies and resources to assist the power and to intensify the rancor of both sides.

Most flourishing nations were either shaken to their foundations or grievously afflicted. The troubles upon troubles that arose were ended only by the enslavement and surrender of the Alaopolitans. Since the Utopians were not fighting in their own interest, they yielded them into the power of the Nephelogeates, a people who, when the Alaopolitans were prosperous, were not in the least comparable to them."

Thus, what people experience is often very different from anything they intend, desire, seek, or foresee. Does the eradication of pride really lead to freedom from all evil?

How is Utopian society kept from reverting to pride? Again, we see many paradoxes. For example, the suffocating constraints on individual liberty required to effectuate the Utopians' attempt to secure more liberty and leisure for all, or the moral injustice of the rational justice by which they regulate numbers in their families and colonies.

The cost of eradicating pride is the deprivation of some portion of an individual's will, however rationally or virtually that person might act. *Utopia* thus contains an inbuilt ambiguity; it represents to a large extent what More wished for, even while he saw that if it could be, which it never could, the human condition would remain essentially unchanged in its character and function.

This point brings us to examine religious pride in Utopia. The essential feature of Utopian religion is that it is not definitive, and it resides in the responsive condition of mind rather than an elaborate and arbitrary dogma.

Its main precepts were instituted by Utopus, who allowed for a range of beliefs and provided for the possibility of wise doubting: "On religion he did not venture rashly to dogmatize. He was uncertain whether God did not desire a varied and manifold worship and therefore did not inspire different people with different views."

The Utopians must, however, accept two fundamental tenets: that the world is governed by providence, not chance, and that the soul is immortal and will receive rewards and punishments after this life. To believe otherwise is to fall from the dignity of human life.

In practice, they let their faith instruct their reason, so that they are capable of modifying the rational

rigor of their epicurean philosophy to allow for the justified existence of their ascetic religious order as well as those who wish to enjoy honest pleasures in marriage.

Thus, for the Utopians, religion is not a source of pride: they cannot say that their belief is better, truer, more righteous than any other belief – a position impossible in the Europe of the day, where to doubt the basic tenets of Christianity amounted to heresy.

This point is highlighted if we consider that the Utopians profess a willingness to contemplate the possibility that all their assumptions about God and religion may be false: "If he [a Utopian] 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 the knowledge of it, for he is ready to follow in whatever path He may lead him. But if this form of a commonwealth be the best and his religion the truest, he prays that then He may give him steadfastness and bring all other mortals to the same way of living and the same opinion of God – unless there be something in this variety of religions which delights His inscrutable will."

Thus we see that the Utopians' prayers manifest immediate faith and hope, while acknowledging doubt about the verity of faith itself. It is this doubt, therefore, that eradicates pride, since one faith system is no truer than another.

Of course, just a year after *Utopia* was written, Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of Wittenberg Church and began the Reformation, which would see Europe being plunged into blood, and would cause the death of Thomas More himself. European reality and Utopian idealism stand at opposite ends of what could be and what really is.

The [photo](#) shows, "The Family of Sir Thomas More," by Rowland Lockey, painted 1592.

