Davis, J.C. "Goodbye to Utopia: Thomas More's Utopian Conclusion." *Utopian Moments: Reading Utopian Texts*. Ed. Miguel A. Ramiro Avilés and J. C. Davis. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. 15–20. Textual Moments in the History of Political Thought. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849666848.ch-003>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 14:25 UTC.

Copyright © Miguel A. Ramiro Avilés and J. C. Davis; individual chapters © the contributors. 2012. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Goodbye to Utopia: Thomas More's Utopian Conclusion

J.C. Davis

When Raphael had finished his story, I was left thinking that quite a few of the laws and customs he had described as existing amongst the Utopians were really absurd. These included their methods of waging war, their religious practices, as well as other of their customs; but my chief objection was to the basis of their whole system, that is, their communal living and their moneyless economy. This one thing alone utterly subverts all the nobility, magnificence, splendour and majesty which (in the popular view) are the true ornaments and glory of any commonwealth. But I saw Raphael was tired with talking, and I was not sure he could take contradiction in these matters, particularly when I recalled what he had said about certain counsellors who were afraid they might not appear knowing enough unless they found something to criticise in other men's ideas. So with praise for the utopian way of life and his account of it, I took him by the hand and led him into supper. But first I said that we would find some other time for thinking of these matters more deeply, and for talking them over in more detail. And I still hope such an opportunity will present itself some day.

Meantime, while I can hardly agree with everything he said (though he is a man of unquestionable learning and enormous experience of human affairs), yet I freely confess that in the utopian commonwealth there are many features that in our own societies I would like rather than expect to see.¹

Following its brilliant reconstruction by J.H. Hexter,² George Logan notes in his essay earlier in this volume that the text of *Utopia* was probably written in a different sequence to that in which it was published. More, according to his friend Erasmus, first wrote the long and detailed account of the 'best state of a commonwealth and the new island of utopia', which now comprises most of Book II, in the Netherlands during the late summer and autumn of 1515. On his return to England, he composed the dialogue on counsel, with its penetrating indictment of contemporary politics, society and international

relations, which was to become the substance of Book I. Finally, he added the bridging section between Book I and Book II, and the conclusion, part of which appears at the head of this chapter, and which, with its references both to the account of utopia and the dialogue which now precedes it, serves as one of those things which reunites the separately written sections. Our reading therefore takes off from what was probably the last section of *Utopia* written by More and the last that we encounter in reading it.

Almost every reader of a work of utopian fiction must finish the book's last section and close its pages with the 'So what?' question very much in mind. Perhaps this is especially true of those visions of an alternative society that we find appealing or deeply satisfying. We turn from an attractive world to the deeply flawed reality we inhabit and ask ourselves to note the apparently unbridgeable gap between the author's fiction and our reality. How should we react to what we have read? Utopian authors seldom offer guidance on what has just been 'reported' to us: how we should read the description we have just followed and what meaning we should draw from it. But Thomas More apparently does. As we reach the end of *Utopia*, the 'Thomas More' (Morus) depicted in its pages steps forward and pours cold water on what has been described to us. Much of it, he tells us, is absurd and ignoble and, even if there are some desirable features in it, we can have no sensible expectation of their realization. When it is not silly, *Utopia* is unrealistic – which is a by no means untypical response to reading utopian fiction. So More has anticipated the commonplace reaction to much of the modern utopian tradition which his masterwork is already inaugurating.

But, if we look more closely at these last two paragraphs, we begin to see that there is much more than what has become a conventional response to utopian fiction here. Morus gives four reasons for seeing *Utopia* as absurd. The first three are not, we are told, as important as the fourth. They are: the Utopians' manner of waging war; their attitude to religion; and 'other of their customs'. This last is a catch-all, too vague to be helpful. Their religious practice, essentially ignorant of Christianity and based on reason and an open-minded tolerance, might seem unacceptable to the contemporary Christendom of 1516 although the utopians have already shown a receptiveness to what they had learned of the Christian religion, especially as it appeared to endorse their own communism (96). They regard warfare 'as an activity fit only for beasts' (87; more generally see 87–92). Devoid of honour or glory, it is shameful and they only engage in it themselves as a last resort. Self-defence, driving invaders out of the territory of their allies, the liberation of an oppressed people and sometimes the avenging of previous injuries, are seen by them as justified causes for making war (87–8). Without shame in a shameless exercise, they prefer to raise sedition, use assassins or mercenaries to pursue international conflict when they must.³ Why this is worse than the stratagems and 'crafty machinations' (29) of contemporary European statesmen outlined

in Book I, or the ‘many great cities destroyed, the states crushed, the republics beaten down, the towns burnt up’ which Jerome Busleyden bemoaned as evils of sixteenth-century Europe (128), Morus does not tell us. It may, however, relate to questions of nobility, magnificence, splendour and majesty to which he soon turns.

The ‘chief objection’ of Morus to utopian life is their abolition of money and their communal living. Earlier in his debate with Raphael Hythlodæus, Morus had rejected communism on Aristotelian grounds, namely that it robbed people of the incentive to work or to work well, that it led to confusion over ownership or use rights and thereby to disorder, and finally that equality undermined all authority (40).⁴ Now these objections are dropped, raising the question of whether they have been answered by Raphael’s description of Utopian life. The objection to a moneyless communism has shifted to the claim that it ‘subverts all the nobility, magnificence, splendour and majesty (which in the popular view) are the true ornaments and glory of any commonwealth’. We are suddenly confronted with a double irony. The parenthetical qualification, ‘(in the popular view)’, might be taken to suggest that Morus has abandoned the claim to speak to and for an elite of educated and sophisticated humanists, whose collaboration *Utopia* is a product of, in favour of the popular view. Second, nobility, magnificence, splendour and majesty have already been found to be deeply flawed criteria by which to judge society. They are expressed in terms of comparative advantage and disadvantage. The magnificent stand out only by contrast with those without the necessary attributes. Striving for them involves emulative competition, seeing others as rivals or even as enemies rather than as friends.⁵ The vice which dominates European life, a ‘pride, which glories in putting down others by a superfluous display of possessions’ (56–7; see also 109–10), is rendered impossible and absurd by the Utopians’ communist egalitarianism. Their scorn for the magnificence and splendour of material display is illustrated by the humiliation and conversion to Utopian ways of the Anemolian ambassadors who fail to impress with their richly gilded and bejeweled dress (63–4). The Utopians wonder at others’ association of nobility with jewellery, dress, and gold and are appalled at the deference shown to the rich (65). The self-deluding fantasy of those who think themselves superior because of such things damages them because it snares them into the pursuit of false pleasure, and blinds them to the nature of true pleasure (71–4). It is at its most damaging when associated with majesty because it then leads princes to think that they can do anything they wish and nothing that they do not want to do (87). Towards the end of his discourse on Utopia, Raphael condemns European society as unjust in that it confers status on the idle, the greedy and parasitic while ‘it makes no provision whatever for the welfare of farmers and colliers, labourers, carters and carpenters, without whom the commonwealth would simply cease to exist’. It is ‘nothing but a conspiracy of the rich, who are fattening up their own interests under the name and title of

the commonwealth' (108; the marginal note is 'Reader note well!'). Can this be defended as nobility, magnificence, splendour and majesty? William Budé in his letter to Thomas Lupset, which was printed with *Utopia*,⁶ probed this question of justice. Budé, like More, was a practicing lawyer and, like many lawyers before and since, worried about the connection, or disconnection, between the law and justice. Some, he observed, argued that the law existed to serve and protect the interests of the rich, strong and powerful.

The result of this logic is that it is now an accepted principle of the law of nations that men who are of no practical use whatever to their fellow citizens – so long as they can keep everyone else tied up in contractual knots and complicated testamentary clauses (matters which appear to the ignorant multitude, no less than to those humanistic scholars who live as retired and disinterested seekers after truth, as a vulgar combination of Gordian-knot tricks and common charlatanry) – such men, it is now agreed, should have each one an income equal to a thousand ordinary citizens, equal to a whole city, or even more. And naturally they also acquire impressive titles, as of honourable, munificent men, pillars of society.

So injustice, honour and nobility became inextricably linked in contemporary society.

But the founder and controller of all property, Christ, left his followers a Pythagorean rule of mutual charity and community property; not only so, but he confirmed it unmistakably when Ananias was sentenced to death for violating the rule of community property.⁷ By this arrangement, Christ seems to me to have undermined – at least among his own disciples – all that body of civil and canon law recently worked out in so many vast volumes. Yet this is the law which we see now holding the fort of jurisprudence, and ruling over our destinies. (118)

For Budé, it is *Utopia* that preserves 'by marvellous good fortune, access both in its public and its private life to the truly Christian customs and the authentic wisdom'.⁸ It does so by adhering 'tenaciously' to 'three divine institutions': absolute equality; 'unwavering dedication to peace and tranquillity; and utter contempt for gold and silver' (119). So Budé, whose letter contains an interesting description of the circumstances under which he read *Utopia*, took from his reading of that work not a vindication of the nobility, magnificence and justice of contemporary society but of the justice and Christian quality of Utopian society. His reading comes closer then to Hythlodæus's admiration of utopian society, than to Morus's dismissal of it.

But it is not only Morus's statement of his final conclusion which raises questions but his very manner of concluding his discussion with Hythlodæus. His objection begins as a blunt, root-and-branch rejection of *Utopia*. Much of it is really absurd. Yet not only does he not voice these criticisms but he takes Raphael into supper 'with praise for the utopian way of life and his account of it'. The question of openness of mind and frankness of speech, which has been a theme throughout the book, is again re-opened. On one level Morus

may appear to be engaging in a blameless hypocrisy, saying one thing while thinking another in order to avoid upsetting someone wearied after a long discourse. But, on another, his evasion reveals further misunderstanding of what Raphael with his 'unquestionable learning and enormous experience of human affairs' had taught him. Two lessons are in fact overlooked. The first relates to one of the keys of the utopian way of life, plain speaking⁹ and open-mindedness. In sixteenth-century Europe flattery, envy, competition and a fawning condescension to the powerful have virtually eliminated good sense and truth speaking, as Raphael illustrates in recounting a discussion that took place in the court of Archbishop Morton (15–28). By contrast, the Utopians are distinguished by their keenness to learn from others, absorbing Greek and Roman knowledge when they have the chance, picking up the technology of print and exploring Christian theology (40–1, 77–9, 96–7). 'This readiness to learn', according to Raphael, 'is, I think, the really important reason for their being better governed and living more happily than we do, though we are not inferior to them in brains or resources' (41). In fact, by withholding his true opinion, Morus is judging Hythlodæus by the standards of Europe rather than giving him the benefit of the standards of *Utopia* that his experience has taught him to admire. Only in the competitive and self-promoting conversations of European society would it be necessary to find fault with the arguments of others in order to enhance one's own reputation for wisdom (14). In the Utopian theatre of plain speaking and open-mindedness, it would be reasonable for Morus to voice his concerns, not to conceal them.

But the question of whether to be frank or not with Hythlodæus also conceals a broader lesson which reverberates throughout *Utopia*. In concluding his description of *Utopia*, Hythlodæus engages in a comparison between the dysfunctional society of Europe and the ideal society he has just been describing. In the former, men speak very freely of the commonwealth but pursue their own gain, but 'in Utopia, where there is no private business, every man zealously pursues the public business'. And then he adds the crucial rider: '*And in both cases men are right to act as they do*' (107; my emphasis). More sees the two societies as different theatres, performing different plays with different scripts and conventions. No individual could reject those conventions without wrecking the play. It is right to accommodate oneself to 'the drama in hand', acting one's part 'neatly and appropriately' (36).¹⁰ The tragedy of More's England is that it is a theatre of misery, enacting injustice, engendering untruth, and productive of wasted lives, unhappiness and empty bombast. It may be right for its inhabitants to accommodate themselves to its play in hand since the only alternative is to fundamentally recast society, to enter a new and unknown theatre with new scripts, stage directions and conventions. Morus then responds like a man well accommodated to the theatre of contemporary society with its requirements of dissimulation and emulative competition in discussion. He would have been incapable of receiving the account of Utopia

in an open-minded way and speaking frankly about it. Hythlodæus has already rejected that theatre as ineradicably destructive and unjust and has introduced us to an alternative theatre, Utopian life, in which open-mindedness and the freedom to speak the truth in a world without emulative competition is paramount. Given this underlying confrontation, it is hard to see how More could have ended his *Utopia* in any other way.

So Raphael Hythlodæus and 'Thomas More' (Morus) inhabit two different theatres. But before we leave it there, let us add just one note. As More himself wrote in his appended letter to Peter Giles, *Utopia* is a work well supplied with 'barbarous and meaningless names' such as, for example, Utopia itself (meaning both 'the place where things are well' and 'nowhere') (113), Anyder (the waterless river), Ademus (the prince without a people) and Amaurot (the phantom city). These names, comic and self-contradicting, have, at the same time, a serious point. They warn More's learned audience to be on guard, to read with utmost care. And foremost amongst the names which served this purpose were those of Raphael Hythlodæus and Thomas More. Knowledge of Greek, Latin and the scriptures would have led More's first readers to note in the first of these names the uneasy juxtaposition of an angelic messenger (Raphael) and a teller of idle tales or a talker of nonsense (Hythlodæus). But this also invited further scrutiny of the name of his fictional disputant, Thomas Morus. The apostle Thomas was so doubtful of the reality of the risen Christ that he could only be satisfied of its truth by plunging his hands into Christ's wounds.¹¹ And Morus would have reminded them of a work which Erasmus wrote while he was a guest in More's home in 1509, *Moriae Encomium* (1511) or *The Praise of Folly* as it was to become famously known in English. The Latin title, of course, punned facetiously on the Latin version of More's own surname. So, the book leaves us with two opposed verdicts on Utopian society. The positive one is that of a messenger from heaven who might also talk nonsense. The negative one is that of 'Thomas More', the sceptical fool. Dear reader, you have work to do.