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Thomas More's Hermeneutic Politics

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Abstract: Thomas More's *Utopia* is often portrayed either as a work of bold political radicalism or as subtle, cautionary conservatism. While the scholars who have contributed to these opposing accounts of More's dialogue offer a number of profound insights, they have also inadvertently obscured crucial philosophical features of his political thought. This essay argues that More's *Utopia* should be read as advancing a hermeneutic politics—that is, a politics emphasizing the contingency of the historical and cultural meanings that constitute social life while nonetheless retaining an anthropology of human limits. Reading *Utopia* as a fusion of hermeneutic insight and anthropological limits clarifies More's deeply original notions of social ontology, normative critique, and humanistic authority.

Keywords: humanism; utopian studies; political imagination; realism; social ontology

Thomas More's *Utopia* is an enigma, frequently read as a fount either of conservatism or of radicalism; a light-hearted farce or a moralistic jeremiad; nostalgically medieval or prophetically modern. And although the commentaries on More's dialogue are rich, the central mystery persists, with contemporary scholarship no closer to a consensus on the politics that motivated More to write in the first place. The present essay hopes to shed fresh light on this puzzle by drawing attention to frequently unnoticed features of More's thought stemming from his vision of politics as comprising contingent meanings or what I will call his hermeneutic assumptions.

The two opposing camps are familiar to readers of Morean scholarship. On one side are conservative interpretations that identify the dialogue's politics with the eponymous character, Morus, who is skeptical about the abolition of property. Conservative readings stress *Utopia* as an ironic critique of excessive fantasizing in politics. Rather than championing idealized institutions,

the function of *Utopia* is cautionary and even implies an antiutopian realism.[1] More's *Utopia* becomes dystopian. Opposing these readings are radicalizers who associate *Utopia*'s underlying politics with the visionary world-traveler, Raphael Hythloday. Foremost among these readers is Eric Nelson, who offers an impressively erudite interpretation of *Utopia* as a form of Platonic radicalism.[2] Nelson establishes that it was a commonplace in More's humanist circle to believe that the ideal political society would abolish private property. Other radicalizing readings have highlighted the ferocity of More's critique of European society as well as his clear interest in total political rupture and transformation.[3] *Utopia* becomes prophetically revolutionary.

By contrast, my analysis might be identified with a third cluster of scholars, including Elizabeth McCutcheon and Dominic Baker-Smith, who believe More's *Utopia* is primarily a mode of thought. As Baker-Smith aptly puts it, *Utopia* is a "parable of political imagination" whose "goal is a state of mind rather than a specified state of society."[4] However, unlike McCutcheon and Baker-Smith I present this way of thinking as explicitly hermeneutic. In doing so I draw on past theorists of the Renaissance such as Ernesto Grassi who insisted humanism was of "philosophical" not merely "literary and aesthetical significance."[5]

My argument has four parts. In the first I argue that More's *Utopia* conceptualizes social ontology in hermeneutic terms as a theater of performed

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[1] Notable conservative readings include R. W. Chambers, *Thomas More* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1938); Alistair Fox, *Thomas More: History and Providence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983); J. H. Hexter, *More's Utopia: The Biography of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952); Peter Iver Kaufman, *Incorrectly Political: Augustine and Thomas More* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954), 167–71; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, *The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Edward L. Surtz, *The Praise of Pleasure: Philosophy, Education and Communism in More's "Utopia"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957); Gerard Wegemer, *Young Thomas More and the Arts of Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[2] Eric Nelson, "Greek Nonsense," *Historical Journal* 44 (2001): 899–917; Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Nelson, "Utopia through Italian Eyes," *Renaissance Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (2006): 1029–57.

[3] Karl Kautsky, *Thomas More and His Utopia*, trans. H. J. Stenning (London: Black, 1927); Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005).

[4] Dominic Baker-Smith, "Reading *Utopia*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. George M. Logan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 149, 162. See also Dominic Baker-Smith, *More's "Utopia"* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); Elizabeth McCutcheon, "Denying the Contrary: More's Use of Litotes in the Utopia," *Moreana* 32 (1971): 107–21.

[5] Ernesto Grassi, *Rhetoric as Philosophy: The Humanist Tradition*, trans. John Krois and Azizeh Azodi (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), 35.

meanings arising from creative human agency. In the second, I show how this ontology implies a normative critique of any politics that presents itself as fated, or the only realistic ordering of human life (I briefly contrast More here with his contemporary Niccolò Machiavelli). Unlike Machiavelli, More's humanism envisioned humans in the *imago Dei* and worthy of political communities that affirm their infinite dignity.

All of this might lead readers to conclude that More's hermeneutics is revolutionary. However, in the third part I explain how More's radical utopian ontology is situated against the backdrop of an Augustinian account of human limits and fallibility. The unresolved, central tension of *Utopia* is that radical imagination exists in dynamic tension with an anthropology of limits. In the fourth and final part I briefly sketch how these two seemingly opposing elements shed light on More's own championing of humanistic authority in the courts of Europe. More's politics did not result in revolutionary mobilization but in the chastened attempt to critique and improve European society from the top down via virtuous humanists advising monarchical power.

1. Utopia as Cosmopoetic Ontology

Some scholars have suggested that the dominant popular theories of politics in the Middle Ages conceptualized the cosmos and polity as held together by a single regime type: kingship. On this view, monarchism was fated by the very structure of reality. To disrupt or rebel against monarchical hierarchy in politics was to rebel against God's very sovereignty.[6] Although this is surely an oversimplification, it does capture one popular conception of the divinity of kingship in Europe at that time. Of course, the Middle Ages also saw the flowering of Aristotelian and republican notions of kingship, which envisioned monarchy as only one among a repertoire of regime types. But even in these cases kingship was not only part of a limited, ahistorical set, but it also remained a permanent, theoretical ideal—even if particular times and places called for less ideal arrangements.[7]

By contrast, although there was no single Renaissance philosophy, humanism did mark a general shift away from monarchy as either providentially given or even an ahistorical ideal—towards the view that political life was open-ended historically. For many humanists this was not based on a

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[6]   William Bouwsma, *The Waning of the Renaissance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 86; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

[7]   Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship, to the King of Cyprus*, trans. G. B. Phelan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1949).

rejection of theism but on a theology that perceived humans as an *imago Dei*, or image of God, sharing in the latter's creative freedom.[8] For this reason, Renaissance humanism saw the poet—who called the "human world into being"—as central to politics.[9]

This is one way to arrive at the Renaissance theme of "cosmopoiesis," or world making, in which human imagination generates politics akin to a work of art.[10] For Renaissance humanists, aesthetic creation was not limited to the art object nor did art simply perfect nature (as in Cicero's notion of *vivendi ars*, or the "art of living").[11] Instead, art itself was the medium in which humans dwelled in worlds of meaning. This notion is central to grasping utopia as a hermeneutic and ontological concept that envisions social reality as expressive of created meanings.

More's cosmopoetic conception of politics can be seen in how he describes the island of Utopia in a way that makes readers aware of its createdness. His microcosmic attention to detail subtly foregrounds cosmopoiesis. For example, Hythloday describes Utopia's geography with poetic flourishes (the island is "crescent-shaped, like a new moon") as well as exacting detail ("two hundred miles across the middle").[12] This cosmopoetic power is also evident in *Utopia*'s historical and ethnographic specificity. Although the reader—like a traveler—only glimpses fragments of Utopia's culture, the overall effect implies a much larger whole.

Consider, for instance, how Utopia's citizens are themselves world makers with fifty-four meticulously planned cities and a dredged channel that transformed the peninsula into an island. Such astonishing creativity makes the reader aware of their *imago Dei* capabilities. Utopus, the mythic founder of the commonwealth, is a cosmopoetic creator of politics (and stand-in for More). He is a planner of cities and dreamer of things others dare not envision. His creativity is so potent that history, culture, and geography bend to his will: he "conquered the country and gave it his name," gave the island's "uncouth inhabitants" their "high level of culture," and even "changed its

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[8] Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

[9] Grassi, *Rhetoric as Philosophy*, 83.

[10] Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Cosmopoiesis: The Renaissance Experiment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), xi, xiv.

[11] Compare Wegemer, *Young Thomas More*, 30.

[12] Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Robert Adams, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 41. References to *Utopia* will henceforth be given parenthetically in the text, by page in this edition.

geography." Utopus is not a Platonic contemplator of eternal forms but a creative visionary who enacts things so strange that "at first" he is "laughed at [for] his folly" but later strikes everyone with "wonder and terror" (42).

In this light, the famous dialogue on counsel in Book 1, often interpreted as a reflection on decorum, can alternatively be read as a meditation on cosmopoiesis. In this passage Morus describes "political action" as a "drama," the social context as a "stage," the various positions people assume as "role[s]" with "garb" and an informal script which an individual can either successfully execute or "pervert and ruin" (34-35). Thus, politics is an intersubjective, communal act of cosmopoiesis. Political history can take the narrative form of a comedy by Plautus or a tragedy by Seneca. Humans are perpetually involved in a rolling work of art that constitutes history.

As with a traditional work of art, this collective act of cosmopoiesis can assume endless iterations and modifications. Morus observes that a clownish "trivial" joke might be cracked amid a bloody, tyrannical political scene (35). Surprising and confounding mixtures of meanings can and do occur. Politics is thus conceptualized as thoroughly hermeneutic or consisting of contingent meanings.

In this way Book 1 is preparing readers for the more radical project of Book 2: inventing a world (Utopia) in which the entire theater of meanings is alien. From the European perspective, Utopia is an outlandish clash of genres (for example, are the golden chamber pots serious or farcical?). Utopia's scathing severity and weird whims disorient. Here it is important to see that More is clearly using satire and hyperbole to ironize a given utopian innovation—a point powerfully underscored by conservative readers of *Utopia* like C. S. Lewis, who calls it foremost a jesting, "jolly invention."[13] Of course, particular leaps of Utopian imagination More leaves for readers to puzzle over whether they are farcical, serious, or some combination of both. This paradoxical feature of utopian dreaming will require a fuller development of More's notion of ethical limits below. For now, the point is that the meaning of "utopia" as a word is very far from the normative idealization that is anachronistically assigned to it by contemporary politics. Hermeneutics is not foremost idealization; it is ontology. It is lived theater but also a dense puzzle of interpretation. The significance of any given theater action, occurrence, or sequence needs to be decoded. This Morean conception of social

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[13] Lewis, *English Literature*, 167.

ontology reaches aphoristic brilliance in William Shakespeare's famous claim in *As You Like It* that "all the world's a stage."[14]

Utopia as hermeneutic ontology implies that humans are always-already dwelling in worlds of imagined and performed meanings. Yesterday's dreams are today's social realities. And, in fact, today's social realities are sustained by a kind of collective dreaming. What appears as mere fantasy in Europe is the way alien people already live in the New World or in ancient times. The ontological assumption is that politics is conducted in the medium of imaginaries. This has the effect of universalizing utopian imagining and deepening historical consciousness. Utopia thus participates in what Charles Nauert identified as the "new historical consciousness" that allowed Renaissance humanists to perceive the "historical discontinuity" of epochs and "discrete cultures."[15]

The geographic isolation of Utopia as an island thus takes on a deeper philosophical significance as symbolic of the carving of human societies into separate cultures. Tellingly, Utopia is not a natural island but one created by human imagination and enactment—a "channel cut fifteen miles wide where the land joined the continent" (42). A cultural and historical rupture is being spatialized by More (a trope he also employs in the case of the Polylerites, Anchorians, and Macarians). This deep historicity is a departure from Plato. It is true, as we shall see below, that More retains the Platonic concern with the centrality of virtue to political life. However, where *The Republic* famously identifies a perennial cycle of regimes participating in eternal forms, More instead unleashes human creativity as historical world-making.[16] For More—unlike for Plato—political history is open-ended, contingent, subject to radical breaks and leaps of the imagination. To think in utopian terms is to see beyond fixed, naturalistic, essentialist (or later mechanistic) structures. It is to perceive politics as the realm of creative and historically performed hermeneutics—even if, as will become clear later, this is still embedded against an anthropology of human ethical limits.[17]

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[14] A number of scholars have established the centrality of theater to Renaissance thought, for example, Bouwsma, *Waning of the Renaissance*, 129–42. Arthur Noel Kincaid notes the "image of theater" pervades More's "whole view of life" and relates it to Shakespeare. See Kincaid, "The Dramatic Structure of Sir Thomas More's *History of King Richard III*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 12, no. 2 (1972): 227.

[15] Charles Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 19–21.

[16] A similar point might be made concerning Seneca, who—although he is an important source for More's image of the world as theater—nonetheless had an ahistorical sense for a fixed range of literary genres.

[17] More ought to be viewed as a key figure for the later notion of social imaginaries. See Charles

Utopia's ontological, creative potential is related to the view of humans articulated by Pico della Mirandola, whose biography the young More translated.[18] Pico's oration *On the Dignity of Man* envisions God as an artist—"the master-builder" and "the Artisan"—and humans as another creator inside creation.[19] As Pico put it, humans alone have an "indeterminate form" such that all creation is assigned a fixed nature, but God says to Adam: "[thou] art the molder and maker of thyself."[20] Tellingly, More has the citizens of Utopia echo Pico's conception of God as artist—the "author and maker of nature" who "like other artists created this beautiful mechanism of the world to be admired" (76). The political world as a work of human imagination makes possible the leap to unexpected new worlds and utopias. Yet More will synthesize this creative side of Pico's account of human agency, with the need nonetheless to recognize perennial human limits to certain insuperable realities concerning human character.

In short, utopia conceptualized as universal to human social ontology clarifies how politics is pervaded by contingent imaginaries of meaning—even if it is never wholly swallowed up by them alone. More's dialogue self-consciously constructs a world together with the reader's activated imagination. This alerts the attentive reader to a parallel creative act carried out heedlessly in the sphere of politics. Utopia thus marks a moment in the middle of the actual historical drama of politics in which the actors might become self-aware of their performance. Perhaps for the first time they recognize the stage and theater of their society for what it is: a shared imaginary, a utopia. What has been done collectively and unselfconsciously might be done intentionally and with full self-awareness. The naivete of fated, inescapable politics is gone.

2. Utopia as Critique

My interpretation of utopia as an ontological concept is reinforced by the general scholarly consensus that Renaissance humanism made a major breakthrough in terms of historical consciousness. Starting with Petrarch, humanists were some of the first Europeans to grasp the pastness of the past. As James McConica observes, the humanists followed Petrarch in "the

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Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

[18] Thomas More, *The Life of Pico Della Mirandola* (New York: Scepter, 2010).

[19] Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1965), 4.

[20] Ibid., 4–5.

consciousness of historical change" and the need to understand historical and social realities in "the context of their time" in order to "recover the very outlook of the original authors."[21]

Yet this ontological claim also has some normative or critical implications. Specifically, the contingency of the meanings enacted as a kind of political theater implies a criticism of all beliefs, practices, and social worlds that present themselves as inevitable, necessary, or fated. Utopia as a hermeneutic social ontology reveals that although societies often understand themselves as the only realistic option, there are in fact always other possible worlds. This critique from the contingency of meanings pervades More's *Utopia*. It might even be thought of as central to his entire notion of political criticism.

Consider, for example, how Hythloday's critique in Book 1 of various European practices (the enclosure movement, militaristic expansionism, the education of servants, criminal justice, and so on) is saturated with an awareness that these are far from the only, natural way of constructing society. The entire purpose of imagined alternative criminal justice regimes like those of the Polylerites is to impress upon the reader that England's way of punishing thieves is in no way natural or inescapable. To the contrary, the fatalism of England's practices and its supposed realism about crime are precisely what block its imagining better and more effective political alternatives (15–21, 22–24, 30, 34).

After describing the radically different punishment regime adopted by the Polylerites, Hythloday underscores this point by noting that he sees "no reason why this system could not be adopted in England" (24). Of course, this proposal is immediately attacked by the pedantic English lawyer who threatens that "such a system could never be established in England without putting the commonwealth in serious peril" (24). In this deft passage, More humorously suggests that one of the main responses to humanist, utopian dreams is threats and mockery from realists who repress the role of the political imagination. In stark contrast to the lawyer, contingency pervades *Utopia*'s entire portrayal of politics as a field of meanings that happen to be one way but might be another. This is why the dialogue entertains many possible alternative worlds. The frightened and defensive response by those at Cardinal Morton's table—which serves as a foil to Giles and Morus's humble

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21 James McConica, "Thomas More as Humanist," in Logan, *Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, 23. Also see Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*, 18–21; Skinner, *Modern Political Thought*, 1:86–87.

and generous receptivity—precisely conveys the extreme scandal of those unable to think in terms of utopian contingency.

Indeed, the notion of utopian contingency helps clarify how the early imaginative exercises in Book 1 set the pattern for the far more ambitious proposals of Utopia as a society. Only in Book 2, when full attention is turned to the practices and institutions of Utopia, does the reader finally encounter the ambitiousness of More's imaginings. Here readers learn that Utopia is not merely a piecemeal concept but embraces as its ultimate horizon an entire cultural world or epoch. It is concerned with what Fredric Jameson rightly dubs "totality."[22] Specifically, what appears as the only realistic option—for instance, the cosmic monarchical fatalism of Europe—is actually a sign of the boundedness of human politics within one imagined horizon. To the Utopians—as Hythloday frequently stresses—it is Europe and its politics that appear unreal, unsustainable, and unworkable. The permissibly real, too, is imagined.

In this way, More's *Utopia* stands as a tacit critique of political realism. Utopian imagination is more realistic than realism insofar as it grasps the contingency of meanings comprising human life. Utopia recovers the original imagined dimensions of all politics. What More recognized perhaps more deeply than any political thinker before him was that contingency applies to the whole culture. This is why today's political "realism" is always superseded by another epoch rendering it strange and unreal. This is an intentional effect of More's utopian thinking. For example, why are European cultures so fascinated by, even worshipful of, precious metals like gold? Or why do economies of money create scarcity? A careful reader of utopia emerges less oriented to his or her own social world as the inescapably real. Contingency creates a disorienting effect.

The purpose of losing one's political and social bearings is critical. As Baker-Smith aptly observes: More's utopian thinking inherits from Erasmus the notion that human customs contain a form of "structural sin" that invites readers to "resist the idols of society" and recognize instead that "society is founded on a conspiracy of shared delusions." The point of this, Baker-Smith continues, is to offer an image of society that is "free from the dead hand of custom" and "prompt acts of political imagination."[23] The contingency of

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[22] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, xii.

[23] Baker-Smith, "Reading *Utopia*," 145, 162.

human politics is often tied by More to sin and folly. It is not simply that humans could live a different way, it is that they very often ought to do so.

More's *Utopia* turns the table on all realisms, naturalisms, and fatalisms. Political realism does not uncover the final, ahistorical politics; it attempts to surreptitiously fix one cosmopoiesis for all times and places. Realism is thus engaged in repressed hermeneutic imagining (utopia in the ontological sense). It tries to fix one social imaginary as eternal. Consider, for example, the case of More's contemporary and founder of the most influential tradition of modern realism, Niccolò Machiavelli.

From the perspective of More's ontological conception of utopia Machiavelli does not escape the hermeneutics of imagination, he simply represses it. As Giuseppe Mazzotta points out, Machiavelli's realism is in fact an extended act of political performance and imagination. Among other things the reader of *The Prince* is invited to imagine: power as made visible in "spectacles and ceremonies" like "public executions"; humans as the most dangerous animal (both lion and fox); the prince as skilled in the "black magic of power" and illusions; the tragic metaphysical stand-off between virtù and Fortuna as a woman; and so on.[24] But the virtù-Fortuna dyad are meanings that can be enacted to greater or lesser extent and not simply awaiting discovery. Likewise, to resist Machiavellian realism is to refuse to imagine its world or perform its meanings. Machiavelli's *The Prince*, in other words, is still a form of utopian imagining in the ontological sense but missing the critical self-awareness. From More's perspective Machiavelli's famous denunciation of utopian fantasies as useless gets politics exactly backwards.

More's *Utopia* also contrasts with Machiavelli in being a part of the explicitly Christian Renaissance. Charles Trinkaus has argued with great erudition that the theological anthropology of the Christian Renaissance had origins in ancient patristic texts, which taught that each and every human participated in divinity. Trinkaus describes this as "possibly the most affirmative view of human nature in the history of thought."[25] The orienting anthropological question for More's utopian political theory is openly Christian: What is a dwelling place worthy of the *imago Dei*, or humans apprehended as divinity? We will see below that this radically central role for the imagination is nonetheless hemmed in by an anthropology of ethical limits—but it is important

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[24] Mazzotta, *Cosmopoiesis*, 30–31.

[25] Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, xiv.

to underscore this novel role for imagination in politics, which is part of More's deep originality.

The normative standards for utopian dreaming are explicitly Christian. Thus, one might heuristically organize the various customs, practices, and institutions of Utopian society around the triad of neo-Platonic transcendentals—the True, the Beautiful, and the Good—held by traditional Christianity to be characteristic of God and divinity. Since humans are created in the *imago Dei* and are able to divinize (*theosis*) through greater free participation in Christ's kingdom, their communities too might increasingly be patterned in a way that embodies the features of divinity.

Take first the traditional transcendental feature of the True. In a dramatic departure from Plato's *Republic*, More envisions education in Utopia as largely egalitarian and premised on the direct apprehension of truth and not indoctrination into noble or beautiful lies. Utopian arrangements are expressive of the value of truth and humanistic education available to all residents. As Hythloday notes, the Utopians leave open that "all citizens should be free to withdraw" from toil to "devote themselves to the freedom and culture of the mind" (53). This is not simply left at the level of individual initiative but is generously provisioned to "every child" in free humanistic education and lifelong open lectures (63).

Similarly, the relative freedom and pluralism of religion in Utopia also could be seen as reflecting the transcendental, divine characteristic of the True. There exist in Utopia various archaic religions as well as a dominant form of monotheistic worship of a "single divinity, unknown, eternal, infinite, inexplicable" (93). The contrast with the homogeneity of mythic belief in Plato's *Republic* is striking. Utopia includes a humanistic affirmation of pluralism and an awareness that theological matters remain fundamentally obscure to humans. Indeed, we learn that Utopia's founder, Utopus, believed it was "arrogant folly for anyone to enforce conformity with his own beliefs on everyone else by means of threats or violence" and so he "left the whole matter open, allowing each individual to choose what he would believe" (95). For utopians, violence and aggressive proselytizing distort true religion, as does glib dogmatizing. Truth in the pursuit of divine things involves free exploration and dissent.

The second transcendental feature of divinity—the Beautiful—is if anything more pronounced in Utopian arrangements. Unlike modern cities, Utopian urban centers are planned on a human scale with an emphasis on

walkability not merely internally but also between cities where "a person" can "go on foot from one to the other in a day" (43). There is an attempt to synthesize the urban and rural without negating either, as evident in the importance of planned gardens—one behind every house—and also the twelve-mile greenbelts encircling each city. Such commitment to beauty is evident even in small flourishes as the insistence that common meals are "elegant and sumptuous" and "dessert…never scanted" (56, 58). Table talk itself has an artful ebb and flow, supported by Utopian customs, that keeps it from becoming onerous. The point is not to fix any one Utopian practice as definitively beautiful. Rather, the exercise in utopian thought is to imagine what a truly beautiful dwelling space for beings participating in divinity would look like. Politics is a lavish hosting of the *imago Dei*. Therefore, as Hythloday pithily puts it, "no kind of pleasure is forbidden, provided harm does not come of it" (58).

A similar ethos is found in More's careful emphasis on a humanized economy—one in which skilled crafts and agriculture are essential. If humans share in divinity, their participation even in mundane exchanges should affirm this dignity. Utopia's abolishing of money is in this regard less a dogmatic commitment to Platonic communism than a playful recognition of the *imago Dei*. Would God be charged money for the necessaries to live? If not, perhaps neither should those made in God's image. Markets that meet all human needs are therefore accordingly imagined "without any sort of payment or compensation" (55). In Utopia "no one is poor…there are no beggars, and though no one owns anything, everyone is rich" (103). Likewise, the divinity of humans is affirmed in imagining the good of health administered in free "public hospitals" that are "not…packed closely and uncomfortably" and everything is done to prioritize the patients (56).

By the standards of his time More's vision of utopia is also highly democratic. This is evident in the elaborate system of representation at the household level as well as the universal legal education and simplicity of laws that eliminate the need for a profiteering class of legal experts who prolong and expand the realm of litigation. Instead, everyone in Utopia is given enough education to litigate on their own behalf. Similarly, the relationship Utopia has with other peoples is marked by an *imago Dei* ethos. War is seen as bestial, an ugly desecration of the human-divine image. Enormous energy is spent on avoiding war at all costs.

But perhaps the most vivid affirmation of humans as *imago Dei* comes in Utopia's abundant and even extravagant democratization of leisure. As the

God of traditional monotheism reaches his creative highpoint on the Sabbath or a sacred time of rest, so too Utopia is filled with holidays, festivals, and times for humans to achieve fulfillment in leisure which they view as their utmost happiness. The work day is affirmed as a positive feature of human creative powers while at the same time "no one has to be exhausted with endless toil from early morning to late at night like a beast of burden," a fate "worse than slavery" (49).

3. Anthropological Limits on the Utopian Project

One might draw the inference from my account so far that for More there are no limits on politics except for the borders of the imagination itself. Politics can become whatever we imagine it to be. But this would be a mistake. Part of the complex tension in More's thought is precisely the way that an unprecedently demanding, open-ended role for political imagination is located against the backdrop of an anthropology of human limits and frailty. As with his positive affirmation of the *imago Dei*, More inherited this anthropology of limits from the Christian patristics, especially Augustine.

As is well known, More gave public lectures as a young man on Augustine's *City of God*.[26] Scholars like Peter Iver Kaufman have made a sweeping case for More's political thought as predominantly a form of Augustinian pessimism.[27] Although Kaufman neglects the radicality of More's cosmopoetic ontology, he and other conservative interpreters of More are nonetheless correct to draw attention to the importance of human frailty and the extreme effort required to achieve excellence in the virtues. Such Augustinian themes are persistently voiced in More's late works—such as *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* and *The Sadness of Christ*—composed as he awaited execution. Although these writings are often presented as devotional, they are also practical ethical manuals on how to maintain virtue amid suffering, death, and the failure of the political community. A brief exploration of the role of human frailty and limits in More's writing is necessary to understand the complex tensions in his form of utopian thought.

More's *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* is an imagined exchange between a young man, Vincent, asking his elderly uncle, Anthony, for advice on how to strengthen virtue in the face of life's adversity and suffering. More locates the dialogue in sixteenth-century Hungary in the shadow of an

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[26] Erasmus, "From Erasmus to Ulrich von Hutten," in *Utopia*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2011), 149.

[27] Peter Iver Kaufman, *Incorrectly Political*.

impending foreign invasion by Turkish forces as well as tumult caused by the corruption of the political community. Anthony's main goal is to offer Vincent extended meditations on how to strengthen virtues like hope, courage, faith, and kindness even as personal and communal well-being falter and spin into dark decline.

Throughout the dialogue, Anthony emphasizes the difficulty for all human beings in facing their limits and mortality without falling into some vice. As he tells his nephew, "there is not a person on this earth…entirely free of dread" and thus without need of encouragement toward virtue and consolation in the face of human limits.[28] These include sins like "indifferent, deadly, dullness" or "sloth" as well "grouchy" and irritable anger when ill, persecuted, or otherwise in pain and fear.[29] Anthony is careful to warn his nephew that any moral or spiritual improvement is gained with the understanding that "none among us may think of ourselves as anything but a sinner."[30] In other words, virtue is the fruit of struggle against an inescapable background of human sliding towards vice—pride, fear, cruelty, spite, and myriad other faults.

For More, as for Augustine, human weakness is both a moral and physical given—what Anthony refers to as "the conflict of the flesh against the soul" that is "in all of us" as part of "old original sin."[31] To be human is to continually contend with a tendency towards viciousness as we experience the failure of our bodies, our personal projects, and our political societies. For this reason, as Anthony advises his nephew, no worldly good is capable of consoling us in the face of our ultimate limitedness. Instead, "those who in their sorrow seek worldly comfort" will eventually encounter adversity so great that "all the pleasures of this world will…drown…in the depths of tribulation."[32] Such worldly goods include those of politics. Thus, only God—who is infinite and eternally transcends the limits of the world—can provide true consolation.

In this manner More affirms the basic Augustinian distinction between the finite, passing goods worshiped by the city of man and those eternal goods worshiped by the true pilgrim church destined for the city of God.

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[28] Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (Princeton, NJ: Scepter, 1998), 22.

[29] Ibid., 27.

[30] Ibid., 40.

[31] Ibid., 33.

[32] Ibid., 28.

As Augustine famously argues, there exist only "two cities," "created by two loves…the earthly by love of self, extending even to contempt of God, and the heavenly by love of God extending to contempt of self."[33] Any utopian imagining—along with any utopian political project—must fall short because it is composed ultimately of finite and earthly goods, not eternal ones. This gives us the central paradox of More's utopian thought as both infinitely demanding and inescapably doomed.

This Augustinian backdrop should be enough to decisively distinguish More's utopianism from contemporary Marxist thinkers like Jameson who claim him as their own while omitting the anthropology of human folly. And yet More's Augustinian inheritance is evident in *Utopia* itself. The namesake character, Morus, voices this theme explicitly in the dialogue when he responds to Hythloday's advocacy for the abolition of private property at the end of Book 1. As a number of conservative scholars have noted, Morus's objections to this proposal are familiarly Aristotelian. Less frequently observed is that they also affirm an Augustinian anthropology in which virtue and vice are never fully resolved in their contest for the human heart. The utopian proposal is treated with skepticism because greed and the "hope of gain" is presented by Morus not only as ineliminable but as in a kind of internal war with other vices like indolence (39).

This objection parallels Augustine's account of human fallenness in *The City of God*. For Augustine, politics is inescapably sinful and unjust because the human soul is never fully in a just and virtuous condition. This is true even for those who have achieved the highest "degree of wisdom" who must nonetheless daily "wage perpetual war against the vices" and "not the vices of others" but "internal ones."[34] This "internal warfare" against the vices even among the most virtuous is directly mirrored by the political community, which Augustine tells us is "held captive by vices" and "divided against itself by lawsuits, wars and strife."[35] Morus draws this same Augustinian conclusion after considering the role that vices like greed and indolence will play even in the Utopian commonwealth. As he puts it, "continual bloodshed and turmoil" will disturb Utopian society surging from this internal condition of warfare and vice (39).

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[33] Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 632.

[34] Augustine, *City of God*, 921, 920.

[35] Ibid., 921, 638.

The Augustinian link between internal viciousness and political disorder is sounded again in the closing words of Hythloday who announces that the prime obstacle to establishing a Utopia-inspired commonwealth in Europe is pride as the "prime plague" that "twines itself around the hearts of men" and is "too deeply fixed in human nature to be easily plucked out" (106). Augustine, of course, argues that pride drives humans to puff themselves up and deny their origins in dust and nothingness, instead assuming a kind of divine permanence that rivals God. As Augustine puts it, "pride is the beginning of sin" and "occurs when a man is too well pleased with himself" and "falls away from the immutable good with which he ought rather to have been pleased than with himself."[36] Prideful organization around ephemeral, worldly goods is what ensures that "the earthly city will not be everlasting" but is "condemned to that punishment which is its end"—namely, to "no longer be a city" and return to nothingness.[37]

Indeed, when it comes to the societies of Europe, both Hythloday and Morus are unflagging Augustinians castigating the cities of man as little better than bands of robbers.[38] The difference only arises when Hythloday seems to improbably locate prideful vice outside of Utopia, while Morus sees it at work even inside the Utopian community (after all, it remains ineliminable from the human heart). Yet even in Augustine's terms there remains a partial truth in Hythloday's hopefulness about Utopia. After all, since Utopia resides in the imagination, it has a role to play in mediating between the fallen, earthly city and the heavenly city whose founder is God. In spite of all the skepticism he expresses, Morus also says he needs "time for thinking of these matters more deeply" and looking at them "in more detail" because the "Utopian community" contains "many features that in our own societies I would wish rather than expect to see" (107).

Once again paralleling Augustine, More allows an iconic earthly city to act as a paradoxically divine sign—orienting politics toward aspects of God's kingdom. The city of Rome offers Augustine and his readers the basic metaphor for God's community as a city. Heaven is a city, a political community, like Rome—but one that exceeds it in every aspect. So, Augustine says Rome (as the height of ancient politics) plays the role of sharpening "the sight of

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[36] Augustine, *City of God*, 608.

[37] Ibid., 638.

[38] Book 1 of *Utopia* has been seen by many scholars as an absolutely withering criticism of More's Europe. Frederic Seebohm, *The Oxford Reformers: John Colet, Erasmus, and Thomas More*, 3rd ed. (London: Longmans, Green, 1887), 348–54.

men" and giving "citizens of the eternal City during their pilgrimage here" the ability to "diligently and soberly contemplate such examples."[39]

In addition, for both Augustine and More the political community is the keeper of real goods. So More presents the Utopian commonwealth very much in the spirit of Augustine's claim that "it is not rightly said that the goods which [the earthly] city desires are not goods" for they are "without doubt gifts of God."[40] The role of true Christians is therefore to not merely passively or fatalistically remain indifferent to the earthly city but to maintain "the cooperation of men's wills in attaining those things which belong to the mortal nature of man," for "even that city is better when it possesses them than when it does not."[41]

The deep tension that human society is unceasingly pulled by a vision of heavenly community that it is unable to fully manifest is another version of the same paradoxical tension at the center of More's utopian thinking. No status quo of the earthly city is sufficient to the demands of the kingdom of God. As Augustine insists, "true justice…does not exist other than in that commonwealth whose Founder and Ruler is Christ."[42] Faithful humans must imagine something better, although they never expect to transcend anthropological limits even in their greatest political imaginings.

For More (like Augustine) even earthly cities play a positive role in human life, both in terms of real concrete goods that sustain human flourishing and peace, but also in terms of an iconic and imagined dimension that allows the faithful to better picture God's own way of building community. Of course, More radicalizes the role of imagination in a way that never occurred to Augustine. More's imaginative leap allows the human mind to self-consciously envision institutions and practices that so far evade actual political communities. In this way, Utopia as the icon of justice can become more powerful—spurring on epochal shifts in politics and alien forms of world making. At the same time, the utopian project is severely chastened. Morean utopians expect to fail if for no other reason than all human projects fail.

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[39] Augustine, *City of God*, 216.

[40] Ibid., 639.

[41] Ibid., 947, 639.

[42] Ibid., 80.

4. Humanists as Chastened Utopian Counselors

The synthesis of radical awareness of the contingency of the political world—and the high demands of a dwelling place worthy of the *imago Dei*—together with an Augustinian anthropology of fallenness sheds fresh light on More's commitment to humanistic authority in politics. More and his humanist circle were precisely a set of scholars capable of interpreting politics as a theater of meanings but also embodying a chastened and humbled effort at virtue. Rather than revolutionary or violent change, they sought prudent but also critical counsel to Europe's monarchs, enacting any changes gradually from the top down.

Consider first the way that utopia as an ontological and critical concept facilitates a significant shift in epistemic authority within politics. Indeed, More's dialogue offers a notion of political authority as distinctive as Machiavelli's virtù in *The Prince*. Only unlike Machiavelli, a Morean humanist recognizes the contingency of the sociopolitical world in such a way as to call into question all realisms surrounding a myth of power.

Of course, it is a commonplace that Renaissance humanism embodied a new kind of scholarly authority in Europe. But More's dialogue on counsel in Book 1 of *Utopia*—in which Peter Giles and Morus press Hythloday to put his humanistic erudition in the service of kings—goes much further by posing the problem of whether humanistic learning might reshape existing power in Europe. Giles makes clear that Hythloday's "learning" and "knowledge" qualify him to advise kings while Morus gushes: "you would be an extraordinary counsellor to any king in the world" (13-14). Such a shift in the concept of who ought to counsel power (a project in which More personally participated and catastrophically failed in the court of Henry VIII) both shores up and radically subverts the monarchism of the Middle Ages.

As is well known to scholars of the Renaissance, a central feature of humanism's bid at epistemic authority was the effort to advance "the value of the *studia humanitatis*" as a "cluster of five subjects," namely, grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy.[43] Although this is often presented as the view that humanism was a syllabus rather than a monolithic, unitary philosophy, it is also crucial to see how the Morean strain of humanism participated in a broader epistemic shift. This is part of a larger history in which humanists arose out of a new lettered class in Europe whose

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[43] Charles Nauert, "Humanism as Method: Roots of Conflict with the Scholastics," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 29, no. 2 (1998): 430. See also Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*, 8.

philological techniques undermined existing intellectual authorities in a truly astounding number of areas (including theology, law, medicine, history, and philosophy). The humanists' radical sense for the historicity of meanings challenged the dominant academic school of Scholasticism, whose manual collections of formal propositions drew from ancient authorities but often rested on historically naive or faulty interpretations. Thus, an awareness of the historicity of meanings was a crucial innovation of the humanists.[44]

Where Scholastics advanced ahistorical metaphysical systems often buttressing existing institutions, humanists offered a new hermeneutic authority over meanings. A paradigmatic case of this momentous move away from medieval intellectual authority was Erasmus's championing of the new historical techniques to correct the Latin Vulgate Bible through use of Greek.[45] Humanists uncovered the importance of historical context and authorial intentions in the recuperation of meaning. In this way, hermeneutics as an art of interpretation became central to humanistic authority.

But utopia as an ontological concept also greatly expanded the scope of humanistic authority far beyond scholarly domains. A Morean humanist was not merely a reviver of ancient texts; he was at the same time a skilled master of the art of interpreting and reading living political reality. Hythloday is an example of such humanistic authority—a polyglot, student of history, traveler of strange lands. All this contributes to his ability to interpret ongoing theaters of action at the micro level and entire cultural worlds at the macro level. This hermeneutic art includes a vast storehouse of counterfactual situations, analogous historical moments, and imagined scenarios from which to view the politics at hand. Knowledge of alien customs and institutions brings Europe's own way of doing things into critical focus.

For example, Hythloday observes the way England's execution of thieves entangles it in various avoidable quandaries of an inconsistent, overly harsh regime of punishment. He also has at his fingertips a number of alternative and more effective regimes, including those of ancient Rome and those derived from his "Persian travels" (especially the imagined Polylerites whose punishment for theft is forced labor) (22). In the same discussion he considers alternative customs and institutions that stymie corruptions plaguing Europe, such as militaristic expansionism (contrasted with the Anchorians) and the enrichment of political elites (compared to the Macarians). Unlike

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[44] Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*, 19.

[45] James McConica, "Thomas More as Humanist," 31–32.

the lawyer at Cardinal Morton's table—who plays the role of boorish antihumanist—Hythloday does not believe there is a single, knock-down, formal argument by which he might "demolish" and "reduce" his opponent's politics to "rubble" (21). Rather, true political judgment requires patient historical and cultural immersion and reflection.

Although the differences between Hythloday, Giles, and Morus have often been remarked upon, it remains true that all the interlocutors are in tacit agreement about the new humanistic authority. The urgency with which Giles and Morus exhort Hythloday to counsel power expresses their confidence in this kind of authority. The well-known clash over the *vita activa* versus the *vita contemplativa* (on which Morus and Hythloday sharply disagree) too often eclipses this profound agreement. As Hythloday frankly admits, much of his political wisdom is derived from immersion in something he "read of in other ages" or saw "in practice elsewhere" (14). This sentiment should be read as programmatic for the utopian authority of Morean humanists. For More, the ability to learn from alien peoples requires the virtue of humility and openness. A humanist is willing to be taught and corrected by both non-Christians and non-Europeans. As Morus earnestly says to Hythloday of his travels to the New World: "we want to know everything that we don't know yet" (40).

The dialogue participants—in their generous but also highly perceptive exploration of Utopia—model for the reader a humanistic mode of political learning resting on an encounter with alien cultures. Morean humanists are masters of making alien cultures appear coherent, while familiar cultures suddenly appear alien. This kind of political multilingualism requires a hermeneutic approach (as opposed to a Scholastic one) that artfully absorbs meanings in the areas of history, philosophy, literature, rhetoric, and law. Morean humanism's extreme lack of interest in and even hostility to formalistic knowledge and metaphysics is an affirmation of the value of this hermeneutic mode of grasping the world. This is the serious point behind More's little philosophical joke that a society such as Utopia is much happier than Europe without a single shred of Scholastic formal logic and metaphysics. As Hythloday reports, the Utopians "equal the ancients in almost all subjects" but "they have not discovered even one of those elaborate rules" that occupy "our modern logicians" (64). This also opens a further point of rupture between More and Plato for whom political authority was established through the perception of abstract, eternal forms.

In short, rather than foundational certainty or logical precision, humanist political knowledge rests on an art of interpretation or hermeneutics. This

is an ability to discern (often on the fly) what Morus pithily refers to as the "drama in hand" (35). Such ability is not limited to the humanistic syllabus but includes the recognition that politics is a form of cosmopoiesis or world making. Morean humanists thus expect to out-read their epistemic rivals when confronting social reality. They are expert interpreters of meaning who have a better chance of entering the stage of politics and grasping the unfolding drama—or at least this was the Morean gamble.

But equally, these humanists are not bright-eyed revolutionaries. Their political agenda is significantly chastened. Rather than take over society by force or by popular mobilization, they expect to play the role of circumspect and virtuous counselor to monarchs. Political change—insofar as it arrives for the better—comes from an epistemic and virtue elite that infiltrates power and patiently attempts to improve life from the top down.

In this regard, it is quite telling that *Utopia* opens with the failure of a high-powered diplomatic mission in which Morus has been sent by Henry VIII to Bruges to resolve a dispute over tariffs. The high affairs of state are put on hold and Morus makes a side jaunt to Antwerp to visit the Erasmian humanist Peter Giles. Here—after leaving the celebration of Mass—Morus is ready to listen to the strange tidings of the old traveler Raphael Hythloday (named after an archangel or messenger of God). Taking the sacrament and participating in the liturgy precedes Morus's patient listening to the tales and dreams of Utopia.

What should not be missed is the setting up of two rival communities to the failed politics of Europe: first, the humanist circles as a kind of friendship transcending political boundaries and, second, the liturgical and sacramental church. Both are involved in transcending the false fatalisms and realisms of existent political regimes and spurring imagination which in turn brings with it new worlds. This Augustinian theme of a contrast community working within the polity to change it is expressed by Hythloday in Book 1 where he notes: "If we dismiss as out of the question and absurd everything which the perverse customs of men have made to seem alien to us, we shall have to set aside most of the commandments of Christ," since "his teachings differ…radically from the common customs of mankind" (36). It is in this sense not at all surprising that the contrast communities of the Catholic monasteries provide More with inspiration for a number of Utopia's customs including the rotating

housing assigned by lottery and the "contempt for material ostentation" and "simple…garb" reminiscent of Franciscans and Carthusians.[46]

And yet all this influence of a heavenly contrast community occurs paradoxically with the equally strong Augustinian awareness of human imperfectibility and the distortion of even the greatest imaginings by human folly and sin (35). And so we have a circumspect form of elite authority that works within the old society to give birth to new possibilities. This implies conservative readings are correct to see More's Augustinian hesitation before revolutionary destruction of the current order. Pride must always be chastened—even pride in human imaginative and redemptive powers. But radical readings are right about the depth of More's critical thought and his infinitely demanding vision of a truly good society. So, the paradoxical situation for the positive side of More's utopian project is humanist counselors must imagine dwelling places worthy of the *imago Dei* from within wildly hostile, violent, and vicious existing communities that are little better than bands of robbers. In this game of cutthroat, imaginative play, there must be a light sense of human folly amid immense suffering and darkness. The politics of *Utopia* are always in the future. Utopian political theory is both humbled and concerned with the hopeful coming of a new world that only partially, if ever, arrives.

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[46] Fox, *Thomas More*, 53.