

Interpretation of *Utopia* as a Whole — Remarks

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I. Introduction

I would like to address four questions that have arisen in our discussion, or that have emerged from More's *Utopia* but have yet to be broached; there are three short points and one longer one.

II. Cities in Speech

In his *Politics*, Aristotle concludes his critiquing of the various forms of government by speaking of the relative ease of the task of thinking through such matters:

But it is pointless to spend time discussing and giving detailed accounts of such matters, for it is not hard to think them through: what is hard is to create them. To speak about them is a work of prayer, but whether they come about is a work of chance (*Politics* 1331b18-21).

We are led here, then, to think of the importance of rhetoric in the founding or preservation of the regime, for that rhetoric is going to be essential to the task of the founder. In More's case, we might think not only of Aristotle or Plato, then, but also of Cicero, for in Book 2 of his *De Re Publica* we have a corollary to Book 2 of *Utopia*. Both Scipio, the main speaker in Cicero's dialogue, and More's Raphael here claim to be describing actual political orders, not cities in speech or political orders that can be thought to come into being only as a result of prayer or chance.

III. Citizens and Regimes

Two key questions have arisen in our considerations of More's *Utopia* that are worth exploring further; first, the nature of the way of life of the citizenry, and secondly the character of the Utopian regime as a form, be it aristocratic, democratic, or some other type.

In the first place, and perhaps most importantly, Aristotle clearly separates the productive role in the city from the work of citizens, relying instead on slaves or

barbarians to perform such tasks. The purpose of dividing up such responsibilities, in Aristotle's consideration, is that the effort required for the adequate completion of the menial tasks does not allow for the leisure that is necessary for the cultivation of virtue, though the things produced are themselves necessary for the city.¹ There should thus be classes in the city which are reserved for citizens, and from which the productive classes are prohibited—thus we have the military, the well-off, the deliberative part and the priesthood. The result of distinguishing these classes, we discover, is also to distinguish between and among the citizens themselves.

Raphael's defense of the Utopian practices in regard to farming, given the fact that the Utopians almost all participate in production, would likely be that the burden for farming is broadly shared by the citizens, so that none are overwhelmed by the work. In addition, even when they are involved in production, he argues, they are so economical in their efforts that they never work more than six hours a day, leaving an adequate amount of time through the day to pursue the leisure that Aristotle suggests is necessary for the cultivation of virtue.² (This would include, in Raphael's account, the freedom to continue their education, attend lectures, etc.) Whether such an arrangement would satisfy Aristotle's strictures for the city would be a matter for fruitful discussion, especially when one considers that the Utopians all take up some other trade or craft to keep them occupied even when they are not farming.

Another component of Aristotle's analysis that we might reflect upon is the form of the regime itself as a whole, and how we might classify the Utopian schema. Aristotle's most famous account of the variety of regimes is in Book 3, chapter 7 of the *Politics*; there Aristotle delineates six forms, three correct ones and three corrupt (1279a22-1279b7). In the subsequent discussion of the forms, though, he engages in an extended consideration of the rightful claims to rule. Without canvassing all of the alternatives he entertains, we might consider two matters in particular, his concern with the rule of law and his final analysis of the best regime.

The desirability of the rule of law is recognized when one thinks of the inherent difficulties of human rulers, in that they typically do not possess the reasoned account of the universal, and that they must overcome the susceptibility to rule by passion. When law rules, on the other hand, you establish the primacy of passionless reason, and the law itself addresses the universal. The limitation of the rule of law, though, is that by its very nature it cannot be relative to actual circumstances, thus limiting the extent to which one can rule prudentially, and ruling according to written prescriptions is a foolish enterprise (1286a7-19). Still, if a human were to endeavor to rule in the absence of law, he would really need to be a legislator, meaning he would have to take the place of a legislature. In *Utopia*, we find a regime that is governed by almost no laws (37, 82), and yet, according to Raphael, is extremely well-governed, though not by one ruler. But, though there are reportedly few laws, there are numerous customs and regulations, and many instances where

¹Thus, as Mary Nichols points out, Aristotle seems to make a concession to the necessity of trade by allowing for a port in the city, though at a distance from its center (140-42). In Book 3, Aristotle has argued that the city needs property owners as well as justice and military virtue, for, he claims, A[w]ithout the former a city cannot exist; without the latter it cannot exist nobly@ (1283a21-22).

²See the discussion of Utopian practices on pages 50, 63 and following.

social pressures are brought to bear upon the citizens, leading them to act in a manner beneficial to the city.

The second significant point Aristotle makes in this context is found in his summary account of Book 3, in which he identifies the kingship or aristocracy as the best regime. This best regime is found, he tells us, where either some one man among all or a whole family or a multitude is surpassing in virtue, and where some are able to be ruled and others to rule, with a view to the most choiceworthy life (1288a33-36). Kingship and aristocracy are candidates for the best regime, but not polity, or the third of the correct regimes, in which the multitude govern for the common advantage (1279a36-38). The reason why polity is excluded from the options for the best regime is presumably what Aristotle says when he introduces it, that it is hard for a larger number to reach perfection in every virtue, which one would have to do to be the best. Typically, he suggests, the many are most likely going to be good at military virtue, and thus in polity those possessing arms will control (1279b1-3). The Utopians' response to this judgment would likely be that Aristotle dismisses too quickly the possibility of universal virtue, and that the way of life of Utopia justifies their claim (or Raphael's claim) to be a superior regime. While Aristotle may hold the view that the many will not be the virtuous, the Utopians would respond that their scheme of government and society promotes the life of the fullest virtue, and not just military virtue or commercial virtue C though it does those things as well.³

Aristotle does point out a problem for regimes that arises when someone of outstanding virtue appears in the city, for it would not be right to either expel him or rule over him, for that would be like ruling over Zeus; rather, he suggests, the people ought to obey him gladly, and make him perpetual king (1284b25-32). If we think of the arrangement in Utopia, one might imagine that the governorship of the city might be given to such a superior citizen, but that would make him only one of 54 governors in Utopia, and there is no sense that he would not be sharing rule with others.

One might think here of Abraham Lincoln's description of the superior ruler, who would not be content with a seat in Congress, a gubernatorial position, or the presidency:

Many great and good men sufficiently qualified for any task they should undertake, may ever be found, whose ambition would inspire to nothing beyond a seat in Congress, a gubernatorial or a presidential chair; *but such belong not to the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle*. What! think you these places would satisfy an Alexander, a Caesar, or a Napoleon?—Never! Towering genius disdains a beaten path. It seeks regions hitherto unexplored—It sees no distinction in adding story to story, upon the

³Here we are reminded of Pericles' claim in the Funeral Oration that the Athenians were the best at everything, including the one thing the Spartan formation aimed at C military virtue. The conclusion of his praise of Athenian military virtue indicates its superiority to Sparta: And yet if with habits not of labor but of ease, and courage not of art but of nature, we are still willing to encounter danger, we have the double advantage of not suffering hardships before we need to, and of facing them in the hour of need as fearlessly as those who are never free from them (Book Two, Section 39.4, *The Landmark Thucydides*, ed. Robert B. Strassler [New York: The Free Press, 1996], 113).

monuments of fame, erected to the memory of others. It denies that it is glory enough to serve under any chief. It scorns to tread in the footsteps of any predecessor, however illustrious. It thirsts and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen.⁴

We might legitimately wonder what Utopia might do with such a type; the beginning of an answer to that query might be in thinking about how Utopia honors great leaders. We are not told of any great historical figures, nor of monuments set up to celebrate their contributions to Utopian society.

IV. *Modern Political Science*

I had suggested earlier that one of the projects of More's *Utopia* seem to be the drive to rethink the nature of political science, or to remind his fellow humanists of the necessity of paying attention to the political. This would be especially important in thinking about how the pursuit of personal virtue is in fact connected to the structure of the political order.

One important modern development in this area is the argument forwarded by Publius, the author of the *Federalist Papers*, in response to the charge that republican government simply has not worked historically, that the desired combination of freedom and order is a chimera, and that liberty results inevitably in anarchy and thus must be sacrificed for the sake of stability. Publius at first suggests that there are historical examples that ameliorate the charge, but then admits that there is a good bit of truth to the complaint. Indeed, he suggests, we might be led to abandon the cause of republican government were it not for the fact that there have been ample improvements in the science of politics. As he puts it in *Federalist* 9:

If it had been found impracticable to have devised models of a more perfect structure, the enlightened friends to liberty would have been obliged to abandon the cause of that species of government as indefensible. The science of politics, however, like most other sciences, has received great improvement. The efficacy of various principles is now well understood, which were either not known at all, or imperfectly known to the ancients...[T]hese are wholly new discoveries, or have made their principal progress towards perfection in modern times.⁵

It is precisely these improvements in the science of politics that now make possible the success of republican government, Publius argues.⁶ Only reflection on the structure of a civil society grounded in principles of liberty and equality will provide the understanding necessary for the development of institutional arrangements necessary to secure that liberty and lay the groundwork for that equality.

⁴*Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1989), 34; emphasis in original.

⁵*The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter and Charles Kesler (New York: New American Library, 1999), 67.

⁶Publius does not here address which of the principles are old and which are new, or which are improvements over the ancient understanding.

V. The Ancient City and Modern Plurality

In conclusion, there is one additional important point that we might consider, and perhaps treat more fully in our discussions: as Aristotle suggests in Book 2 of the *Politics*, in the context of his criticism of the Republic, the city is a multitude of human beings who differ in kind, and so the city cannot be simply unified. The understanding of many interpreters, of course, is that the ancient city is unified, or at least far more unified than the modern state. But if the city is diverse in some sense, as Aristotle suggests, might we draw the conclusion that the city which is multiple is really the desired city, and thus the city (or state) in modern liberal democracy is to be preferred to the ancient city, in its acceptance and promotion of the multiplicity of ways of life and goods? Or, to put the same question in a different way, is the city meant to be diverse, and thus the city which is most diverse might be held to be most fully a city? Or, is the city which is a pastiche of those who differ really most a city, because it can more likely achieve the end of the city, self-sufficiency, and it can achieve its end precisely because it is variegated, and thus the combination of different qualities can be called upon to advance the good of the city?

Or, alternatively, is Aristotle's view something quite different from that found in this analysis? That is, is Aristotle suggesting that while the city is made up of diverse human qualities, to be a city it must not be one simply, but still be essentially unified in some way? The unification, it seems, would come in the form of a unified end, achieved through a common formation of the citizenry. Indeed, as Aristotle says in Book 2 of the *Politics*, a city, since it is a multitude must be made one and common through its education (1263b33-34).