

Political Designs: The Politics of Utopia: Classical Influences on More's *Utopia*

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I. Introduction

In his undated letter to Peter Giles which serves as a preface to his *Utopia* as a whole, Thomas More mentions two questions he has for Raphael Hythloday, the first being a rather obscure, seemingly insignificant issue about the exact length of the bridge over the Anyder river at the town of Amaurot.¹ More then notes that another

has cropped up—whether through my fault, or Raphael's, I'm not sure. For it didn't occur to me to ask, nor to him to say, in what part of the New World Utopia is to be found. I would give a sizeable sum of money to remedy this oversight, for I'm rather ashamed not to know where this island lies about which I've written so much (5).²

Yet, while More does not recall Raphael mentioning where Utopia was, Peter Giles seems to have a different view. In his letter to Jerome de Busleyden, Giles recalls part of the conversation with Raphael, and in particular the discussion of where precisely Utopia is:

As for More's difficulties about locating the island, Raphael did not try in any way to suppress the information, but he mentioned it only briefly and in passing, as if saving it for another occasion.³ And then an unlucky accident caused both of us to miss what

he said. For while Raphael was speaking of it, one of More's servants came in to whisper something in his ear, and though I was listening, for that very reason, more intently than ever, one of the company, who I suppose had caught cold on shipboard, coughed so loudly that some of Raphael's words escaped me. But I will never rest till I have full information on this point and can give you not just the general location of the island but its exact latitude—provided only our friend Hythloday is safe and sound (121).

Giles distinctly remembers the discussion of the topic, while More claims that Raphael simply did not mention it, and the discourses did not think to ask.

Why, though, does More provide us with the discordant accounts of the information provided on the whereabouts of Utopia, and why is he seeking confirmation about the size of this obscure bridge in Utopia? A variety of explanations might be given for More's approach, and this essay will focus on one possibility, to be fleshed out through the analysis of *Utopia*. More, it will be argued, is interested in commencing a dialogue with the classical and medieval tradition of political thought, addressing along the way developments in the tradition that call forth some substantive rethinking of principles or applications articulated by previous authors; one might think, especially, of the emergence of Christianity and new forms of continental thought emerging at the outset of the sixteenth century, as well as the reconsiderations occasioned by the discovery of the New World.

The most readily recognizable and authoritative guide to classical political teaching is, arguably, found in Aristotle's account of the political order in his *Politics*. That is not to say that Aristotle's *Politics* is the most read or most influential classical work on politics; surely we would have to accord that status to Plato's *Republic*. Yet, the *Republic's* attractiveness to the larger audience is in part a function of the character of the text, which is markedly different from the *Politics*. The *Republic*, it has rightly been noted, is well-suited for spirited discussion and late-night debate over double-espressos about a whole range of political and philosophical issues, including, not least, what the final teaching of Plato might be on those issues.⁴

In Aristotle, though, we have what appears on the surface to be a much less far-reaching presentation of the realistic and prudential analysis of political action that might be useful for actual rulers and potential rulers. Not for Aristotle is the talk of philosopher-kings, the community of women and children, the banishment of anyone over 10 years old, and the noble lie,⁵ all important features of the city in speech constructed in the *Republic*. What the *Politics* contains, instead, is a careful weighing of options that might be employed in the city as a means to establishing good order, to preserving and maintaining the city, and, indeed, for achieving excellence in the city. It is, in other words, an account of what we might call the science of politics.

But this Aristotelian science of politics is not to be confused with what we in the contemporary world call political science. Modern political science, as found in contemporary universities, is essentially calculus, governed by concerns about voter studies, attitudinal models, coefficients from regression equations; this account can

subsequently – such as, for instance, the existence of slaves in Utopia, where they came from and what work they perform.

⁴See, on this point, Augustine's critique of Socrates—and implicitly, Plato—in Book VIII of the *City of God*.

⁵Plato's *Republic* 473c-474c, 457c-458d, 540e-541b, and 414b-415d, respectively.

¹This question is brought up here perhaps to signal to the reader the fanciful nature of what is to come, when one reflects on the meaning of the names mentioned. The textual discussion of the bridge in Hythloday's account is found on 45.

²All references to the text of *Utopia* are to the Cambridge Revised Edition, edited by George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams; page numbers will appear parenthetically throughout the text (*More's Utopia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³It should be noted that Raphael does occasionally raise an issue that only gets fleshed out

be verified by a quick perusal of almost any mainstream political science journal. Rather, Aristotle's science of politics is a wisdom of politics, the result of steady reflection on the human condition and the nature of the human good. That is, the science of politics takes its bearings from the nature of man, from an understanding of the various elements of human character, and the variegated types of human character that are a result of both nature and convention.

The central questions of political philosophy for the ancients might legitimately be captured in two queries, the answers to which are necessarily intertwined, though not identical: what is the best way of life, and what is the best regime. The latter question, central to the concerns of Plato,⁶ Aristotle,⁷ and Cicero,⁸ among others, is perhaps most clearly and comprehensively dealt with by Aristotle in his analysis of the various regimes in his *Politics*. Most pointedly, in that text Aristotle both critiques the account of others in presenting the best regime (including that by Socrates in Plato's *Republic*), and presents his own version of the best regime in Books VII and VIII of the *Politics*.⁹

In *Utopia*, as many commentators have indicated, Thomas More is clearly imitating the pattern set out in these classical treatments of the regime.¹⁰ Whether we think only of his adoption of the dialogue form as his manner of presentation, of his use of classical names for titles of various people and places, of Utopia's own supposed connection with the ancient Greeks, Egyptians, or Romans, of Raphael's identification with Plato, his love of ancient books, or his knowledge of a wide variety of philosophic schools of thought, it is apparent that the author wishes the reader to be reminded of the great tradition of political regime-analysis. Yet, as we will see, the political characteristics of Utopia bear marks of sharp differences from that found in the writings of classical authors, most notably Aristotle.

We will approach the question of the connection between Utopian policy and ancient thought by closely examining three areas of public life in Utopia, property, war and foreign relations, and form of government, and compare the Utopian practices with those suggested by Aristotle in his analysis in both the *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*.

II. Forms of Regime and the "New Political Science" of Utopia

Raphael Hythloday's narrative account of the government and way of life of Utopia amounts to a monologue which could be understood as an elaborate commercial for Utopia, intended to attract visitors curious about this strange but fascinating project. We are first told about the layout and division of the country, 54 cities in all, but all perfectly identical. This, apparently, was the design of Utopus,

⁶See, for example, *Republic*, Books VIII-IX.

⁷See the *Politics*, Books III-VI.

⁸See *de re Publica*, Books I-II.

⁹For purposes of clarity, in this essay I will employ the traditional sequencing of the books in the *Politics*, though I will be citing the translation by Peter Simpson, who does not accept the traditional order; he places Books VII-VIII after Book III, so that what is normally Book IV becomes Book VI (*The Politics of Aristotle*, trans. Peter L. Phillips Simpson, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

¹⁰See, for example, George M. Logan, *The Meaning of More's Utopia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 131ff.

the conqueror who is referred to as the "city's founder" (46). The first office-holders we are told about are the three "old and experienced" citizens sent each year to Amaurot (the functional capital) by each city, and their function is to "consider affairs of common interest to the island" (43). This body is apparently not the same group later referred to as the senate, as the senate seems to be a local institution, consisting of the "tranibors"—or "head phylarchs"—and their invited "syphogrants" (48). On the other hand, in speaking of the preeminence of the city of Amaurot Raphael mentions that it is acknowledged as superior by the fact that "the other cities send representatives to the senate there" (45).

Over every thirty households (or 1200 people) across the countryside we are told a "phylarch" is "placed"; we later discover that they are elected by the household, but no mention is made of any voting requirements such as age (47). At the end of the introductory section we are told that at the time of the harvest the phylarchs in the country inform the "town magistrates" how many workers will be needed for the harvest; no more is said about these magistrates, though.

In addressing more particularly the officials in the cities of Utopia, Raphael mentions again the "phylarchs" (formerly called the "syphogrants"¹¹), who are over the thirty households, and then over every ten "syphogrants" is the "head phylarch" (formerly the "tranibor"). The two hundred "syphogrants" elect the governor¹² by secret ballot, and he holds office for life.¹³ The governor, then, is the governor of the city, not of Utopia as a whole; indeed, nothing is said of the existence of such a central ruler; the only hint we get of such a centralized authority is that on occasion some questions are brought before the "general council of the whole island" (48). Within each of the cities, though (with the population of each apparently approaching 100,000 people), the "tranibors" consult with the governor every other day, and constitute a senate, to which they invite two other "syphogrants" to attend with them.

In addition to the senate, there is also an assembly of "syphogrants" who consider all important matters in the city before making recommendations to the senate. Finally, there is a "general council of the whole island" to which questions can be brought, though we are not told anything more about it here; this seems to be the council we have been introduced to already, made up of the three "old and experienced" citizens who are sent once a year to Amaurot by each city. Later the council is said to be responsible for determining shortages and excesses in goods (59), and for receiving foreign ambassadors (61).

What we find in Utopia, then, is a national assembly, which meets annually in Amaurot, made up of representatives from each city, and presumably elected by secret ballot, as are all the officials (98). In each city there is a governor, chosen by the "syphogrants"; 20 "tranibors" who constitute the senate, and chosen from the class of scholars; and 200 "syphogrants" elected by the households. In addition, there are no more than 13 elected priests (with one chief priest), and finally, a class of scholars who are chosen by the "syphogrants" on the recommendation of the priests, a group from which is chosen ambassadors, priests, "tranibors," and the governor

¹¹As George M. Logan points out, though, Raphael goes on to use the older term (47, N. 22).

¹²The governor is known as the Ademus, formerly called the Barzanes (52).

¹³The governor has a life-tenure, "unless he is suspected of aiming at a tyranny" (48).

(52).¹⁴ Finally, we are told of the existence of “town magistrates” (44), but we are not told who they are or what complex function they might have.

Before turning to examine Aristotle’s account of the best city, though, we must also recognize a few other characteristics of the way of life of Utopia, for they have a formative relation to the analysis of the offices and structure of the regime. In Utopia, virtually everyone works the farms, alternating duties in rural areas, and everyone learns an additional trade or craft (49). There is a group of slaves in each city, composed of enslaved citizens, foreigners condemned to die in their own cities, and the destitute from other nations who voluntarily choose slavery in Utopia (77-78). Another important aspect of Utopian society, as will be illuminated through our examination of Aristotle, is that the citizens of Utopia fill the ranks of the military, though, as we shall see, they also call upon mercenaries to fight on their behalf.

In Books VII and VIII of the *Politics*, Aristotle provides us with an extended discussion of the principles and practices that would characterize the best regime (or, at least, one might say, a good regime). But since Aristotle has already criticized a variety of proposals for the “best regime” at the outset of Book II, we find fruitful evidence there for how we are to understand more fully his description. By examining his account of the particular character of the best city, we will be in a position to compare or contrast it with the situation in Utopia.

Aristotle begins his description of the city by asserting that the possibilities available to political founders and rulers are limited by various factors that go into the makeup of the city, most especially the “number of citizens and the territory” (1325b39-40). The proper character of the citizen body must be what is considered first, and not just any “chance multitude,” but a limit on the extent of the population, for “a great city is not the same thing as a populous city” (1326a23-24).

The population of the city ought not be too large, Aristotle says, as a city of too great size cannot be governed well, for law cannot be made properly in such a case. The best city comes into being when it is “large enough to be self-sufficient with a view to good life in political community” (1326b8-9). While a city can grow in size, there is a point at which it must cease expanding, for the sake of justice. The proper arrangement of law and justice in the city includes judging actions and distributing offices, but that can only be done when a proper assessment of the citizens’ character can be made, and that is impossible in a city too large. In addition, where there are “excessive numbers” foreigners can too easily blend with citizens, and unjustly get a “share in the regime” (1326b20).¹⁵

Aristotle’s second major consideration in this context is the territory of the best city, both in terms of quantity and quality. The territory should be large enough to be self-sufficient, providing a bounty that will allow the inhabitants to live “a leisured life with liberality and moderation combined” (1326b30-31).¹⁶ The territory should be easy to defend, possess good means of transporting goods, and have access to the

sea at a point somewhat remote from the city itself, the latter so as to improve trade possibilities and to allow for military engagements by naval power.¹⁷

Aristotle next turns to an extended analysis of the character of the citizenry, including the various classes and office of the citizens, and we will see that we have immediate grounds here for assessing the cities in Utopia in light of his considerations. The primary consideration for Aristotle is that there be a shared life of virtue among citizens, or “those engaged in politics” (1328a17)—that is, those who will share in rule in the city. But that commonality does not mean that there will be no significant differences between and among the inhabitants, for there are numerous things that the city must have in order to be self-sufficient and make leisure possible. At this point, then, Aristotle introduces the six “works” that must be found in the city: food, arts, arms, commodities, “care for the divine, which they call priesthood,” and judgment about interaction among the people (1328b6-14). In order to meet these requirements, the city must have farmers, artisans, soldiers, the “well-off,” priests, and judges (1328b18-21).

But when Aristotle considers how the city is going to provide such different classes, he makes it clear that the citizens are not to be in the first two classes, of farmers and artisans. The citizens will be warriors, but only when young, and then can become judges when older; thus, they can perform both functions, but at distinct stages. Finally, citizens will constitute the well-off and, in their old-age, the priesthood. In Aristotle’s best city, then, the work of the unleisured classes will be in production, but citizens must possess leisure, “both for the generation of virtue and for political activity” (1329a1).

The city that is nobly governed, Aristotle holds, must see to it that the “mechanical or commercial way of life” is not followed by its citizens, for such lives are “low-born and opposed to virtue” (1328b38-39), and thus do not allow for being “just simply” (1328b37). The citizens ought not be farmers, either, for that life makes the life of leisure impossible, and leisure is necessary for “the generation of virtue and for political activity” (1329a1). The warring body and the “part that deliberates” in the city are to be made up of citizens, and, indeed, “our regime must be handed over to both groups,” but the ranks of the two groups are not filled by the same citizens at one and the same time (1329a12-13). Power exists in the younger, and prudence in the older, and so dividing the two according to their character is the proper delineation -- those who now fight on behalf of the city know that their turn to rule will come later.¹⁸

Once we have recognized the necessity of distinguishing classes in this way, we will readily see the necessity of dividing up property so as to achieve the desired end. Thus, property must be in the hands of citizens, if they are to pursue the acquisition of virtue, while the farm labor is undertaken by “slaves or barbarians or serfs” (1329a33).¹⁹ Territory should be owned by the citizens, the “common” part of the

¹⁷Both trade and naval power should be limited, but may also be necessary for the survival of the city; see Nichols on the possession of a port and self-sufficiency (*Citizens and Statesmen*, 140-142).

¹⁸Simpson suggests that by such a division Aristotle avoids the problem of Carthage (1273b8ff.), since rule is spread around in the “whole mass of citizens,” and avoids the problem of Plato’s *Republic* (1264b6ff.), since he is not left with a permanent class of soldiers who will forever be excluded from ruling (*A Philosophical Commentary*, 222).

¹⁹Aristotle discusses the make-up of the slave class at 1330a25-32; the slaves should neither all be from the same race, nor spirited.

¹⁴I mention the class of scholars here because although they are not yet officials of Utopia they are an elected group; some scholars, but not all, will later be chosen for the various offices.

¹⁵On the question of population in the city for Aristotle, see Mary Nichols, *Citizens and Statesmen: A Study of Aristotle’s Politics* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1992; 137-139).

¹⁶We will discuss Aristotle’s concern about the groundwork for moral virtue in the city later, in connection with the question of property.

property being devoted to the gods and to providing for common messes, and the “private” should be partly in the city and partly near the border, so that there is a common interest in protecting the city from invasion (1330a9-18).²⁰

In sum, Aristotle’s description of the arrangement of the best city in this extended passage of the *Politics* is less detailed than the account Raphael gives us of Utopia, especially in terms of the structure and terms of the offices of the city. Aristotle does not talk here about the question of national versus local rule, he does not discuss the length of the tenure of office in the best city, nor does he consider here the various institutions and their function in the city.²¹ But Aristotle does discuss some principles of just rule that will allow us to begin an assessment of Utopia’s practices.

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 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.²² 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. Other factors, such as the possession of property and the conduct of war, will be dealt with successively.

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.²³ (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 III, 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 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 III, 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” — though it does those things as well.²⁴

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

²⁰More will be said about the appropriate ownership of property in Aristotle in the next section of the essay.

²¹Aristotle does speak at great length about the role and substance of education in the city, but we will have to leave the assessment of Utopia’s educational practices according to these criteria for another occasion.

²²Thus, 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 (p140-2). In Book III, Aristotle has argued that the city needs property owners as well as justice and military virtue, for, he claims, “[w]ithout the former a city cannot exist; without the latter it cannot exist nobly” (1283a21-22).

²³See the discussion of Utopian practices on 50, and 63ff.

²⁴Here 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 — 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 II, Section 39.4, *The Landmark Thucydides*, ed. Robert B. Strassler [New York: The Free Press, 1996], 113).

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.²⁵

III. *War and Foreign Policy*

Toward the end of his discussion of slavery in Utopia, Raphael addresses the foreign policy of the Utopians, and makes mention of the fact that they never enter into treaties with other nations (83).²⁶ Having been informed at some length of the wealth and power of Utopia, we might be led to think that there is no need for the Utopians to enter into such arrangements. But what Raphael tells us instead is that the Utopians think that men should be friends, and not have to rely on artificial bonds to unite them. Experience has taught men “in that new world” that governments cannot be trusted to abide by their word, and they will always look for some way of interpreting the language of the treaty so that it benefits them to the exclusion of the other signatories (84).²⁷ The result of this experience is that men have been led to think that justice is in fact something of an illusion, or that it is only a salutary teaching meant for plebeians, but not binding on kings or princes.

One important aspect of this argument is the attention Raphael gives to the Utopian’s supposed appreciation for friendship. The Utopians, we are told, would think it bad to rely on treaties even if they could count on them being adhered to, for treaties suggest natural distinctions between and among people, belying the Utopian presumption that no such natural differentiation exists. Raphael notes that the Utopians see that “treaties do not really promote friendship,” as both parties can manipulate the language in their favor. The connection between a common bond and the promotion of friendship is a central part of the classical concern with polity; there good laws are typically spoken of as the essential foundation for friendship. For example, in Plato’s “Seventh Letter,” he notes that his own unwillingness to

²⁵One might think here of 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 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.” *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1989), 34; emphasis in original.

²⁶Though later we are told that they keep truces “religiously,” such that they will not break them even if provoked (92).

²⁷Of course Utopia is not really a “new” world, except in the sense of the revelation of its existence by Raphael; we are told that it had cities “before there were even people here” (39), and that its historical records go back 1,760 years (46).

involve himself in politics in Athens was directly related to the defect of the regime, a defect most readily recognizable in the absence of good laws.²⁸ The defective nature of the laws, he tells us, made it impossible to find sufficient friends with whom one could engage in useful political action. Similarly, Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* devotes a considerable amount of attention to the importance of friendship in the life of virtue.

It would follow, after these things, to go through what concerns friendship, since it is a kind of virtue, or goes with virtue, and is also most necessary for life (1155a1-3).²⁹[...]And when people are friends there is no need of justice, but when they are just there is still need of friendship, and among things that are just, what inclines toward friendship seems to be most just of all. And friendship is not only necessary, but also beautiful, for we praise those who love their friends (1155a26-29).³⁰

After having commented on the absence of treaties in the foreign policy of the Utopians, Raphael turns in the next section of the text to a description of their military practices.³¹ Herein he considers the causes which compel the Utopians to go to war, their conduct in war, and their deployment of mercenary armies.

Raphael commences the formal discussion of military practices by noting that the Utopians “despise war” and would like to refrain from it altogether, and relates the conditions they put on going to war:

[T]hey enter a conflict only if they themselves have been consulted in advance, have approved the cause, and have demanded restitution, but in vain, and only if they are the ones who begin the war (85).

And yet Raphael gives us a catalog of justifications the Utopians use for going to war, and the list appears to be fairly expansive:

[T]hey go to war only for good reasons: to protect their own land, to drive invading armies from the territories of their friends, or to liberate an oppressed people, in the name of compassion and humanity, from tyranny and servitude. They war [he adds] not only to protect their friends from present danger, but sometimes to repay and avenge previous injuries (85).

The rather expansive justifications for war are not in fact new revelations from Raphael, for he had earlier remarked on the Utopian practice of planting colonies when the population grows too large for the cities. There he noted that the excessive Utopian population moves to the mainland, and inhabits “unoccupied and uncultivated land” that foreigners have left idle. Sometimes natives come and live

²⁸*The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 1574-6.

²⁹Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002), 143.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 144.

³¹Presumably the connection between the two issues is that when treaties do not work, when your relations with foreigners break down, you will have to be able to rely on your military—hence Utopia has thought about the matter and tended to it.

with them, and they share the same customs.³²

They think it is perfectly justifiable to make war on people who leave their land idle and waste yet forbid the use and possession of it to others who, by the law of nature, ought to be supported from it (54).

Raphael apparently finds this a rather unremarkable claim, as he passes over it without editorializing on its importance for understanding the foreign policy outlook of the Utopians, or commenting on the relation of such a principle to the accepted premises of international law.³³

The consideration of the criteria that the Utopians think must be met before they will embark on war ineluctably remind the reader of the principles of the “jus ad bellum” strain of the just war tradition,³⁴ though with some important differences in emphasis. One issue that would have to be addressed in this context is what Raphael means by saying that the Utopians only go to war “if they are the ones who begin the war” (85), for he offers no explanation of this practice. He might be referring here to wars of an offensive nature, fought in their own defense or in defense of allies; more likely, he means the Utopians will take the lead in fighting wars on behalf of allies, rather than entering a conflict someone else has already begun.

As far as the conduct of the war itself goes, Utopia relies on volunteers for its military, and allows—indeed, encourages—women to accompany their men on military expeditions, with the thought that if a man is surrounded by his relations he will fight more forcefully. This view is reinforced by the social pressure of reproaches that are brought to bear upon those who return home without their spouse (90).

There are some rather unusual practices the Utopians engage in during war, perhaps most especially their deployment of the mercenary “Zapoletes,” a “rude and fierce” people who are “born for battle” (88). The Zapoletes are hired out by Utopia because they are the best at what they do, though they are the “worst possible men” (89). And because the Zapoletes are so merciless and willing to put themselves in the greatest danger for pay, many end up getting killed in battle, but the Utopians have no remorse for that fact; indeed, Raphael tells us, the Utopians “think they would deserve very well of mankind if they could sweep from the face of the earth all the dregs of that vicious and disgusting race” (89).³⁵

There are additional peculiar aspects of the Utopian approach to war, including their praise for victories won by guile (wherein they celebrate the “manly and virile bravery” of the human intellect), and the promotion of assassination and bribery, the

³²Raphael also says that they share these things “much to the advantage of both,” but does not elaborate on what, for instance the Utopians might have to learn from these foreigners, who have never lived on this land.

³³In a textual note Logan points out the pedigree of the position, and observes that “[s]imilar arguments were applied to colonisation of the New World” (54n40).

³⁴For a helpful and clear summary account of the traditional understanding of just war principles, see the discussion in James Turner Johnson, *Morality and Contemporary Warfare* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 8-40.

³⁵As Logan points out in a note, “How the Utopians reconcile their employment of the Zapoletes with their aim of minimising bloodshed and plunder in war is unclear” (89n106).

fomenting of conspiracies among the enemy, and laying ambushes (86-91).³⁶ The animating principle behind these practices, as with the employment of the Zapoletes, seems to be to spare the lives of innocents, among both the Utopians and their foes. As Raphael describes it:

They pity the mass of the enemy’s soldiers almost as much as their own citizens, for they know common people do not go to war of their own accord, but are driven to it by the madness of princes (87).

The purported Utopian disdain for bloodshed is the motivation for avoiding the unnecessary deaths that would result from full-scale warfare, so (almost) any attempt to settle disputes through other means would have to be legitimately considered as a viable alternative.

It is precisely the avoidance of war that Raphael suggests is most notable about Utopian practices. The Utopians are remarkably well prepared to fight, and that often is enough to discourage foreign attacks.³⁷ In addition, they presumably have a regular corps of spies, as they seem to have advance knowledge of impending attacks (92). Finally, Raphael tells us, they are intensely aware of the practical dangers of relying on mercenary or auxiliary troops, and thus there is no “necessity so great” that they will allow auxiliaries on the island (92).³⁸

We have already seen above part of the Aristotelian teaching on warfare, especially as it concerns the makeup of the military, from which Aristotle excludes the citizens. That choice will, of course, require that the city depend on others to do the fighting for them, and thus seems to necessitate relying on those very groups that the Utopians are wary of, mercenaries and auxiliaries.

IV. Property Ownership and Utopia

The Utopian view of property is certainly one of the most notable principles found in our text, and is controversial even there. At the end of the day, as he finishes his account of Utopia, More allows Raphael the opportunity to retire to supper without raising his doubts about the relative virtues of the Utopians’ practices. More says that he thought many of the laws and customs “really absurd,” and these included

their methods of waging war, their religious practices, as well as other customs of theirs; 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 (106-07).

³⁶On the morality of setting ambushes in war, see St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II.Q.40, Article 3: “Whether it is lawful to lay ambushes in war?”

³⁷We are told that both men and women carry on vigorous military training” (85); later we are reminded of this attention to military training (103).

³⁸This concern for mercenaries or auxiliaries is one of the central teachings of Machiavelli in *The Prince*; see Chapters XII-XIV. On this point, see Leo Paul de Alvarez, *The Machiavelian Enterprise: A Commentary on “The Prince”* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999), 55-71.

Raphael's praise for the community of property, however, is very much the first principle of Utopian policy; as he states in Book 1, "wherever you have private property, and money is the measure of all things, it is hardly ever possible for a commonwealth to be just or prosperous" (37). In this context he praises Plato, "[w]isest of men," who "saw easily that the one and only path to the public welfare lies through equal allocation of goods" (37).³⁹ But that equality, Raphael acknowledges, "can never be achieved where property belongs to individuals" (38), and the life of superabundance among the Utopians is intrinsically linked for him to the rejection of the practices of countries in the "old world," where the many were destitute and only the few possess "the good things of life" (37).

In Book 2 Raphael first speaks of the communism of Utopia in the context of describing the character of cities, where people move in and out of their homes routinely, and exchange their houses by lot every ten years (46); so, he says, "there is nothing private anywhere." And though the Utopians only work six hours a day, they produce more than enough to satisfy the needs of the people, because virtually everyone works and they produce only "those commodities that nature really requires" (51). The fact that almost everyone is put to work in production is a matter of real consequence for Raphael, as he laments the fact that in other countries (his own included, we presume), so many people are left out of the labor pool -- women, for instance, and the "great lazy gang of priests and so-called religious," the rich, and "lusty beggars" (51). Because the Utopians all work, and they are well disciplined, they can easily produce "all the goods that human needs and convenience call for—yes, and human pleasure too, as long as it is true and natural pleasure" (51). In addition, the Utopians have severely limited needs, for their homes are well built and so require little maintenance, and their clothing is simple and sturdy (their work clothes last seven years, and people wear the same cloak for two years; p 52-53). Food is plentiful, which removes the temptation to steal, Raphael asserts, and no one is left in want.⁴⁰

In response to Raphael's initial assertions about private property in Book 1, More immediately calls into question the premise of Raphael's assertion about property, and provides something of the argument that he explicitly foregoes at the end of Book 2, when Raphael has finished his more elaborate narrative of Utopian practice. The basis of More's objections, as George Logan points out, is derived from Aristotle's *Politics*, in the passages in Book II critical of the principles at the heart of the founding of the city in Plato's *Republic*.⁴¹ We will now turn our attention to that critique.

In Book II of his *Politics*, Aristotle sets out to criticize the structure and intention of the regime described in the *Republic*. The exaggerated unity of the "city in speech" of the *Republic* is impossible and undesirable, Aristotle argues, for a city is not simply one but made of "human beings who differ in kind" (1261a23). After cataloguing the various defects of the community of women and children, Aristotle turns in Chapter

³⁹Earlier More had recognized Raphael's affinity for Plato, when he notes that "your friend Plato" taught the need for a philosopher-king (28).

⁴⁰In a later passage, somewhat curiously, we are told that at meals the elders, when they are so inclined, "give to their neighbors a share of those delicacies which are not plentiful enough to go around"; where these delicacies come from, what they are, or why they are not plentiful themselves we are not told (57).

⁴¹39n89.

5 to the problem of common property, a question which he suggests might be considered apart from the question of the community of women and children.⁴² If citizens are to do the toiling, he asserts, then the community of possessions will be the cause of great strife, for some will complain that others are taking more than their share but not contributing an equal amount of work. As Aristotle says, "it is a hard thing to live and share together in any human matter, but especially in matters of this sort" (1263a14-15), where in close quarters matters of justice and equality become paramount.⁴³ It would be much better, he suggests, if we could combine good character and good laws, providing the benefits of goods possessed both privately and in common:

For possessions must in a way be common but as a general rule private, because when the care of them is apportioned out, it will not be a cause of complaints but rather will lead to greater improvements, as each applies himself to his own, while, when it comes to use, virtue will ensure that, according to the proverb, "the things of friends are common" (1263a25-29).⁴⁴

There are some cities that point in this direction of the right perspective on property, where citizens possess private property but make some useful to friends and the rest is treated as common.

Aristotle adds an important note to this discussion, a note which at first seems innocuous, but turns out to be of primary importance. Regarding something as one's own is pleasurable, he notes, and there is nothing inherently defective about such love; it may deteriorate into self-love, which is "rightly blamed" (1263b2), but the rightly ordered love of self is legitimate, and natural. More importantly, for our purposes, Aristotle then says that doing favors for others "is a thing most pleasant, and it requires private property" (1263b6). If and when the city becomes too great a unity, and thus not really a city, in Aristotle's view the citizens are deprived of the possibility of engaging in two virtues, moderation in respect of women and liberality, "since the work of liberality exists in the way one uses one's possessions" (1263b12).

This latter concern is the one that invites our consideration, and to do justice to Aristotle's account it would be beneficial to refer to the argument of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in the context of his description of the various virtues. There Aristotle considers liberality (or generosity) and magnificence, both virtues having to do with spending for others, and especially for the common. The difficulty is that such spending requires the possession of property to spend, and without it one cannot

⁴²I mention this fact because while Utopia does have common property, it does not have a community of women and children.

⁴³That is why the example Aristotle employs here to show the jealousies that come to characterize human companionship is that of fellow travelers, who, he says, "split up over quarrels about small everyday matters" (1263a18-19).

⁴⁴On the question of friendship and virtue, see the opening of Book VIII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "And when people are friends there is no need of justice, but when they are just there is still need of friendship, and among things that are just, what inclines toward friendship seems to be most just of all" (1155a26-29). On the attachment to "one's own" as a problem for the communism of the family, see *Politics* 1262a1-13.

undertake the actions that are the substance of the virtue. As he puts it in describing magnificence,

one who spends money in small or moderate outlays in proportion to their worth, such as the one “often giving to a wandering beggar,” is not called magnificent, but only someone who does so on big things. ...Hence, a poor person could not be magnificent, since there is no property out of which such a person could spend appropriately. ...[while] magnificence is appropriate to those who have such means... (1122a26-29; 1122b27-32).

The very performance of acts of virtue, then, requires what might be called “equipment” in Aristotle’s view,⁴⁵ and thus the possession of property is essential to achieve a mastery of the life of virtue.⁴⁶ In the absence of such possessions, one is left incapable of embodying the fullness of moral virtue.

Aristotle makes one final comment in this passage from Book II of the *Politics* which bears strongly upon our considerations. Many are attracted to the vision of communism because they like the thought of harmonious living, thinking as they do that the cause of evil in society is the absence of common property. But, Aristotle contends, the existence of lawsuits, perjury and flattery are not byproducts of private property; rather, he says, these things come about through the “depravity” of men. We are misled on this point because there are so many more who possess property privately than do so in common, and so the former gets more attention. Also, we must think about the extent to which the community of property will be without blemish, for “justice requires one to say not only how many evils but also how many goods those who share together will be deprived of. Their life, in fact, seems altogether impossible” (1263b24-26). It is insufficient, then, even to point out the flaws in the policy of allowing ownership of private property, without recognizing that many good things would be abandoned.⁴⁷

In a subsequent passage in Book II of the *Politics*, in the course of treating Phaleas of Chalcedon, Aristotle points out that one seemingly positive effect of eliminating private ownership of property is that doing so can prevent faction. But, he acknowledges, that is not a matter of “great significance” (1267a40). What will occur as a result of abolishing ownership that might be significant, though, is that “the refined sort would get annoyed on the ground that equality is beneath their dignity,” and the danger this could cause is precisely “factional strife.” And, because “the wickedness of human beings is insatiable,” and the nature of human desire has no

limits, so the propertyless will always be seeking to improve their situation at the expense of others.⁴⁸ Rule in this environment thus consists “not so much of leveling possessions as of providing for the respectable to be by nature such that they do not want to get more and for the base that they cannot” (1267b6-8). But that cannot be accomplished, he seems to be suggesting, without allowing for private property.

The defects of abolishing private property in the city, then, in Aristotle’s view, include the fact that it denies the natural love of one’s own, it denies the opportunity for practicing the virtues of moderation and liberality, it does an injustice to the “refined sort” of men who are not going to be satisfied with equal distribution, and the attack on private property is fundamentally based on a misunderstanding of the root problem it is intended to address, which is human depravity.

This last consideration must loom large in any analysis of Raphael’s encomium to Utopian practice; the rationale for allowing or promoting private property, in Aristotle’s view, is that any other approach reflects a crimped, and misguided, vision of human nature.⁴⁹ It is in the nature of desire, Aristotle tells us, to “have no limit,” and, he notes, “satisfying desire is what the many live for” (1267b3-4).

V. Conclusion

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 (Aristotle’s *Politics* 1331b18-21).

Thomas More’s concern with what we might call the “science of politics” in *Utopia* compels us to think about later modern treatments of the question, especially as they might reflect on the experience of western liberal democracy. In one sense, we may say that More sets the stage for analyzing some of the important developments of modern political science, though he may not be the founder of that new science—that honor will have to go to his contemporary, Niccolò Machiavelli, for reasons we might explore further subsequently. But we do find in *Utopia* a serious confrontation with many of the issues which become central to the development of the new political science. We might preliminarily suggest that this occurs because More’s probing mind sees the trajectory of that development, and this leads him to foresee many of the concerns of the modern political order even before that order comes into full flower.

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

⁴⁵See, for example, the *Politics* VII.13: “Now it is manifest that everyone desires happiness and to live well, but some have the ability to attain it while others, because of some stroke of fortune or nature, do not (for noble living also requires equipment...)” (1331b39-41).

⁴⁶Peter Simpson notes that some have tried to argue that moderation concerning women and liberality can still be practiced under communism, though he finds the arguments unconvincing (*A Philosophical Commentary on the Politics of Aristotle* [Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998], 86-87, and note 27).

⁴⁷See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II.Q.91, Article 4 on the consequences of attempting to punish as criminal every human sin or failing: as Augustine says (*De Lib. Arb. [On Free Choice of the Will]* I, 5,6), human law cannot punish or forbid all evil deeds: “while aiming at doing away with all evils, it would do away with many good things, and would hinder the advance of the common good, which is necessary for human intercourse.”

⁴⁸So, Aristotle says, when politicians commence handing out favors to the people, the demand will always be made for more, “and so it goes on without limit” (1267b2-3).

⁴⁹In the Appendix to this essay, for comparative purposes, is included an extended analysis of St. Thomas Aquinas’ treatment of private property from the “Treatise on Law,” wherein he employs Aristotle’s principles to assess the wisdom of the Old Law’s prescriptions on the ownership of property.

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.⁵⁰ [...]these are wholly new discoveries, or have made their principal progress towards perfection in modern times.⁵¹

It is precisely these improvements in the science of politics that now make possible the success of republican government, Publius argues.⁵² 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.

In *Utopia*, it has been suggested, Thomas More is more concerned about institutional analysis than others of his period.⁵³ Humanists had especially focused on character, not the arrangement of power that is established in the city. More’s focus on the practices of the Utopians may very well lead, then, to greater attention to the moral implications of the law—that is, to the view that the law does in fact regulate morality. This can certainly be seen when we reflect on Raphael’s defense of Utopian practices, whether it be in regard to war, property, punishment, or a host of other matters. In addition, such a focus on the nature and importance of the political order calls the reader back to a tradition of thought in which institutional or regime analysis is a central concern. To the extent that More, or Raphael, compels us to attend to matters of political order, we are led to rethink or reconsider that older tradition, embodied to some extent in Plato’s *Republic*, but most noticeably and clearly in Aristotle’s *Politics*, Cicero’s *de re Publica*, and in the revival of Greek thought in the Renaissance. In Book II especially we are drawn to this consideration by Raphael’s discussion of the books of philosophy that he brought with him, and which were so quickly and thoroughly devoured by the Utopians; what is peculiar about this is that the Utopians were visited, we are told, by an earlier group of Romans and Egyptians, from whom they learned so much about the technological advances of the West. Yet, we later discover that they have had no exposure to western philosophy or literature (75). What, we might ask, explains this peculiar situation? Why would the Utopians not know about western philosophy when they have already received such visitors? Does this tell us something about More’s view of the contributions of Rome and Egypt to western civilization, opposed to, say, the Greek contribution? These questions could lead us to a reconsideration of More’s—or Raphael’s—larger political concerns.

⁵⁰*The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter and Charles Kesler (New York: New American Library, 1999), 67.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

⁵²Publius does not here address which of the principles are old and which are new, or which are improvements over the ancient understanding.

⁵³George M. Logan, *The Meaning of More “Utopia”* (Princeton UP, 1983).