

## Interpretation of *Utopia* as a Whole — Remarks

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In the first symposium on Book 1, I examined a few of the dialogical details of *Utopia* in order to shed light upon the extended tale of Book 2. Those details are admittedly but a few of the matters to be considered when trying to come to terms with *Utopia* as a whole. Thus, rather than attempt a synthetic reading of the whole work, in what follows I will try briefly to elaborate upon how attending to such dialogical details in *Utopia* helps us to see certain truths about human nature, statesmanship, and political discourse.

Elsewhere, I have noted at length the striking similarities between Hythlodæus' political tale of Utopia and Critias' political tale of primeval Athens and Atlantis in Plato's *Timæus*.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, both the tale of Critias and the tale of Hythlodæus have Plato's discussion of the ideal commonwealth (as well as his notion of the philosopher-king) as a background. And both seek to present that ideal commonwealth "alive" and "in motion" (*Timæus* 19b). In both cases, however, we find much more than just the tales. Within the larger dialogical context, we also find a lively dialectical exchange between interlocutors, an exchange that gives us clues about how to receive and assess the tales themselves.

Focusing our attention upon More's *Utopia*, we encounter two very different philosophies regarding the possibility and practice of political discourse. Hythlodæus, cynical and skeptical of offering the pearls of his wise counsel to kings, chooses instead to live as he pleases, unrestrained by duties of any kind. His unrestrained speech is a function of his detached way of life. Morus, fully immersed in various levels and types of human relationships, sees the service of kings as the duty of a truly noble and philosophical nature. His "indirect approach" is measured and circumscribed by what the political situation demands.

Even given these fundamental differences, Morus—a lawyer himself—does not assume the dismissive attitude of "the lawyer" in Book 1 toward Hythlodæus' political ideas. Rather, he (like Morton) hears Hythlodæus out, as any reader must who finishes Book 2 of *Utopia*. His attitude, though, is not one of mere toleration.

Instead, he actually takes pleasure in Hythlodæus' speech, encourages him heartily to go on, and leaves for the reader the completion of the task begun by him (and Morton) in Book 1, namely, to receive the account with patience, circumspection, and good will and then to test it by bringing it out of the realm of the imagination and into the real world of politics.

Again and again, we find that Hythlodæus has a keen grasp on the political problems in the real world. But again and again, his suggestions for reform gravitate toward extreme and potentially disastrous political solutions. As readers of *Utopia*, we are left with very practical questions: How would Hythlodæus' reforms really work out? What problems are they meant to solve? Would they really succeed? What new problems might arise, thereby making the political cure worse than the disease? What view of human nature do Hythlodæus' political solutions presuppose? Is this view sound? What kinds of problems can the statesman hope to solve? Are there any human problems beyond the reach of political solutions? Bound up in the answers to these questions are other, more fundamental questions: What is the nature of a human being? What is virtue? What is vice? What is happiness? What is freedom? When we follow the lead of Morus and Morton, such questions naturally present themselves as we try to assess the fruits of Hythlodæus' political imagination.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey S. Lehman, "Passing Strange, Yet Wholly True: On the Political Tales of Plato's Critias and More's Hythlodæus."