

## More vs. Raphael: Justice and the Learned Professions with Drs. Jeffrey S. Lehman and Stephen W. Smith

**Gerard Wegemer:** Jeff, you talked about the role of the characters in this drama. Why lawyers? Morus is a lawyer. In the story-within-the-story, you have a blunt lawyer talking to Morton, and Morton is the Lord Chancellor introduced as being learned in the law. Why lawyers?

**Jeffrey S. Lehman:** One of the central issues of *Utopia*, it seems to me, is to come to terms with the presence and absence of law and lawyers at different points in the work. As you've said, there are lawyers present in various ways in *Utopia*: the writer, who presents himself dramatically as one of the interlocutors, is a lawyer; there's also the blunt lawyer in Hythlodæus' encounter with Morton, who is himself learned in the law. Significantly, there are *no lawyers* in the account of Utopia as told by Hythlodæus in Book 2. As I see it, the conspicuous presence and absence of lawyers in *Utopia* leads us to reflect upon is the nature of law and just what the proper approach is for a lawyer. When we compare the character Morus with the lawyer from the episode with Cardinal Morton, we see lawyers speaking and acting very differently. And one of the things I've noticed in my studies of Plato, and the bit that I've done with More, is the way that each author portrays one character alongside another and invites the reader to compare their virtues and vices and so forth. So I think that that's one of things that is supposed to be brought to the fore by the *Utopia*; among other things, it is a reflection on the proper place of law and lawyers in a regime.

**Gabriel Bartlett:** My question is for Professor Lehman. I liked what you said about not adhering to the paint-by-number approach. I wasn't really convinced that you yourself didn't do that, which is to say, I think you give Hythlodæus short shrift. I've actually not read a great deal of scholarship that *doesn't* give Hythlodæus short shrift. Couldn't Hythlodæus, again, being a foil of More's, present himself or be presented by More in such a way as to not wish to serve kings, princes, etc.—engage in the political life—for idealistic reasons? You know, he's "too decent" to do so. On the other hand he says it would be a terrible waste of time, which also goes together with a certain view of the philosopher in Book VI of the *Republic*, which he alludes to in Book 1 of the *Utopia*; and this is the third, and I think most serious, point: he is

able to give sound political advice. He's able to give very *good* political advice. So, I wonder whether the presentation of himself as too decent, as recoiling, as becoming indignant—that may be part of the foil.

**Lehman:** You've made some excellent comments. It's a tricky sort of thing when you're talking about Hythlodæus. Part of what I was trying to draw out in the comments I made was how Hythlodæus is presented dialogically; I wanted to do justice to the way that More has written this work *as a dialogue*. What I meant to say—and if I didn't emphasize it enough, it's clearly an oversight on my part—is that there's a great deal of soundness in what Hythlodæus says. He makes good points, and he seems quite trenchant at times. But the other question—the one that is primarily in view in Book 1, as I see it—is whether he should involve himself politically or not. With all the good advice that Hythlodæus gives, Morus is continually trying to influence him to actually give this advice in a "real world" context. The comments that I've made pertain to the debate in Book 1 over whether one with political insight should serve as counselor to a king. The dialogue of Book 1 sets up a reading of the Utopian vision of Book 2. When someone reads Book 2, I think the author More wants us to ask, "Well, how *would* you bring this into the council of a king? How *would* you bring it into the 'real world' of politics?"

In particular, what I want to focus on is the conflict of character that you see going on among the interlocutors. One point that I emphasized was that Morton and Morus never give up on Hythlodæus—they're constantly engaging him in dialogue; they're constantly bringing him back to reality and asking him to continue on. Furthermore, it seems to me that anyone who finishes Book 2 has done the same thing—they've heard Hythlodæus out. And in doing so, they've heard a lot of very bright things, a lot of things that make a lot of sense; but now what do you do with them? That's where, as a reader, you have to enter in and get very actively involved in the dialogue yourself. You have to do as Steve has said: put the tankard aside and bring the discussion into the realm of politics.

**Fr. Joseph Koterski:** Thank you both; I enjoyed that very much. I'd like to ask you a question—to either or both of you—about irony, about how we recognize it. Particularly, it may be that irony is just one of those things that you can spot when it's there. But when you both made references to Plato, I was thinking that, with Plato, we can see some ironies, but often they are accompanied by hints. In the *Phaedo*, you get the misology/misanthropy hint, followed by a syllogism and four terms, and you're saying, "No, he's being ironical here." Or in the *Republic*, you get a definition that justice will involve certain particular features, and then by the fifth book, clearly we've got these outlandish waves coming at us. And even in what's expected of the philosopher king, you get two jobs directly contrary to an earlier principle. So for that kind of dialogue, so much in the background of More's *Utopia*, there's a clear statement that there's irony involved—or at least a pretty good hint—and then a very clear dialogical exposition of it. And yet we always pull up short, because even when we interpret the *Republic* dialogically, we love the Divided Line and the Cave and all that, and we don't tend to interpret them ironically; we tend to take it straightforwardly. My question, then, is, do you have a theory, a sense of how we know we're getting irony when we spot it? Do you know of any such hints in More, to let us know *when* we've got it and, on the other hand, when we

should just read it straightforwardly much as we read parts of the *Republic* straightforwardly?

**Stephen W. Smith:** That's a great question. I remember Molière said, "The providence of Nature attaches to the ridiculous as something that's visible," but that's probably not very helpful.

There must be something about which the author is not ironic. Without that, it would be very difficult to escape from total irony. That would be one thing I would look for. I'm thinking of a great ironic author like Jane Austen: Total irony does not reign because we detect things in the fiction about which she is not ironic. So, that might be one possible approach.

**Lehman:** In terms of a general principle, I can't say that I could articulate one at present. When I look at the *Utopia* or when I look at Plato, it's usually a constellation of factors related to a particular instance. So a good question to ask oneself is, "How do I see this particular statement in light of the larger whole?" In many cases determining whether a given instance is ironic or not, I think, is going to be a subject of debate. So typically we would just have to enter into a good-natured debate about whether it seems to be ironic or not.

**Wegemer:** That might be a helpful way of thinking of it—that irony is designed to produce a debate. So I see this; you see that; what's really there?

**Nathan Schlueter:** What do you make of Hythlodæus' early protestations that he cannot give advice to rulers, and then, at the end of Book 1, he declares that he actually is on a mission to give the world an image—a *true* image? There's a reversal, in fact, and he's assuming the role of a kind of "super-statesman." I wonder what you think of that, and I want to throw out a hypothesis of sorts. It's very tentative since this is the first night of the conference. There's a kind of "Aristotle vs. Plato" motif running through this dialogue between Morus and Hythlodæus, a concern with rational, deliberative speech in the political sphere as concerned with the practical application of ideas, and then something getting at metapolitical phenomena, which is ultimately a poetic enterprise, and somehow this book is showing both of those. There is a point at which political discourse relies fundamentally upon a kind of poetry—an image—and those images really are helpful in that first book. Even if they get more and more outlandish, they become opportunities to reexamine and shed light upon political practice that, without imagination, wouldn't be there. I know you've not suggested that Hythlodæus is just a fool or a foil for More to ridicule and to point out people that like to hear themselves talk. You think that there's something more than that. But I'd like to get your further thoughts on what that "more" is.

**Smith:** I think that that line that Jeff pointed, where Hythlodæus says, "you either have no image or you have a false image" at the end of Book 1, indicates Raphael's interest in either providing an image or supplanting and replacing images; so that's certainly a key concern of the book. I do have one other point: the shift in Raphael in Book 1. If we assume that this is a consistent narrative here, a dialogue, then what accounts for the change? I have been wondering whether or not Raphael's speech

isn't connected to lack of conscience? In Book 1, especially as the question about taking action—What should I do? Should I serve? Should I do this? Should I do that?—is essentially a question of conscience, which is going to become a key concern of More's later. So I wonder if the decision to discuss *Utopia* and to provide an image isn't somehow a response of a conscience that's been touched somehow in the dialogue. So I'd like to examine conscience and dialogue.

**Lehman:** I've written another essay which I'll try, in as much as it pertains, to summarize. Part of what got me interested in taking a dialogical look at the *Utopia* was Plato's *Timæus* and *Critias*, where we find the tale of Atlantis as told by Critias in two installments—one before *Timæus*' long cosmological treatise, and then one afterward. Critias begins there by saying, "Let me tell you a tale which, though passing strange, is yet wholly true." The argument that I make in the paper is that he is telling a story that is "passing strange," in a way, and that's "wholly true," in a way, but not in the straightforward sense of "I'm giving you detailed facts of primeval Athens and Atlantis." In the tale of Atlantis there's a lot of sorting through to be done. Likewise, you have a similar situation with Hythlodæus in his tale of *Utopia*. There's definitely truth there, and a great deal to talk about. As the reader enters into Book 2, it's as if More is trying to sharpen the reader's ability to make sound judgments on the different questions at issue in the dialogue. Another similarity that I find between Critias and Hythlodæus is that they both conveniently remove their regimes beyond the reach of empirical scrutiny. In Plato, it's said that the events related in the tale are 9,000 years old, at least according to one way of tabulating. In addition to this huge temporal distance, we are told that primeval Athens and Atlantis were destroyed by earthquake and tidal wave. So there's not a trace of these regimes remaining; you couldn't find a bit of it if you tried. There is an interesting parallel with *Utopia*: we move further and further away from anything that anyone could ever test, anything that anyone could ever look at. And so the degree to which he could give his political imagination free reign is great, because ultimately no one can challenge it. Do the people like living in *Utopia*? You bet they do. Everyone likes living in *Utopia*, for instance. How could you tell otherwise? And it's not to say that everything he says is wrong, because I don't think it is. It is to say, however, that it's *safe*—it exists outside of the realm of where anyone could really challenge it, *and that's what the reader is challenged to do*. Since they're not doing challenging it within the dialogue, the reader is led to say, "OK, let's do what More seems to be constantly concerned about, and what Morton also is constantly concerned about. Let's bring it back into the real world." In essence, Morton will first say to Hythlodæus, "Well, we would have to see if that would work *since it's never been tried*." Morton then adds, "I've thought of a way we can actually test these ideas within the existing system of justice." And so Morton makes a small attempt in that direction, and Morus follows suit by asking and trying to bring Hythlodæus back into the realm of real world politics.

**Schlueter:** I think it's a very thoughtful comparison, especially given the fact that they both claim, as opposed to the *Republic*, that the regimes they describe are real, instead of just being imaginary and theoretical.

**Lehman:** Dramatically speaking, the *Timæus* come right after the *Republic*. In the

opening lines of the *Timaeus*, Socrates says the interlocutors will now see “alive and in motion” the ideal regime discussed in theory in the previous day’s discourse. And that something similar is going on in *Utopia* with the unmistakable reference to the *Republic* in Book 1. So both *Utopia* and *Timaeus/Critias* have the discussion of the *Republic* as a backdrop; and both purport to bring a theoretical discussion of the ideal regime into the practical realm.

**Michael Foley:** Following on the topic of comparing *Utopia* with the Platonic dialogues: one of the dramatic elements that always interested me about *Utopia* is the role that food plays with the three interlocutors. More, for example, meets them after he comes out of morning Mass—he’s just been to a sacred banquet. And Book 1 ends with their all having lunch before we get the real skinny on *Utopia*. And that theme of feasting or not feasting seems to come up in Plato in some ways as well, whether a dialogue is *after* a banquet or the dialogue is *taking the place of* a banquet. Any thoughts on the role that these elements play in *Utopia*?

**Lehman:** I’ve made the same observation; but I don’t really know what to do with it. In the *Timaeus*, Socrates specifically asks the interlocutors for a feast of words in return for the feast that he has provided the day before. You’re right; it’s there in Plato’s dialogues in much the same way as it seems to be used by More in *Utopia*. I’m fascinated by these details, but I don’t quite know what to make of them yet.

**Smith:** I think in the *Utopia*, the pattern of eating does connect more with food, and the fact that he has to take care of Raphael twice—in the sense of actually feeding him lunch, and then, rather than disputing with him, taking to dinner at the end of Book 2—seems to align More with what we might call the ordinary or the every day, the physical: food. Certainly a work could be described (and I think More does in the second letter to Giles) as something that’s *eaten*, with honey on it—the old image. So perhaps there’s a connection there.

**Travis Curtright:** There was a collection of essays put out on the criticism of *Utopia* and that collection was reviewed negatively by *Sixteenth Century Journal*. The reason given was that the introduction never said why one ought to read Thomas More as a political philosopher. It was Cambridge’s *History of Great Political Philosophers*. It seems to me that that’s a good question, because both of you struck what was referred to as middle ground with regard to how to approach *Utopia*. We have not necessarily dialogical play for its own sake, but for the sake of acquiring some sense of truth within the fiction; not reading in a paint-by-number way, but yet realizing that there could be something at stake here by way of understanding the political imagination at work within the whole. So, for anyone on the panel, does *Utopia* give us an account of the nature of politics as a whole? Or is that not what it is about? And if it doesn’t provide an account of politics as a whole, then should we be looking at it as something different, something along the lines of the critics mentioned at the beginning of Professor Smith’s talk—the quote by Lewis has a sense of play and exuberance—more of an intelligent man’s hobby?

**Smith:** I’ve read Lewis’s position several times; and I’m struck by the fact that he’s an excellent judge, but I think he overstates the holiday spirits case. There are too

many references in the prefatory letters that say that the original audience or intended audience of this book is More’s fellow humanists, and I think that, insofar as the humanists were engaged in a kind of project, or if you will, a dream of sorts, this “book of airy nothing,” as Shakespeare would say, addressed to the man of new learning, would seem to me to have a profound political significance. That’s a first thought.

**Lehman:** I don’t have a definite view on your question, but what I’d say at this point is that it *is* a work of political philosophy because it addresses central questions of political philosophy. Of course it does not outline a definitive position on X, Y, or Z; but it presents key political issues, it brings them forward. The question of whether a philosopher should give counsel to kings strikes me as one of the foremost questions in political philosophy; but that’s not my particular area of expertise, so I should probably defer to others who will be speaking later this weekend.

**Smith:** It may also be that *Utopia* is proto-philosophical, that it’s clearing the way. I see that Raphael speaks of false images that are in the way—certainly images in the mind of a city or politics, or things like that, could be a problem. But equally problematic could be the self-image of the reader, or of the thinker, or the would-be councilor, or whatnot. And it seems to me that a fiction like this works to disrupt our “settled sense of the world,” as Shakespeare says in the *Winter’s Tale*. In that sense, perhaps it’s proto-philosophical. I mentioned the image of awakening, or stinging, or shocking—Socrates described himself as the gadfly or the electric fish. I wonder if the *Utopia* doesn’t have a playful sting to it, and again, is interested in false images—not only of things outside the self, but of the self-image as well.

**Wegemer:** Another way of presenting it is to say that *Utopia* sets itself up in conversation with the four most famous works of political philosophy: Plato’s *Republic* (*Utopia* dares to claim three times that it surpasses the *Republic*, an unsettling claim.), Aristotle’s *Politics*, Cicero’s work on political philosophy, and then Augustine’s. Through all the issues that are raised in this conversation, we are examining the fundamental problems of human existence.

**John Boyle:** A slightly different version of Travis’s question: Is there anything from Book 1 that a practical person has to learn from this? I’m not asking a political philosophy question; I’m asking, for the person who has practical, on-the-ground responsibility in the world, Is there anything that Book 1 has to teach this person other than, well, maybe listen to a few moonbats like Hythlodæus to try and sift out something? Is there more than that here?

**Lehman:** I think there is, in much the same way that there is more than the overtly political in the *Republic*. It has to do not only with order in the city, but with order in the soul. And the same way that these two concerns are present throughout the *Republic*, they’re also present in Book 1 of *Utopia* in terms of things like prudence and sound judgment in conversation.

**Smith:** I’ve been fascinated as a reader by the context of friendship in the book—this is a book written *among friends*, and both Giles and More try to draw

Hythlodæus into friendship, into a different kind of discourse. And it may be that that's quite significant. [John,] you asked how an ordinary, practical person could benefit from reading *Utopia*. Well, there's a suggestion that friendship is necessary for human flourishing, and it may be that we can't help but be dialectical. We need other souls. We need conversation. It may be that the book is something like an image of More talking to himself, or an image of thought and deliberating in such a way. But it's in the context of all those letters from his friends, so it's not simply that; it's a work of art addressed to other people in the real world, who are commenting, responding to it, arguing.

**Elizabeth McCutcheon:** To come back to your question, [Travis,] it seems to me that Book 1 attacks—or reopens—fundamental questions about justice, about the whole nature of law in England, and the analysis of thievery, and of crime and so on. One of the things that some political thinkers have been struck by—and this is the systemic argument that is given—is that you don't solve crime by putting someone in jail. And this is a practical question; you [John] were asking about practical questions—this is a question we see addressed everyday in the newspapers. The same thing with welfare, and that issue pops up all over the place in Book 1: there are the unworthy and the lazy ones just sitting around; and who do you help, and why, and under what circumstances? So I think there's an awful lot of very fantastic political analysis that goes beyond the usual kind of thing. But it does seem to me, along the same lines, that Morus' argument that we have to trim our speech for the audience, or that we can't drop the sails when the ship is about to sink—these are true. On the other hand, if everyone is compromising, how do you effect change? And that's where Raphael's vision comes in. But then, to have the vision you have to somehow be outside the system; but once you're outside of the system, how do you change it? This is another argument that we still go through in academia every day. You've sat on enough committees, right? I've sat on each side of this question. When I was young, I was much more sympathetic to Raphael's side; but then, as an administrator, you know you have to keep going no matter what. So there it is. It seems to me that More has made a very incisive representation of the complexities of the political situation, which does have to go in two different directions, and the complication is how you keep all that in your head.