

Utopia and the Common Good

with Drs. John Boyle and Richard Dougherty

Richard Dougherty: Raphael says that, when the questions of divorce are brought forward, the senators and their wives get together to decide upon this, the presumption then being, I guess, that the senators are all male. But I don't know if anything is said about the representatives being male or female. So what role are the women playing? What does that tell us about the household? How is that related, then, to production, which is essential leisure? I think those are all really important questions.

Judge Jennie Latta: Well, it does say that they take all their meals in common, though, so you wonder what family life there really is. There's a nursery off the dining hall, so it does look a lot more like the *Republic*, where the children are being raised in community. I'm not sure that he cordons it off, because if everybody's working and taking meals in common, what part of the day is left over for family life? Which is interesting for More, because he values family life.

Mary Gottschalk: Well, I thought that was just the syphogrants. Isn't it just the syphogrants eating in common?

John Boyle: No, everybody does. You don't *have* to, though. Utopians have their own version of religious in addition to the larger religious frame. But again, it's one of those areas where at least what is the ideal of the religious seems oddly absent here, certainly for the general Utopians. The point is that the giving up of these goods according to the evangelical counsels of perfection - poverty, chastity, and obedience - is precisely ordered to a higher good. So then the question becomes, what's the higher good this is ordered to? And the only hint you get of that is specifically with their own form of religious; but even there, there are some odd quirks in the structure of their religious life, and perhaps we can talk further about that too. But I did want to get back to Nathan, because I think you raise very good points which push to a deeper question. So I'll lay some of my cards on the table, although I won't go out on a limb and say what I think Book 2 is really about. What I'll say is that (Dougherty: "We're all friends.") - we're all friends, but we may not be when it's over (laughter) - what interests me about Book 2 is not the politics of Utopia, it's the character of Hythlodæus, who's telling us about Utopia. That seems to me particularly interesting. You raised the question, I think rightly, Nathan, that we have these institutions that are intended to promote virtue, and it's wonderful:

we have pleasure understood as contemplation; we have the virtuous exercise of the human mind. And yet isn't it curious when Hythlodæus talks about the taxonomy of pleasure in Utopia, he says there are the pleasures of the mind and the pleasures of the body, and we get a full page plus of the intricacies of the pleasures of the body, and all that remarkable stuff about the elimination of bodily excesses, but *no* taxonomy of the life of the mind. *None*. Now, this is not ignorance on the part of Thomas More, right? Thomas More understands and has a rich classical tradition on the division of the sciences, and the nature of the contemplation of the truth—absolutely missing in Utopia. When Utopians talk about pleasure, they make a bow to the pleasure of the mind, but what they've really been thinking about—at least as Hythlodæus presents it, and I think it's about Hythlodæus—are the pleasures of the body. He brings these wonderful books, and what do we learn about the Utopians? The Utopians are giddy about printing! So what they do is print these books over and over and over again. We never encounter Utopians *writing* books. Where are the Utopian philosophers that think about this stuff, that lead it forward—this rich, Utopian life of the mind? Where is it? There are artisans who reinvent a printing press. Having received these books in Greek, they've mastered Greek—they're very good at languages, but they never write in Greek, apparently. All they do is print! They're a little island Xerox company, that just prints out more and more copies of texts. Now again, whether that's about Utopians, or about Raphael's characterization of Utopians, for me, those are the interesting quirks that More puts in there. It seems that he must have gone *out of his way* to make the Utopians *less* philosophical, *less* concerned with the life of the mind. For me, that's a sort of puzzle, and frankly, that's why I need the sort of happy cautions of "don't get overly negative," because there are the goods, but they're puzzles.

Dougherty: I was just going to say something about the matter that you've addressed. Now, in Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus*, he ends by talking about Sparta in general, and he says that what Lycurgus did in Sparta in deed is what the great writers of politics, including Plato, talk about in writing, and that Sparta is the example of a complete philosophic city. Well, in what way? You've just asked the question about philosophy in Utopia—what kind of philosophers are there in Sparta? I always ask my students, "In the core, are you reading Spartan philosophers?" That isn't Plutarch's point; there's something else that's philosophical about Sparta. But there really is no discussion in Sparta of an account of scholars and this sort of thing, so when you think about Utopia and you do have that, then you have to ask what it is that they're actually doing. It's not a complete philosophic city in the way that Sparta is a complete philosophic city, because you do have this claim of the life of the mind, but then when you look at the details of it and you ask "what are they reading? What are they writing? What are they doing?" It's unclear.

Fr. Joseph Koterski: I wonder if I could get the panel to reflect a little bit on what kind of a theory of the common good you think Thomas More the author has. And Dr. Boyle, you were urging us, I think, that the religion of the *Utopia* should focus us on God; but somehow there's a little emptiness in the way in which they do it, especially compared to what Christians claim about what true divine worship is as a common good.

Or Professor Dougherty, when you were reflecting on public order, and the good that that is, I think you were also adverting to, and many of the audience questions have picked up on, some of the peculiarities of the order. I was hearing in the background the difficulties about conceiving of the common good as merely the

sum of these individual physical goods that we all have—it's not just that. I was hearing in the background a sense that it can't be just a libertarian vision of the common good, in which everybody has equal opportunity to succeed. I think I heard you in the background urging that it can't be an egalitarian vision of the common good, as if everybody needs to be made equal simply in terms of what they have.

And Dr. Wegemer, in your book on statesmanship that I so like, you so strongly urge that the second book is just a denial of all the Augustinian non-negotiables of Christian politics and that More would like us to see that this *can't* be it, but that it must be something else.

So I guess my question is not just what is the list of the common goods, but what kind of common good theory did he have? What's the basis on which someone who wants to be working in the tradition of More, either in wisdom, in learning, or in politics, would construct a common good?

Gerard Wegemer: Well, since you asked me, I'll... (**Koterski:** I *do* ask you, and I'd love to hear it.) It seems to me that one must begin with asking the question, "What kind of regime is it?" Is it more like a monarchy? Or is it more like a republic? Or is it more like a democracy? All three elements are represented in *Utopia* and from the detail we're given, it's hard to determine what it is. That seems to be deliberate, so we consider all the alternatives, and we ask, "How *would* the common good be served?" It seems to me that that's how the full question is posed by him. And then there is the relationship of the political institutions to the economic institutions, and then to the religious institutions. Is *Utopia* simply a civil religion that serves the State? Is there any independence whatsoever? Of course that's the fundamental problem raised in *The City of God*.

Boyle: There are at least two questions in there. First, "What does he take to be the common good?" And second, "How would we go about ferreting it out?" It's not clear to me how we would ferret it out from *Utopia*, in part because I'm inclined to agree with Dr. Wegemer that *Utopia's* a lot of negatives. Admittedly, there are some good particulars; but fundamentally, he's not standing in any one place that allows you to say, "Ah-ha, here it is!" It's watching this play out in motion, as Jeff Lehman said yesterday; but a lot of that's in the negative, so I'm not sure that one could construct a theory of the common good from *Utopia*. One might—I just don't see it. What does More take to be the common good? I suppose I could say the safe thing, which is, "I'm a medievalist; I'm a Thomas More dilettante; I have no idea," and get myself off the hook. Instead of saying that, maybe I'll try a slightly different tack, which is as follows: It's not clear to me, but I think the Augustinian critique looms large here. The problem of the Roman Empire is its disorder, and the only authentic ordering to a good comes with charity. We can put it in Thomistic terms and say, "Even natural virtues are only true virtues if they're informed by charity." I wonder to what extent that lurks in More here. Not that it's possible to achieve it in this life, but that fundamentally, if that first and final good of God and the virtue of charity towards God—if that's not in place, then all the other efforts are going to be, at best, incomplete. So, for example, and I'll end on this: one of the questions I asked myself recently when I was reading Augustine's *The City of God* was, "Is there for Augustine *anything* good about the Romans?" I think it's safe to say there is the *pietas*. Augustine seems to think that there are good things. He's read his Sallust, and he likes our friend Sallust. Augustine and More shared that enthusiasm, in part because of that sense of Roman virtue. It's there in Augustine, but always with the critique that it's somehow incomplete. So while I guess I'd love to know what the common

good is for More, I think the one thing I would say is that it's going to be very difficult to understand it apart from charity.

Dougherty: I would embrace that position. But I would say that the larger question of the common good is absolutely central to our considerations. I heartily recommend that everyone think about it for this reason, which Fr. Koterski brought out very well. The dominant contemporary view is that the common good is the accumulation of individual goods. There is nothing that transcends the individual. "Be all you can be, and I'll be all I can be." That is the criterion that we're going to use for establishing whether or not the common good can be met. To put it differently, the dominant view is that common good is found in the establishment of the conditions within which we can all achieve our individual goods. That is neither the ancient nor the medieval view of the common good. And so the common good is something common we share. It's an activity of the city, or an activity of the community. And that would mean a rejection of a kind of libertarian view, of an egalitarian view, of a communistic view: "We're all the same, and therefore we all play the same role in society." Also, one way of beginning to answer the question from More's point of view is to consider the passages in Book 2 where Raphael is describing Utopian society, and then he steps back. It happens every once in a while. He'll step back and there'll be a paragraph or two about the problems in modern European society. And that's where one has to wonder: is that Raphael or is that More? Is Raphael's analysis of the failures of contemporary society really More talking about it? Well then, suppose it *is* More. Then one would have to ask the question of whether the solution that Raphael provides through the Utopian practice is the solution that More would provide. And that is a much more tenuous claim. So, if you look at those passages again where Raphael describes Utopian practice, it's all sort of "move along, here's this and here's that"; but where he really gets animated is when he wants to compare *Utopia* to the failures of modern society, and that's clearly what he's interested in. If he is so interested in *Utopia*, why doesn't he stay?

Wegemer: Before we leave this question, Professor Logan, would you mind giving us your answer to Father Joe's question. How does one discover the common good in *Utopia* from More's point of view?

George Logan: I would say that the common good of *Utopia* is the accumulation of individual goods. And in the matter about what the Utopians read and write, we have a whole lot about that aspect of their thought. In fact, we have all too much about their moral philosophy. Now, we don't know the details about that; but of course, we know what the subject of their moral philosophy is. As Hythloday says at the beginning, they have the same debates about moral philosophy that we in Europe do, even though they have no connection to arrive at the same views as European philosophy. And of course they would say what the individual good is, and it's as if that's all they need to talk about, because it evidently goes without saying that the best commonwealth is the one that maximizes every individual's ability to find happiness. So all you really need to determine is what the individual good is, and the communal good—the best commonwealth—is structured so as to maximize the sum of the individual goods.

Elizabeth McCutcheon: I wanted to follow up on this notion, this important point, that always in the back of Book 2 are the failings of Western society. In that sense, a lot of Book 2 is peculiarly negative because it's negating negations; you get

into this very odd balancing act. But I think related to that is the question that came from back there: that is, can we see something positive in Book 2, or is it all in a sense negative? And it seems to me that one of the questions that both Raphael and More are struggling with, which is why we need both Book 1 and Book 2, is: Can I be a person of leisure if my fellow citizens or residents are slaving away so that I can sit on a throne while everyone around me is starving or working endless hours, has no retirement, has no medical care, has no food on the table, or is gathering scraps? We're so used to living in a modern Western society, that I think this whole question of the gap between rich and poor, or the gap between those who have and those who haven't, we don't always see it. But if you travel to a developing country, such as India or the Philippines, your first response is often, "I don't know how anyone could live there; there's so much poverty." And then, after a while, you somehow adjust to the notion. In Mumbai, half of fourteen million people don't have houses. They're sleeping in camps or parks; they're washing at a common faucet by the train station; they don't have education. The poor children who are selling bottles of water in the train station don't have any education. And this is the kind of thing that I think More was observing, yet it's half hidden behind all these other things. "Can I enjoy *my* dinner if someone else is starving?" seems to me a real question he is asking, a question that Raphael comes back to in the peroration at the end. In that sense he's also interested in the common good, and he even puns on that at the end, where he says, "This is the only *res publica* because this is the only *publica* where the *res* is common." You can't deprive people of material needs. And of course that's where we get into the other problem, because to make sure that their material needs are satisfied, we end up limiting in so many other ways. We're still struggling with that question too, but these concerns that are in Book 1 are built into the structure of Book 2.

Boyle: It makes perfect sense that that's true for More, and perhaps even theoretically for Hythlodæus. The curious thing about Hythlodæus—and I'm not sure what to make of it—is his response when Peter Giles says, "It would be good for you to advise princes, and it would be good for your family." Hythlodæus replies, "I don't owe my family anything. I divvied up my inheritance long ago before I left, and so I don't owe them anything. That's more than most people would do." It seems a fairly paltry sense of family obligation here: "I took my inheritance and I already gave it away. I don't owe them anything, so I'm going to go travel some more." (**Dougherty:** I'm spending my grandchildren's inheritance.) Again, there's something quirky about Hythlodæus here. He seems to have a remarkable mind to see the problem, but I guess I don't see Hythlodæus' heart to be truly troubled by it, personally. More will feed neighbors in time of famine; but it's hard to imagine Hythlodæus doing that.

Clarence Miller: One of the questions asked was, "How do you get there?" How do you get to the Utopian attitude toward the common good? One of the great difficulties is the ahistorical character of the book. We have seventeen hundred years about which we know nothing. We do *not know* how the Utopians arrived at their institutions. It's a kind of anomaly because you can't live correctly unless people are trained by the institutions, and we have no idea how they got the institutions in the first place.

Logan: Well, I don't think that's entirely true, Clarence. We know quite a number of important things about how they got their institutions—they were conquered

from outside. (**Miller:** "Utopus did, but how? How did he change them into what they are now?") Well, evidently, Utopus was very much like those traditional Greek lawgiver figures. He was a Solon or Lycurgus who evidently knew exactly what he wanted to do with his newly conquered place. It's certainly true that we don't hear anything about the evolution of Utopian institutions, but we are given to understand that most of them are simply imposed by Utopus, with some happy combination of great power and great wisdom. It's always struck me as one of the melancholy aspects of this book anyway. Book 1 talks about how we can change things for the better, and the most optimistic statement that comes out of Book 1 is, "Well, maybe we can make things a little less bad, if we go in and cajole these jerks who are in charge of things." (laughter) And then Book 2 offers, as it were, a kind of covert, implicit object lesson that, in a way, to make fundamental changes, you have to have a supreme enlightened dictator to come and make those changes.

What I really wanted to talk about, though, is a remark that Elizabeth made in passing, which I thought was fascinating. She talked about the difficulty of interpreting Book 2 being largely a product of its complicated relationship to Book 1. She said some of us are very needy [?] in saying that in many ways Book 1 is a negation of a negation—that is, a negation of the negatives of Europe as depicted in Book 1. This formulation, negation of negation, seems to me not only extremely interesting in itself but particularly interesting as coming from Elizabeth, who is the great expert on negations in *Utopia* in that famous treatment of litotes in her article of 1968. And I suddenly had this sort of blinding epiphany. I say, "Yes, right: Book 2 as a whole is a kind of litotes, isn't it?" And that's one of the reasons it's so difficult to interpret, because, as Elizabeth points out in that famous article, it's very hard. Litotes in its very nature opens a range of meanings. Affirming by denying the contrary doesn't just give us one answer, one result that's the opposite of what the contrary would be. It opens a range of possible answers, a spectrum of answers, and that's exactly what the problem with Book 2 of *Utopia* is. There's a big difference between Book 1 and Book 2 of *Utopia*. I think somebody talked a few minutes ago about how much we're to attribute Hythlodæus' views in Book 1 to More. I think that up until they get into the argument about the indirect approach, we're to understand that they're in entire agreement. What else does More tell us after Hythlodæus gives his account of Cardinal Morton's dinner table conversation? He says, "I find everything you said to be wise and witty." In other words, "I agree a hundred percent with that." But of course, as was pointed out at this same point in the discussion today, there's a fundamental difference when you come to Book 2: it's very hard to know what More thinks there. Really, if we come back to Elizabeth's very nifty formulation, that's a very large part of the causal relation between Book 1 and Book 2, because Book 2 is a negation of a negation, and it's very hard to say what the single meaning of a negation of a negation is.

Travis Curtright: On the question of the common good, you might be able to say from More's own career that the political unity of Christendom is certainly a common good that he was very much interested in cultivating. And part of that was protection of the Church's liberties against the State. That might be a plausible inference from reading the sanctuary debate in *Richard III*—that More's very concerned that the Church may lose its liberties, and vice versa, that the state may lose some of its liberties from the Church's encroachment. Hence, for example, when he apparently told Henry VIII that he ought to think twice about what he wanted to say with regard to the Pope's potential powers over the State. So this idea of the Gelasian rule, a distinction of *Sumus Imperator* and *Pontifex Maximus*, and all the

ramifications that it has in More's public career, might be a way of bearing out the protection of the common good by way of preservation of Christendom. That not only has ramifications for a circle of humanists and scholarly development, but also for peace, which seemed to be a fundamental aim of humanism. And even Augustine, of course, mentions that in the *City of God*, that the peace of Babylon is one that Christians are instructed to pray for, because by that peace we're able to go about our own business and pursue other things.

I was struck in your answer to this: I'm not sure that there is a discernible common good in Book 2 of *Utopia*. I wonder what any of you might say to the question, If you can't have a discernible notion of the common good in Book 2, what does that say about the question in Book 1 of whether or not one should serve? Because the immediate inference is: "We don't know what we're serving." That is to say, you ought to be involved in politics but politics is not geared toward any understandable or discernable common good. It seems to me that you could say that these two books, then, are tied together by that. But what would be the ramifications of saying that you can't find a discernible common good in Book 2 with regard to the question of Book 1? Why should one serve politically?

Dougherty: Your first point on the Church is very important, and John brought this up. This is one of the issues where examination of More's *Utopia* has to be differentiated from analysis of Sparta or any classical analysis. Because once you have the entrance of Christianity into the political picture, you've exploded the problematic nature of the relationship between religion and political power. That is, in Christianity, you're no longer going to accept that the city is the horizon of life, and that its presentation of religion is definitive. That's not acceptable anymore, so you have to look beyond that, and so protections of things like the interests of the Church might be paramount here in a way certainly that they wouldn't be for Lycurgus.

On the question of the common good: Again, a great point about how you connect Book 1 and Book 2. This is related to the comment made about how *Utopia* got to where it was. How did it get these institutions? It seems to me that this is an absolutely central question: how did this work? Why isn't Raphael interested in that? Why doesn't he tell us about this? Well, I think one suggestion may be that he thinks that *Utopia* is so harmonious with human nature that you don't have to describe it. *Utopus* came in with the help of some people, presented the people this plan, and they all said, "Great, that's for me, because that's the fulfillment of the human good." And so you then don't have to go into an analysis of whether in fact this is compatible with the human good because we just take it for granted. So you get to the other question about how *Utopus* was able to do this, only if you begin to reflect on whether the *Utopian* scheme is in fact compatible with human nature, or whether it's at odds with human nature.

Latta: I have two questions. For one, no one has really talked about the way in which coercion undergirds what's going on in *Utopia*. We've talked a little bit about the ambivalence: is *Utopia* a good thing or not? But we haven't talked about the fact that there is no freedom of travel. There is very little freedom at all, and if you attempt to move beyond the boundaries of your assigned city, you're called back once, and the second time you're executed. So, coercion undergirds this.

But my second question is the thing that's been puzzling me about this discussion—namely, that we seem to be conflating all of More's biography into this period prior to 1515. I would like for someone to help me situate this a little bit

better, because More makes some slaps at the Church throughout *Utopia*. He talks about priests and how they're worthless idlers. He's making slaps and I assume that, from 1517 forward, he didn't feel as free to do those things. But I would like someone to speak to the question of who Thomas More was in 1515, because I don't think he was the same guy that was in the tower.

Miller: More himself says later on, "Times have changed, and now I might not want the *Morea* of Erasmus out; some of my own works I might not want out, because people would use them wrongly." He says that—distinguishes between the later times and the earlier times.

Wegemer: That's a great place to end—to look forward to our conversation in the third and last session after lunch.