

The Political Philosophy of Sir Thomas More

Thomas More never articulates in one place his political philosophy, but throughout his writings he does make clear statements about human nature, the best way of life, the origin of society, the source and extent of authority, the nature of the best regime, the basis and role of law, and the task of education. Considering all of these together, one can discern a coherent political theory based on both reason and revelation.

More considered human nature to be free but fallen (CW13 3-25). As free creatures, human beings have a limited participation in the highest powers of God—the intellect and the will—and thus reflect God’s image and likeness (EW 387-388, CW12 12/7-10). As a free creature, every person exercises will and intellect to choose goods, actions, and a whole way of life. Before the Fall, in the “natural state,” the best way of life was clearly known and fervently desired; it was a contemplative life, “a life good, quiet, and restful, with spiritual delight, in such knowledge of God and His wonderful works, as reason at the least without revelation might attain unto” (CW13 37/2-4,9). Despite this satisfying knowledge and love of a personal God, the first man and woman indulged a “foolish proud affection” to be like a god and goddess, thus delighting in their godlike powers rather than in God himself (CW13 16-19, 7).

This free choice led to the destruction of the harmony and power of the intellect and will, and it resulted in war, pain, and death (CW13 13/22-27). The root cause was pride, a condition that now describes the permanent disposition of the soul in its fallen state. As such, the soul of every person has the tendency to become enamored with an image of the good, a “worldly fantasy” of its own creation (CW13 226/14, 81/12; CW12 61/18,27, 154/23,27, 210/5-6, 211/17, 225/1,17)¹ Or, to put it in another way, pride is the disordered love of one’s “own private pursuits to the detriment of the common cause” (SL 130). Given the universal power of this inherent quality, no one is simply virtuous (CW13 7117ff, 9/24ff), and everyone is capable of rebelling against the dictates of the good in exercising this fundamental freedom. Anyone can, however, live a contemplative life, although everyone has a tendency to mistake temporal pleasures for true goods. In this light, More understood well Aristotle’s statement that “the whole concern both of virtue and of political science is with pleasures and pains.”²

Thus, because of this tendency to err, all human beings have a special need for government after the Fall, although the authority to govern was actually present, especially in the family, before the Fall (CW13 13/16). The family is a natural society and the first, conforming to our end as free beings ordered to love and care for others (CW6 415/6-28, CW13 21/19-22/4). Here are learned the virtues and habits that will be exercised in the larger civil society.

What was More’s understanding of the extent and source of political authority? As always, More takes guidance from his understanding of the person as free though fallen. Since no one is perfect, no one can be invested with unqualified and absolute authority—by inheritance, election, or divine right. Everyone needs advice. In fact, all sound minds seek and love good advice.³ Just as England consults and ponders tradition in parliament and inns of court, so too must each person do the same with wise and well-chosen friends.⁴

Furthermore, since authority exists in order to give reliable guidance to individuals or a nation in the proper exercise of freedom, the good ruler or proper authority is presented as a devoted father towards all his children, not as a master towards his subject (CW3.2 no. 111,

109); he serves as a watchdog and guardian, not as a tyrant and wolf ravaging the flock (CW3.2 no. 115; CW2 24/30); he considers himself the head of a people whom he sees as part of his own body (CW3.2 no. 112). This conception of authority leads him to conceive of himself as a chosen ruler of a free people, not as a master of slaves (CW3.2 no. 121, 198, 120, 201, 206); as one humble enough to do “lowly service,” not as a lord lusting for power (CW3.2 no. 243; CW13, 111/30, 227, 14).⁵ In this emphasis upon seeing the governed as free citizens and not as slavish subjects, More shows his theory of government to be characteristically English; this also explains More’s distaste for unchecked monarchy. In Epigram 121, More articulates what has traditionally been the English view of authority:

The Consent of the People
Both Bestows and Withdraws Sovereignty

Any man who has command of many men owes his authority to those whom he commands: he ought to have command not one instant longer than his subjects wish. Why are impotent kings so proud? Because they rule merely on sufferance?

Such a view of freedom explains why More would prefer republican government to monarchy. In the following epigram, he sets forth a comparison of how monarchy and republican government can both use and misuse their authority:

Perhaps it is difficult to find a group of good men; even more frequently it is easy for a monarch to be bad An evil senator is influenced by advice from better men than he; but a king exercises the only influence on his advisers. A senator is elected by the people to rule; a king attains this end by being born. In one case blind chance is supreme; in the other, a reasonable agreement. The one feels that he was made senator by the people; the other feels that the people were created for him so that, of course, he may have subjects to rule. A king in his first year is always very mild indeed. So it is that a consul—one who shares his power—will be at any time as good as a king is in the beginning of his reign. Over a long time a selfish king will wear his people out. If a consul is evil, there is hope of improvement. (CW3.2 no. 198)

Notice the reasons which More gives for preferring elected officials to a hereditary monarch: elected officials are more receptive to reasonable advice than are kings; their choice is more likely to be based on a reasonable agreement among the people; they are more mild and responsive to the people; and there is hope for a change if they are evil.

Elsewhere More actually undercuts the supposedly exalted status of kings (CW3.2 no. 39, 201, 206; note the juxtaposition of 243 and 244). Here, as throughout his writings, More calls attention to the one vice most harmful to correct rule and the one most responsible for the tyrannical soul: pride. And why is pride so dangerous to rulers? Because it distorts their judgment (Grace 125; CW3.2 no. 114, 121; CW4 243/22-245/2) and leads them to misuse their authority (no. 19, 80, 109, 115, 243).

In writing about kingship, More habitually presents the monarch not as a chosen instrument of God’s dread judgment and majesty,⁶ but as an ordinary person with a special function in society. This rhetoric stood in marked contrast to the custom of the day, and certainly to King Henry’s conception of himself. For example, consider More’s sparing reference to

Romans 13:1-6, perhaps the most famous biblical quote used to support the absolute character of kingship. More uses this passage only twice in his writings: once to support the authority of the Church (CW5.1, 197) and once in quoting Henry VIII's own defense of his power (CW5.1, 270). More did not emphasize the extent of the king's power; in fact, he warned against doing so: "[for] if a lion knew his own strength, hard were it for any man to rule him" (Roper 28). Even early in More's life, when many were optimistic about Henry VIII's character and when More was receiving special favor, More expressed his deep understanding of the monarch he served: "Son Roper, I may tell thee I have no cause to be proud thereof for if my head could win him a castle in France... It should not fail to go" (Roper 12).

This distrust in the power of kings arose from More's understanding of human nature and of history. According to More, anyone who knows only power and prosperity is incapable of true self-knowledge and is therefore particularly vulnerable to pride (CW12 58/25-26, 59/11; CW13 47/5-9). More's one great history, *Richard III*, has this as its principal theme, and his whole perspective on human nature supports the prudential need to limit power: "Unlimited power has a tendency to weaken good minds, and that even in the case of very gifted men" (CW3.2 no. 1/90-91).

In addressing the question of the best form of government, More never discusses at length the relative merits of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. He does, however, seem to favor a republican form of government in which virtuous citizens have the possibility of being elected for limited terms; yet he also recognizes that rarely can one choose one's form of government. In his poem "What Is the Best Form of Government?" (CW3.2 no. 198), More begins by weighing the pros and cons of a king or a senate. Throughout he shows his preference for a senate, yet characteristic of More is this abrupt and surprising ending:

— but say, what started you on this inquiry anyway? Is there anywhere a people upon whom you yourself, by your own decision, can impose either a king or a senate? If this does lie within your power, you are a king. Stop considering to whom you may give power. The more basic question is whether it would do any good if you could.

Here More demonstrates his clear-sighted realism, or, one might say, his sober English pragmatism: the best must always be considered in light of the existing traditions and customs of a country. This same idea is expressed by persona Morus in *Utopia* when he says, "What you cannot turn to the good, you must at least make as little bad as you can" (CW4 101/1-2). Regardless of the form of government, however, More considers law the fundamental criterion of a government's justice. Human laws, "which truly are the traditions of men," arise naturally as the work of prudent citizens concerned for the common good (CWS 281/14-15). They provide a "sure and substantial shield" (CW6 262/8) that is absolutely necessary for true freedom and a relatively just society (CW6 368-372, 403-405). Although no law is perfect (CW10 164), "people without law would rush forth into every kind of crime" (CW5 279).

More advocates respect for all laws, even unjust ones. In the face of an unjust law, More advises waiting for a "place and time convenient" to advocate change, and he disapproves of "open reproof and refutation" (CW9 96-97; repeated and further defended in CW10 193, 228-230). This More showed in his own life by his manner of respectful resistance and acceptance of death when confronted with a law he could not obey.

Law has such an important place in More's political philosophy that it becomes the determining factor in considering the justice of any ruler's action:

If you take away the laws and leave everything free to the magistrates, either they will command nothing, and then magistrates will be useless; or they will rule by the leading of their own nature and imperiously prosecute anything they please, and then the people will in no way be freer, but, by reason of a condition of servitude, worse, when they will have to obey, not fixed and definite laws, but indefinite whims changing from day to day. And this is bound to happen even under the best magistrates, whom, although they may enjoin the best laws, nevertheless the people will oppose and murmur against as suspect, as though they govern everything, not according to what is just and fair but according to caprice. (CW 5.1 277-279)

Given this important function of law in offering a stable and disinterested standard of justice, one can understand why More would insist that he would give even the devil justice, for the sake of the common good (Roper 21-22).

More recognizes an objective law of nature written in the human heart (CW6 141), which anyone can know by reason. Since all have free will, however, all can ignore this law as made known by conscience and can follow instead the "foolish fantasy" of their own imagination—but only for a limited period of time. Why? Because violation of conscience always causes grief (EW 461-462, CW6 110, CW13 258, SL 237), even in the most hardened and cruel tyrant (CW2 87/8-21, CW14.1 457). Conscience, then, provides the metaphysical foundation and the ultimate binding force of law, arising from the very structure of one's being and not merely (as Raphael implies in *Utopia*) as the result of threatened punishment.

In the letter that I would call his "Dialogue on Conscience,"⁷ the imprisoned More discusses with his daughter Meg the relationship between law and conscience. Margaret has obeyed the Parliament's law by taking the oath which More has refused. Meg argues that More has a duty to conform his conscience to a law which has been widely debated and agreed upon:

You well ought and have good cause to change your own conscience, in conforming your own conscience to the conscience of so many others, namely being such as you know they be. And since it is also by a law made by parliament commanded, they think that you be, upon peril of your soul, bound to change and reform your conscience, and conform your own as I said to other men's. (Corr 524/379-385)

More forcefully rejoins that "yet is there no man bound to swear that every law is well made, nor bound upon the pain of God's displeasure, to perform any such point of law, as were indeed lawful" (Corr 524/391-393). More argues that positive law must be judged by the well-formed conscience. To emphasize this point, More insists to Margaret: "I never intend (God being my good lord) to pin my soul at another man's back, not even the best man that I know this day living; for I know not whither he may hap to carry it" (Corr 521). Here More expresses the traditional Christian view that each person is radically free — and responsible — before God, and that one is therefore bound to obey the dictates of one's own conscience. Of course, one's first responsibility is to form one's conscience well, and More understandably repeats to

Margaret that he has spent years of study and many sleepless nights thinking through the issues involved in his present case (Corr 528, 530); his conscience is sure and not in doubt (SL 221-223, 235, 250-253). A good conscience, however, requires a good education.

The proper end of a good education is, for More, “train[ing] the soul in virtue” (SL 98). Thus not only should it lead the intellect to contemplate truths, it should also lead the will to love the good and shun the evil. To explain how this is done, More most frequently uses the traditional image of cultivating the garden of one’s soul (SL 105, EW 460-464, CW4 99/31-32, CW12 13/13ff, 282/14-17). Good precepts and affections must be planted and nourished, while the “nettles, briars, and other...barren weeds” of pride and deceptive pleasures must be carefully and consistently rooted out.

The problem in cultivating virtue is that the will and the intellect are drawn more immediately and forcefully to temporary goods of the body than they are to the eternal goods of the soul (CW12 108/26-109/2). Hence the child first desires comfort and pleasure, not virtue and contemplation. To acquire these “spiritual affections,” one must actively temper the demands of the senses while engendering, planting, and watering the “spiritual affections” “many a time and oft” (CW12 281/25ff). This requires a development in self-knowledge, frequent contemplation, “substantial advice and good counsel,” and a “right imagination and remembrance” (238/7-8, 198/25-33, 202/2-3, 312/11-12). The result is “a fervent longing” for the soul’s greatest joys (306/29-307/1).

More warns, however, that one must expect “labor, travail, penance, and bodily pain” if one is to achieve the “sweetness, comfort, pleasure, and gladness” of the highest good and the greatest pleasure possible: that “ardent and lasting love” of eternal goods (EW 463-464). Yet just as cultivation of the transitory earth requires considerable labor and effort, so will the cultivation of the immortal soul involve arduous labor.

More conceives virtue as rooted in love for eternal goods, which one comes to know through the experience of temporal goods. More’s first published literary work develops this somewhat paradoxical idea, showing the relationship of earthly and eternal loves. In his poem “Twelve Conditions of the Lover,” More describes twelve moments at the height of human love. In these he sets forth the ardor of love that leads one to be willing to undergo any difficulty or any trial for the sake of the beloved. After each of these moments is described, More shows how one must be willing to apply the same lesson to the eternal love of the soul.⁸

This depth of love for things eternal as opposed to all those attractive temporal goods can be achieved only “by a long continuance, a strong deep-rooted habit — not like a reed ready to wave with every wind, nor like a rootless tree scanty up on end in a loose heap of light sand, that will with a blast or two be blown down” (CW12 204/13-17). In a similar passage, More explains how “affections of men’s minds [are] imprinted”: reason must be “engendered and planted in our soul,” watered “by long and deep meditation thereof, so to continue that affection that it shall turn into a habitual purpose, fast-footed and deep...” (CW12 281/25ff, 294/8-10).

In his well-known letter on education, More maintains that the “whole fruit” of a good education consists “in testimony to God and an upright conscience” (“in teste Deo et conscientia recti,” Corr 123/85-86; SL 106). Persons with such a conscience “will be inwardly calm and at peace and neither stirred by praise of flatterers nor stung by the follies of unlearned mockers of learning” (SL 106). Such a conscience also provides the greatest joy possible in this life (EW 365, 388, 386; 381-385). In contrast, “a mind must be uneasy which ever wavers between joy and sadness because of other men’s opinions” (SL 104).

More recommends a good education in the liberal arts to “prepare the soul for virtue” (CW15 139). Without proper training, reason would run “riot, and wax over high-hearted and proud, [and would] not fail to fall in rebellion,” even against its own firmest convictions. To mitigate the chance of this rebellion, More recommends diligent and demanding study of the liberal arts, with special attention to the great poets (CW15 139, SL 99) and “true philosophy, especially Aristotle” (SL 18), if one is to acquire the level of sound judgment that will not “swerve from the very nature of things” (SL 23). Such training will lead people to moderate their expectations and to see the difficulty of making political judgments. One must understand deeply these difficulties and the contingency of temporal affairs if one is to avoid rashness and pride. To “learn prudence in human affairs,” More “doubt[s] that any study contributes as richly to this practical skill as the study of poets, orators, and histories” (CW15 139). More’s strongest scorn and satire is for those who presumptuously overlook the difficulties in such judgment; he compares them to the proud rooster who “puffs up his chest while strutting in his own dung-pit” (SL 39). Such people are unable to see the law of nature imprinted in their own hearts, since vain fantasies fill their sight.

In these few pages, a preliminary sketch of More’s political philosophy has been set forth. Much work has yet to be done, however, to fill in the colors and hues of More’s richly textured thought. Such a task has particular importance in our time, since More offers what our age desperately needs: a metaphysics of government based on conscience, law, and statesmanship. A deeper grasp of More’s political philosophy would also have special importance for an understanding of the English precedents to American institutions of law and representative government, since More presents a cogent defense of several pillars of our American political tradition: the rule of law, the practice of political free speech, division of power, separation of Church and state, and the need for institutionalized forms of public deliberation. As such, More offers a significant alternative to Machiavelli’s absolutist prince and to later social contract theories.

Gerard Wegemer
University of Dallas

From *Saints, Sovereigns, and Scholars: Studies in Honor of Frederick D. Wilhelmsen*. Edited by R. A. Herrera, James Lehrberger, M. E. Bradford. New York: Peter Lang, 1993, pp. 137-143. Reprinted with permission, with minor corrections.

Works Cited

- Grace, Damian. "Thomas More's *Epigrammata*: Political Theory in a Poetic Idiom." In Paregon, New Series 3 (1985) 115-129.
- More, Thomas. [Corr]. *Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*. Ed. Elizabeth F. Rogers. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1947.
- [EW]. *The Four Last Things*. In *The English Works of Sir Thomas More*. Ed. W. E. Campbell et al. Vol. 1. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1931, pp. 459-499.
- [EW]. *The Life of John Picus*, pp. 347-396.
- [SL]. *Selected Letters*. Tr. Elizabeth F. Rogers. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1947.
- [CW]. *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 1963-1997.
- CW2 *The History of King Richard III*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester.
- CW3.2 *The Latin Poems*, ed. Clarence H. Miller.
- CW4 *Utopia*, ed. Edward Surtz and J. H. Hexter.
- CW5 *Responsio ad Lutheram*, ed. J. M. Headley.
- CW6 *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, ed. Thomas Lawler.
- CW9 *The Apology*, ed. J. B. Trapp.
- CW10 *The Debellation of Salem and Bizance*, ed. John Guy.
- CW12 *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, ed. L. L. Martz.
- CW13 *A Treatise on the Passion*, ed. Garry Haupt.
- CW14 *De Tristitia Christi*, ed. Clarence M. Miller.
- CW15 *In Defense of Humanism*, ed. Daniel Kinney.
- Roper, William. *Lives of Saint Thomas More*. Ed. E. E. Reynolds. New York: Everyman's Library, 1963.

¹ More's preference for the word "fantasy" illustrates how pride involves a movement of both powers of the soul: it signifies rational desire based on a deliberate act of the intellect. See the editor's note on this word at CW12 61/27.

² In CW12 74/7-9, More alludes to this passage of the Nicomachean Ethics (1105a). He also explains this tendency to be guided by pleasure rather than true good at EW 463. One should keep this passage of Aristotle in mind when analyzing and weighing the claims for pleasure made in *Utopia* by Raphael Hythlodæus.

³ For example, in his letter on education, More urges that love of good advice be cultivated in his children while love of praise be rooted out (SL 106).

⁴ The whole of More's *Dialogue of Comfort* dramatizes the need for good counsel.

⁵ Damian Grace's article on More's epigrams gives a profound analysis of the political philosophy which informs them.

⁶ More does, of course, use the conventional language of the day in his rhetorical addresses, and he recognizes that the king has a special role in society that must be revered. He uses biblical language in at least two important passages referring to the king as ordained and consecrated by God (CW8.2 595/10-20, CW9 50/31). But these passages are few and run counter to More's customary practice.

⁷ This is my title for the fourth and last great Socratic dialogue More wrote with his daughter Margaret Roper. It appears as "Letter 206: Margaret Roper to Alice Alington" (Corr 514-532), written less than one year before More's death. Some claim that this dialogue was written by his daughter Margaret, but internal evidence indicates that it is at least a joint endeavor. In this short dialogue, More speaks of conscience over forty times.

⁸ More treats the same theme in his last literary work. See CW12 313/8-22.