

The Intention Behind Thomas More's 'Utopia'

by Neeraj Samtani

Thomas More was a writer, lawyer, and philosopher who wrote 'Utopia' in 1516, one year before he became an advisor to King Henry VIII. The intent behind More's 'Utopia' has been speculated by scholars for centuries. Many believe his primary purpose was to propose Utopia as a goal that society should strive toward. However, one could argue the opposite – that More never intended to present Utopia as the ideal place. Instead, the purpose of Utopia was to mock not only abstract thinking but also the philosophical practice of isolation and “looking within” in search of the truth. In 'Utopia', More's fictional character attempts to persuade Raphael to partake in politics, and this is precisely what More tries to do with his readers. Through the blurring of the line between fiction and reality, the employment of literary devices such as puns and metaphors, the juxtaposition of the forms of dialogue and monologue, the very form of Utopia, and the narrative and dialogical content, More seeks to persuade philosophers to give up abstract thinking and to instead partake in politics by showing them that they should make peace with incremental development because extreme, idealistic thinking is unattainable and pointless.

More mocks abstract thinking because idealism and lack of action tend to coincide. While we need idealism in order to measure our current status with what we hope to eventually achieve, we must devote most of our attention to incremental development in order to see improvement and make steps towards our ideal world. Furthermore, moral philosophy plays an important role in legislation. For example, rehabilitation is based on the belief that moral values aren't ingrained. Instead, people can become better and learn to be good. Evidently, the laws we create and the punishments we set are based on theories of moral philosophy and in order to determine our laws and appropriate legal punishments, we need philosophers to partake in politics.

More uses several techniques to ground the work in reality, motivating the audience to suspend their disbelief while reading the book. In the book, More's character is an ambassador for King Henry VIII. He travels to Antwerp, where his friend Peter Giles introduces him to Raphael Hythloday, another philosopher. Hythloday tells them stories of his travels with Amerigo Vespucci and the land of Utopia, which is a seemingly perfect place. The only relevant fictional names are 'Utopia' and 'Raphael Hythloday'; the other names are drawn from real life in order to blur the line between fact and fiction. Even when Raphael recounts his dinner with the cardinal, half the characters are real while the other half are made-up. Furthermore, the entire first chapter talks about the geography of the island, allowing readers to visualize it clearly. As if this is not enough, More supplements his vivid descriptions with several made-up items including maps of Utopia, the Utopian alphabet, poems, and letters that supposedly verify the existence of Utopia at the start of the book. All these details are provided to help ground his work of fiction in the real world.

Of all the famous travelers More could have chosen as Raphael's companion, he picked Amerigo Vespucci, a significant person at the time. The early 1500's were the beginning of the protestant movement and a large portion of the Christian population was unhappy with the Church in its current form. Furthermore, "Europe and England were still founded on the economic models of feudalism, in which virtually all power resided with rich nobles while the peasants endured a backbreaking existence that supported the lavish lifestyles of their rulers". (Utopia - Context) The public was generally unhappy. Around the same time, they had heard about the "New World", which was named America, after Amerigo Vespucci. The public looked at this place as a new beginning – an untouched place they could go to start over without feudal society or the Church in its current form. By associating Raphael with Vespucci, More alludes to the idea that Utopia might be such a place, where people might want to immigrate and spend the rest of their lives. Moreover, Utopia is an island, which makes it separated and isolated from the rest of the world.

Utopia can be perceived as the equivalent “new world” which hasn’t been impacted by feudalism or the recent changes in the structure of the Church.

However, More’s main intention was to persuade philosophers to give up radical, idealistic thinking and focus on small, incremental development. Initially, it might seem counterintuitive to make this idealistic place seem real. However, More does this in order to make the readers initially subscribe to the possibility that such a place exists, and then shows them why it might not be everything they wanted. He takes common philosophical arguments – such as the abolishment of property and money – and demonstrates what would happen if such policies were actually implemented. Utopia has some absurd laws as a consequence of this “perfection” and the population there have no control over their own lives. In some ways, it was a lot like feudal society, in the sense that common people barely had any power.

In order to make readers question whether Utopia is the ideal place they truly desire, More makes use of literary devices such as puns and metaphors. By the time ‘Utopia’ was written, the printing press had been invented. This enabled the book to be widely distributed and read by those who understood Latin. However, many humanists and philosophers were acquainted with Greek as well. Knowing this, More inserted several Greek puns into the text, which “function[ed] as a shibboleth for the humanist readers of Utopia. Those who understand them would get a layer of meaning that the ordinary reader would miss.” (Rees)

More uses puns to direct the philosophers’ attention to the fact that the book is a satire and shouldn’t be taken entirely at face value. While ordinary readers would take the fictional names such as Hythloday and Utopia as proper nouns, readers with an understanding of Greek would delve deeper. They would question Raphael’s ideas because his last name Hythloday literally means “nonsense-distributer”. They would wonder if More thinks a place like Utopia could ever exist, because More coined the word from the Greek ou-topos meaning 'no place' or 'nowhere'. (British Library UK) Other puns include the capital of

Utopia, Amaurot, which literally means 'dark city', and the principal river, Anyder, which translates to 'waterless'. (Rees) These puns take a piece of literature about a perfect city and add a deeper layer to it. More conceals the message that Utopia is an unattainable goal that can be found nowhere, and the person that speaks of it is known for spewing nonsense. Readers that understand Greek are now skeptical of anything Raphael proposes.

More employs metaphors and the juxtaposition of monologue and dialogue to help persuade philosophers to take up politics. By structuring Book I as a dialogue, and Book II as primarily a monologue, More reminds philosophers of the importance of discourse between people. The structure and content of each book complement each other and work towards achieving this aim.

Book I is a realistic dialogue set between characters who think critically and engage in discourse, which helps them refine their arguments and exposes any inherent flaws. The characters examine the political, socioeconomic, and judicial system of the time and arrive at conclusions that would be useful for a legislative body.

More's character argues that Raphael should advise kings since he will be able to influence them and bring about change. Unfortunately, Raphael believes that his ideas are too radical, that philosophers must think in isolation, and kings cannot be helped by philosophers. He goes on to say:

Plato doubtless did well foresee, unless kings themselves would apply their minds to the study of philosophy, that else they would never thoroughly allow the council of philosophers, being themselves before, even from their tender age, infected and corrupt with perverse and evil opinions.

More's character, on the other hand, believed that one should improve flawed systems through incremental change. When Raphael recounts the story of his dinner with the cardinal, he's upset because the people won't accept his idea initially, but are eager to try it out when the king suggests it. He says

When the cardinal had done, they all commended the motion, though they had despised it when it came from me; but more particularly commended what related to the vagabonds, because it was his own observation.

He establishes that the people won't accept an idea proposed by him but will accept it if delivered by a cardinal or a king. Consequently, this brings up a strategy for philosophers. Instead of introducing an idea through monologue, if the philosopher can use dialogue to discuss an idea with a king and get them to see the merit in it, then the others will naturally agree because the king agrees with the idea. The dialogue serves other purposes too. By conversing with the king, not only will the philosopher show the king a sense of respect and make the king more likely to entertain the idea of reform, but the philosopher also has the opportunity to find the flaws in the argument through discourse, which will eventually allow them to strengthen their argument to make it strong enough to convince the king.

In this story, Raphael doesn't recognize that the king decided to try out the idea as a result of their discourse. He is simply upset that the people only listened to the idea when it seemed like the king had come up with it. However, once the king agrees with the idea and announces it to the people, it shouldn't matter whether the idea is credited to Raphael or the King – if the people agree with it then the philosopher has made a useful impact. This story shows philosophers that they can make a difference, and that they shouldn't be concerned about getting credit for their ideas. They should be concerned about getting their ideas implemented.

The author uses the second book to warn philosophers about the dangers of thinking in isolation. Book II is primarily a monologue of a single character – who the author chose to name 'nonsense-distributer' – talking about a place he visited. There is no discourse in this section and as a result, none of the ideas are refined or questioned. Raphael never wonders how people who are constantly under surveillance and live without any liberties can remain happy and content, despite the constant looming threat of slavery as a

punishment for trivial crimes. This raises some important questions about what it means to be happy, and what the goals of the government should be. Are people simply happy when they have no anxiety as a result of everything being provided for them? Or do they need more, such as a feeling of control over their lives, the freedom to move between places without requiring permission, a sense of privacy, among other needs? Such questions are pondered by philosophers and can help guide the formulation of legislature, yet another reason why philosophers should partake in politics.

At the end of the second book, More chooses to say nothing to Raphael even though he disagrees with some of the laws of Utopia. This action has multiple implications. First, it functions as simple as a social nicety. However, with an author who has frequently layered different meanings in the same text, it could be something more. It could be a metaphor for philosophers choosing to not say anything to kings when they disagree with their method of ruling. Readers, and particularly the philosophers among them, might wonder why More didn't engage with Raphael, causing them to become aware that they don't always engage in discourse when they don't agree with the rules of their king. Finally, More could also be saying that it's not worthwhile to persuade someone who is interesting solely in dreaming up ideals since they exist only in that person's head and have no real existence. The juxtaposition of these two narrative styles helps the reader realize that we need discourse and debate in order to refine our ideas and determine the flaws within them. The first book cautions philosophers against keeping away from discourse with kings, and the second book serves as an example of a flawed idea that's not contested because More chooses not to engage.

This paper has looked at the techniques More effectively employed in 'Utopia' to persuade philosophers give up abstract thinking and to instead partake in politics, including the blurring of the line between fiction and reality, the employment of literary devices such as puns and metaphors, the juxtaposition of the forms of dialogue and monologue, the very form of Utopia, and the narrative and dialogical content.

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