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## IS MORE'S *UTOPIA* A UTOPIAN BOOK?

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Initially, Thomas More's *Utopia* makes us expect that we'll be presented with a depiction of unknown lands and peoples, in the style of the Florentine voyager Amerigo Vespucci's *Quattuor navigationes*. The setting is this: In the garden of the same Antwerp inn where, in the summer of 1515, Thomas More lodged during his short visit to his Dutch friend Petr Giles, a certain Rafael Hythlodaios joins the two companions. This fictional character is there to tell the two humanists about the isle of Utopia where he arrived in the course of the fourth of Vespucci's expeditions and where he could see with his own eyes every thing he is going to narrate. First he will describe the reception given to the group of travellers that have remained on the isle; next he will report on the Utopian political constitution and mores. But before all of this takes place, More the author inserts the conversation that first brought the three personages to a mention of the isle.

Here the book launches a completely novel area of investigation; namely, the relationship between philosophy and politics, or more precisely, the issue whether the philosopher ought to become the counsellor of the prince -- the prominently Humanist inquiry as to how the contemplative life ought to be linked to the life of action. As the conversation proceeds, Hythlodaios and More come to a disagreement concerning the role of philosophy in politics. Whereas Hythlodaios opines that at the courts of rulers there is no place for philosophy, More believes the very opposite. In More's own words, the two positions can be stated as follows:

at rulers' courts there is no place "for this school philosophy (*philosophia scholastica*) which supposes every topic suitable for every occasion" (p. 95); however, there is place for "another (*alia*) philosophy, better suited for the role of citizen, that takes its cue, adapts itself to the drama in hand and acts part neatly and appropriately" (p. 97).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Latin original and the English translation are quoted after *More: Utopia*, edited by George M. Logan - Robert M. Adams - Clarence H. Miller, Cambridge University Press 2006 (first published 1995). The translation of the *Utopia* in this edition is based on the Norton Critical Edition of *Utopia* by Sir Thomas More, translated and edited by Robert M. Adams.

As we shall see, the two philosophies -- the one of the schools and the “other one” -- differ not only in their relationship to politics but also in their approach to common and private property. In order to grasp well the above-quoted passage and the significance of More’s polemics with Hythlodaios, a polemics that touches the very grounds of the utopian way of life, i.e. social equality and abolition of private property, it needs to be clarified what position is adopted here by More the author. As the person who wrote *Utopia*, More may be presenting the objections mentioned either, (A), merely as a sceptical rider as to the chances of transforming Utopia into reality and as to the legitimacy of the idea of equality and common ownership; or (B), as the expression of the author’s essential dissent from the notion of such a social arrangement.

As is clear from the Latin title, *De optimo reipublicae statu, deque nova insula Utopia*, the topic on which the book of *Utopia* focuses is the best arrangement of society and the newly discovered isle. The whole text is constructed along a twin principle, and it splits into two main parts that can be almost considered two separate books. Whereas the former of the two depicts the disastrous state of society in 16th century England, the latter describes the perfect life lived at the opposite end of the Earth.<sup>2</sup> Equally the genesis of the *Utopia* points to two separate periods of time and to two distinct places. According to Erasmus’s testimony, More wrote the part about the Utopian way of life during his 1515 stay in Antwerp;<sup>3</sup> only after his return to England he then elaborated the critique of the current state of the country, the Preface<sup>4</sup> and the conclusion.<sup>5</sup>

A similar split can be detected in the course of More’s own life. From 1501-1505 he sought to escape the “cruel and inhuman” world by means of an ascetic existence behind the walls of a monastery, with members of the Cartusian Order,<sup>6</sup> yet afterwards he became a

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. T. I. White, *The Key to Nowhere: Pride and Utopia*, in: J. Olin (ed.), *Interpreting Thomas More's "Utopia"*, New York 1989, p. 38. F. Seebohm claims that Book I presents a response to Henry III’s offer of the post of a Justice, whereas Book II forms a contrast to the situation in Europe at the time; cf. *The Oxford Reforms: Colet, Erasmus, and More* [1867], ed. H. E. Seebohm, New York 1914, p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> The isle of the sages was supposed to form a counterpoint to the land of fools; cf. Erasmus of Rotterdam, *Praise of Folly*.

<sup>4</sup> A version of the Preface might have been drafted already in Antwerp, since in the first edition the epistle bears the title *Prefatio in opus de optimo reipublicae statu*, so that it might have represented an introduction to the treatise on Utopia (G. M. Logan, *The Meaning of More's „Utopia“*, Princeton 1983, p. 14, fn. 13).

<sup>5</sup> Erasmus of Rotterdam, *Epistles*, vol. III, p. 398 (a letter to Ulrich von Hutten from 23 July 1517; cf. G. M. Logan, *The Meaning of More's "Utopia"*, p. 11-12).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. W. Roper, *The Life of Sir Thomas More. In Two Early Tudor Lives*, vyd. R. S. Sylvester - D. P. Harding, London 1962, p. 198.

highly successful London barrister and attains the office of Lord Chancellor. Still, he remained in opposition to unlimited papal power, as he believed that the Pope is subject to the power of the church council, as well as unlimited power of the prince -- the King; consequentially, he refused to accept the Sovereignty Act, which brought him to the Tower prison and eventually to the executioner's platform.<sup>7</sup> This conflict between the ancient and the new, between medieval contemplation and humanist action, informs also the eventual shape of the *Utopia*. In this work and elsewhere, More is waging a war with himself. At first, he seeks the solution in one direction only; however, as is apparent from his attitude to the Utopian way of life, eventually he succeeds in overcoming the conflict. It is here that we find his message to the Humanists, one not limited to a mere re-exposition of the Humanist orthodoxy.<sup>8</sup>

It is true that soon after its publication More's *Utopia* became the paradigm of a new literary genre as well as of an argumentative and theoretical pattern, employed then primarily in the 17<sup>th</sup>--19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and that many contemporary commentators still view it as a seriously intended project of human existence bare of social tensions as well as of private possessions. Yet, a number of passages in the book can induce us to acknowledge that *Utopia* is *not* a utopian work, if that should mean that the author of the work personally identifies with the guiding ideas of the Utopians' existence. Our scepticism concerning the notion that More's supposed utopian project is meant seriously is based on, first, the author's attitude to the principal character; second, on an interpretation of the dialogue that confronts More's and Hythlodaios's views; and finally, on More's commentary in the conclusion.<sup>9</sup>

Doubts about the significance and the intention of More's book turned up as soon as it was published in 1516 in Louvain. There is no agreement on an overall reading. Whereas J.H. Hexter views the book as a seriously minded description of an ideal society, Dexter perceives in it a derisive satire of a "repulsive" state order. Logan considers it an extraordinarily

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<sup>7</sup> Having refused to acknowledge the sovereignty of Henry VIII in the spiritual sphere, More was tried for high treason and eventually executed on July 6, 1535.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. G. M. Logan, *The Meaning of More's "Utopia"*, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> The just cited dialogue is part of a conversation which, as stated above, is inserted by the author shortly after More-the-character invites Hythlodaios to tell the story of the unknown peoples and lands from his last sea voyage. The exchange, thematically focused on philosophy and politics, forms the end of Part I. The concluding commentary then follows upon Hythlodaios's presentation of the crucial features of the Utopian way of life, in Part II, and is not dialogical. It is a critical, polemical note on the constitution established on the isle of Utopia.

complex work of political philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Karl Kautsky finds More's *Utopia* a source of proto-Communist ideas.<sup>11</sup> According to C.S. Lewis, the book is a satirical fiction, while to R.S. Sylvestr it offers a complex criticism of the principal speaker, Rafael Hythlodaios.<sup>12</sup> H. G. Wells points out the thematic differences between the two main parts of the work and claims it to be "one of the most profoundly inconsistent of books".<sup>13</sup> There are many indications that the ambiguity of the overall significance of the book and the tension between the two thematic areas stem from the author's intention.<sup>14</sup>

The so-called Humanist Reading,<sup>15</sup> rooted in the historical context and represented by commentators such as E.L. Surtz, F. Caspari, J.H. Hexter, R.J. Schoeck and Q. Skinner, is among the most influential present-day interpretations. The shared element is that its proponents set More's *Utopia* within the Humanist context. Skinner, for instance, believes the *Utopia* to be a contribution to a more general "programme" of Humanist reforms, while Shoeck sees the work as a "model that makes it possible to realize the reforms".<sup>16</sup> A prime opponent of such a reading is G.M. Logan, who detects defamatory language in the *Utopia* and notes its dialogical composition, its inconsistency, the authorial irony, and the distance adopted to the Utopian community. It is also well to notice his remark that Plato's *Republic* is full of inconsistencies, and thus -- in Logan's view -- "the ideal *polis* is not seriously intended".<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> J. H. Hexter, *More's "Utopia": The Bibliography of an Idea*, New York 1952, 1965, p. 57; Allen T. S. Dorsch, *Sir Thomas More and Lucian*, in: *Archiv für das Studium der Neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 203, 1966-1977, p. 362; G. M. Logan, *The Meaning of More's "Utopia"*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. K. Kautsky, *Thomas More und seine Utopie*, Berlin 1926.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. C. S. Lewis, *Oxford History of English Literature*, s.v. "Utopia". R. S. Sylvestr, *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, Hamden 1977.

<sup>13</sup> H. G. Wells, *Introduction*, in: *Utopia*, New York 1935.

<sup>14</sup> A similar idea is expressed by Hexter, who writes in the Yale edition that the greatness of the book "lies not in its harmony but in its intensity"; cf. *More's "Utopia": The Bibliography of an Idea*, New York 1952, p. XXVII.

<sup>15</sup> The phrase was coined by one of the reading's proponents, E. L. Surtz, in his *The Praise of Pleasure: Philosophy, Education, and Communism in More's "Utopia"*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1957, p. 2-8, as well as *The Praise of Wisdom: A Commentary on the Religious and Moral Problems and Backgrounds of St. Thomas More's "Utopia"*, Chicago 1957, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, I, Cambridge 1978, pp. 255-256, 261; R. J. Schoeck, "A Nursery of Correct and Useful Institutions": *On Reading More's "Utopia" as Dialogue*, in: *Moreana*, 22, 1969, pp. 19-32.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. G. M. Logan, *The Meaning of More's "Utopia"*, pp. 1-31; on Plato cf. p. 31, n. 15. For the view that the best regime, as outlined in Book Five of Plato's *Republic*, is for Plato a subject of criticism, cf. e.g. A. Havlíček, *Die Kritik Platons an Glaukons Auffassung des besten Staates im V. Buch der „Politeia“*, in: A. Havlíček - F. Karfik (vyd.), *The „Republic“ and the „Laws“ of Plato*, Praha 1998, pp. 46-66; idem, *Ist die „gerechte“ Handlung gerecht?*, in: D. Barbaric (vyd.), *Platon über das Gute und die Gerechtigkeit*, Würzburg 2005, pp. 9-20.

In what follows, and developing some of Logan's ideas, I will try to show that More's *Utopia* is not a utopian treatise and that More's attitude to the Utopian way of life, as depicted by Hythlodaios, is critical rather than anything else. We shall also examine both the theoretical assumptions behind the Utopian constitution and the premises of More's critique. First we shall turn to the Preface, where the author talks about his own role in the book, and to the character of Hythlodaios as the key advocate of the life led on the isle of Utopia. Then we'll analyze the dialogue captured by Part I of the *Utopia*, as it discusses the presuppositions adopted by each participant in the debate. The conclusion summarizes our analysis.

### **The significance of the Preface**

The Preface characterizes all the main characters of *Utopia* -- that is, Hythlodaios, More and Giles -- and it also mentions the isle of Utopia for the first time. More tells Giles ("Aegidius" in Latin) that, a year after the event, he is sending him a manuscript of his book, and asks him to arrange that Hythlodaios could read it, as he, More, should not like to omit anything true or include anything untrue in Hythlodaios's story. However, More also distantiates himself from the contents of the book, as he insists that he merely repeats whatever he, together with Giles, heard Hythlodaios say. In the circumstances, "truth" means a faithful report on what was said and implies no positive stance toward its content. As for his own contribution to the image offered here of life on the isle of Utopia, More describes it as follows:

„For, as I've taken particular pains to avoid having anything false in the book, so, if anything is in doubt, I'd rather say something untrue than tell a lie. In short, I'd rather be honest than clever (*quod malim bonus esse quam prudens*).” (p. 35)

Even though More does want to capture the story told by Hythlodaios and the life of Utopians as faithfully as possible, that does not mean he admires it uncritically. His objections against Hythlodaios's presentation will be stated in the course of the discussion in Part I, those against the Utopian way of life both in Part I and at the end of Part II. Still, it is with surprise that we encounter his admission of ignorance as to where the isle of Utopia actually is. We would expect him to note every detail, obviously including the name of the sea where the island is situated -- and yet he has no idea as to the geographic position of the

isle and does not even appear interested in this piece of information.

As for More's image of particular characters, what he has to say about Rafael Hythlodaios is critical through and through. While More certainly respects and admires some of Hythlodaios's attitudes and views, he considers Hythlodaios less than well-spoken and lacking genuine erudition in either Latin or Greek. That is why, so More, his speech approaches "unsearched-for simplicity". The author's view of the Portuguese voyager comes to the fore also in the choice of Rafael's surname, "Hythlodaios". The key that would decipher the name can be provided only by familiarity with Ancient Greek.<sup>18</sup> It is composed of the Greek vocables *hythlos*, which is to say "idle talk, nonsense", and *daios* (from *daiein*), i.e. "experienced, knowing, capable". In English, Rafael Hythlodaios means as much as Rafael Windbag. Such a choice of name -- an intentional one, no doubt -- disturbs the respectability of everything the character is going to say, including his views concerning the Utopian way of life.

The humorous and ironical note of the Preface is complemented by other Greek neologisms: besides the name of Hythlodaios, the text mentions words such as Amaurotum (from *amauros*, dark, obscure), Anytrus (from *anydros* / *anydria*, arid / aridity) or Utopia (from *ou-topos*, what lacks a place: Nowhereland or Nowhereburg). In a similar way, More engages in wordplay by using English neologisms for the Utopian offices. The Czech translator of *Utopia*, B. Ryba, made a unique attempt to decipher the significance of some of More's witticisms in Part II. For instance, as we detach the affix *-tus* from the Latin-looking *sypograntus* and read the resulting *sypogran* backwards, it turns out the talk is of a "nark office" (= "the office of spying and prying"). By a similar procedure, *traniboros* produces "rabbi nark", i.e., "the chief officer of spying".<sup>19</sup>

All the elements listed above -- i.e., the author's distanciation from the content of Hythlodaios's ideas; his lack of interest in more detailed information concerning the isle; the claim that all he does is a faithful reproduction of whatever was said; the ridicule by which

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<sup>18</sup> Even though knowledge of Ancient Greek did assure respect and good standing, at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century it was not common among the Humanists; cf. *More: Utopia*, ed. by G. M. Logan et al., p. 31, fn. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. B. Ryba, *De Thomae Mori vocabulis Utopianis*, in: *Charisteria Thaddaeo Sinko oblata*, Varsaviae - Wratislaviae 1951, pp. 289 f. The traditional explanations of *sypograntus* and *traniboros*, derived from ancient Greek, lack proper backing. The first term can mean either "the ruler of a pig sty" (from Greek *sypheos*, a pig sty, and *krantor*, a ruler), or again "a wise elder" (from Greek *sophos* and *geron*). The latter term could mean "the master eater" (from Greek *traneis* or *tranos*, sharp, bright, and *boros*, insatiable, hungry). Cf. *More: Utopia*, ed. by G. M. Logan et al., p. 121, n. 21; *Utopia by Sir Thomas More*, tr. by R.



the main character is smeared; and the pervasive irony -- indicate a gap between the author's own position and the subsequent exposition, first and foremost the ideas presented by Hythlodaios. In the next part, we shall examine the roots of More's critical objections to Hythlodaios's views and the assumptions or attitudes on which Hythlodaios's and More's respective positions are based.

### **The dialogical sequence in Part I of the *Utopia***

After the Preface, it is primarily the polemical part of the whole exchange in Part I of the *Utopia* that allows us to demonstrate More's critical stand to Hythlodaios. The exchange is set off by Giles' question as to why Hythlodaios will not offer his services to the King, given he is so learned and knowledgeable about lands and peoples, and it closes upon the demand that Hythlodaios depict the mores, arrangements, laws and such on the isle of Utopia. For Giles is entranced by Hythlodaios's knowledge of the lands his friend has visited and is convinced that his friend's counsels would bring succour to the King, as well as help Hythlodaios himself to a more privileged position. However, Hythlodaios begs to differ. He has no desire to own things -- his possessions he gave away to relatives -- and he refuses to be a slave to kings. With his life he is content; any and all striving after the favours of those in power he will leave to others.

However, the attitude to politics exhibited by Hythlodaios, a man fully devoted to philosophy, goes quite contrary to the opinion of Thomas More. On this point, More agrees with Giles and advocates the view that a shared effort of the philosopher and the politician is a meaningful and useful thing to promote. While More esteems Hythlodaios's lack of interest in property, he believes that by taking a step back in some areas for the sake of public interest Hythlodaios would help realize the essence of philosophy. For he would do public good by inducing the ruler to "just and noble actions" (p. 53). The confrontation of More's and Hythlodaios's respective views as to the relationship between philosophy and politics, formed on the paradigm of the debate on the best arrangement of the community in Plato's *Republic*,<sup>20</sup> brings up some points of contention -- such as the influence exercised by the

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Robynson, edited with an introduction, by D. H. Sacks, Boston – New York 1999, p. 134.

<sup>20</sup> Even though both Hythlodaios and More refer to Plato on this occasion, each points to a different idea: while Hythlodaios has in mind the role of the philosopher who refuses to take part in political matters, as this

philosopher on the ruler; the question of the essence of state and of humanity; the task of philosophy; and also the issue of equal property and the role played by private and common ownership -- and also illuminates the preliminary assumptions of the two opposite stances.

a) Is there a place for philosophy at the ruler's court?

The first of the debated points, namely the philosopher's involvement in politics, is treated by Hythlodaios in a relatively long speech, interrupted by a brief polemic with More. In the first part -- a re-enactment of the presentation that took place at Cardinal John Morton's during Hythlodaios's stay in England -- Hythlodaios lists his objections against the understanding of law and justice prevalent in England, in particular against the "just" use of capital punishment for thieves and against the role of money, as it is put at the same level with human life.<sup>21</sup> However, the reactions to his original lecture were almost all negative. With the exception of the Cardinal,<sup>22</sup> not a single one among those present expressed at least limited support for Hythlodaios's proposed novelties. Hythlodaios concludes there is no reason why he, a philosopher, should advise rulers, given that his views are not appreciated in the least.

Yet Hythlodaios's experience with the response of the courtiers will not induce More to change his mind about the role of philosophy in politics. He remains convinced that in giving counsel, the philosopher "would do very much good". He also recalls the words written by Hythlodaios's favourite Plato in Book V of the *Republic* (473d),<sup>23</sup> namely, that the state will attain happiness only once the ruler becomes a philosopher or the philosopher a ruler (p. 83), and adds that to contribute by counsel would suffice. Hythlodaios, who agrees only with the first part, believes that the current rulers are in no mood to listen to the "good

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would make him participate in lawless actions, More recalls, rather, the essential character of philosophy as a participant in political matters (for which see below, p. 12). For similarities between Plato's *Republic* and Book I of More's *Utopia* cf. e.g. Colin Starnes, *The New Republic*, Waterloo 1990. The issue whether in the *Republic*, Plato presents his own vision of the best arrangement of the community, or rather criticizes it, will not be further treated here; cf. the author's papers mentioned in n. 17.

<sup>21</sup> The same penalty -- i.e., the capital punishment -- is dealt to both murderers and thieves. Hythlodaios sees causes of thievery not only in lack of proper education from a very slender age, but also in bad economic conditions (*More: Utopia*, ed. by G. M. Logan et al., pp. 65-67).

<sup>22</sup> Even though the Cardinal did not adopt Hythlodaios's part unambiguously, he left open the possibility of further discussion about his proposals.

<sup>23</sup> At several places, More-the-author refers to Plato's *Republic*, in Hythlodaios's view a paradigm of the utopian way of life. On pp. 43-45 it is stated: „[Hythlodaios] sailing has not been like that of Palinurus, but more that of Ulysses, or rather of Plato“; on pp. 81-83 Plato is stated to be a model for Hythlodaios („Your friend Plato thinks that commonwealths will be happy only when philosophers become kings or kings become philosophers...“); on p. 101 Hythlodaios identifies with Plato's views as expressed in the *Republic*; on p. 101 he claims he agrees with

counsels” of the philosophers, as their whole education was directed at a completely different understanding of the purpose of governance than the one presented by philosophers. The only way to bring about some change would be for princes to start philosophizing.

This brief polemical debate highlights a diversity in the notion of what makes a ruler a ruler. According to Hythlodaios, the proper arrangement of society will be set up only once the ruler turns philosopher -- for unless this happens, the prince will not obey the “good counsels” or “wholesome decrees” (*decreta sana*) of the philosopher. On the other hand, in More’s view the realization of a prosperous state is not anchored in the notion of the philosopher-king; rather, it depends on the capacities of the person who counsels the ruler, i.e., of the philosopher as councillor. In order for the ruler to obey the philosopher’s “wholesome decrees”, the philosopher must choose an appropriate approach. In such a case, the distinction between the philosopher and the ruler remains intact.

#### b) The essential nature of the state and of humanity

The “appropriate approach” that the philosopher ought to adopt turns up in the following point of discussion, i.e., the essential nature of the state and of humanity as well as their mutual relationship. Here Hythlodaios lists examples from the court of France so as to demonstrate what he means by wholesome decrees for the state. They include the avoidance of expansive policies, as these bring more worries than profits. The ruler’s aim ought to be life in peace and care of his subjects that attains visibility in their mutual love to one another. Another “wholesome decree” is a reform of the attitude to money, and to wealth in general. Rather than trying to amass the maximum of personal riches, the ruler should strive to make his people wealthy. The people chooses a ruler in order to live well, *not* to assure a prosperous life for the ruler. In this sense, the ruler ought to rule over “the wealthy and well-to-do”, not over beggars. The third decree concerns governance, in that the ruler ought to apply the law and keep criminality at bay.

Hythlodaios’s decrees present a new view of the nature and purpose of the state, both in that the good of the state is identified here with the good of the people rather than that of the ruler and in that one assumes the ruler ought to rule for the others rather than for himself, or that he ought to subject the well-off and not the poor. As a matter of fact, it is a reversal of

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an idea of Plato. On p. 181 it is stated that Utopians knew all Plato’s works.

the world where the ruler rules for his own profit.<sup>24</sup> However, the prospects of making this “good world” real begin to crumble once we pursue them at the court of a ruler whose convictions are quite different. Here there is a rare moment of agreement between Hythlodaios and More, as More assents that to give “good” counsels to rulers whose beliefs are quite contrary is like “telling tales to the deaf”.<sup>25</sup> However, the two disputants interpret the simile very differently. For Hythlodaios, the simile implies lack of interest in philosophical counsels on the part of the ruler, and this is a crucial reason why Hythlodaios refuses to take part in political matters. On the other hand, More deduces from the simile that it is quite pointless to tell the ruler *certain things*, if we know that his convictions are different and that he will not accept these views, so that our effort would come to nought. One must know which things one *can* tell him and how they ought to be presented.

In order to illustrate the difference of views in more detail, More offers another simile, when he compares Hythlodaios’s insistence on the realization of his “wholesome decrees” to a typical scene from a Plautus comedy: a philosopher steps in front of babbling slaves and begins to intone a passage from the Roman tragedy *Octavia* which depicts a confrontation between Nero and Seneca, the emperor advocating cruelty and arbitrariness, the erudite calling for prudence and self-control.<sup>26</sup> The effect of the situation is a mixture of tragedy and comedy, for the simple reason that two completely different things are mixed together. When a particular dramatic piece is acted out, the goal is to perform it the best, which, according to the principles of the theory of drama, means that one ought not to add into the mixture just any thing at hand, whatever its intrinsic quality. Similarly, a beautiful whole can be formed only by putting together those parts that are *proper*.<sup>27</sup> What follows hence for every state where the good and evil are mixed, is that its optimal arrangement cannot be attained by following Hythlodaios’s requests and introducing into the community elements of a world based on complete elimination of evil as well as exclusive rule of the good, for this would create an improper mixture of things.

For More, however, a good arrangement can be established in an indirect way

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<sup>24</sup> The alternative that one takes into account the prosperity of the people as well as that of the ruler is implicitly included in More’s stance. Cf. More’s idea of an indirect course of action and of treating things appropriately.

<sup>25</sup> „they would turn deaf ears to me“, *More: Utopia*, ed. by G. M. Logan et al., tr. R. M. Adams, p. 95.

<sup>26</sup> The issue of authorship remains unresolved. For a long time, the text was attributed to Seneca.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Plato’s example of the painted sculpture in the *Republic* (420c-d): the goal is not for it to have the best colours at the best parts, but rather to be beautiful as a whole.

(*obliquus ductus*), where everything is treated *adequately and appropriately* (*virili omnia tractes commode*) (p. 96). It follows from More's speech that the "indirect course" of action assumes the human community to be both good and evil. And the same is true of a particular human being: every person is both good and evil, too, having been burdened by the original sin, and whatever a human does, their action will *never* be *purely* good; rather, it will be *both* good *and* evil. The only exception would be for a human to turn angel -- but then, that person would no longer be human.<sup>28</sup> In the human condition, a person cannot effect the good *fully*, or in all cases, and unless one is willing to become a dogmatic skeptic, one chooses the solution where the outcome of human action is not the absolute good, but a good nonetheless. Concerning one's attitude to the ruler, the effect will be the indirect course of action, as mentioned above. The reason this course is "indirect" consists in the fact that the ruler is not presented with matters directly and openly; rather, one proceeds from evil towards a lesser evil. This action being "adequate and appropriate" means that it takes into account the singular nature of the situation and that it keeps in view not only the conditions of the subjects of government but also those of its holder. Thus, under this method of realizing the good, it is necessary, first, to opt for the realization of the good, and then, to strive for the least amount of evil in the world. For More, the persistence of evil in the world is a challenge captured by the image of a voyage on troubled seas:

"don't give up the ship in a storm just because you cannot hold back the winds" (p. 97).

Hythlodaios will not accept the "indirect way" of resolving things, as he recognizes only two, mutually contrary options: Either the good is realized fully, or not at all.

If Hythlodaios and More differ in their views of the state, it is because they hold different concepts of the essential nature of human life and of the goals to be pursued by the human community. While for Hythlodaios, the essential nature of human beings is the good, and the goal of the state is a return into the Golden Age, More assumes a culpable humanity whose life is set within the precariousness of the situation, one that the community strives to resolve by means of a prudent and balanced way of life. A comparison of these conclusions

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. K. Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage*, München 1979.

with Carl Schmitt's ideas in *The Concept of the Political*,<sup>29</sup> where he declares the ultimate basis of political considerations to be not the state, but rather "the element of the political" (*das Politische*), created by the duality between friend and enemy, will allow us to see a correspondence between the dualities of good--evil and friend--enemy, as well as between precariousness and the political. The assumption, held by More, of a persistent tension between good and evil can then be interpreted as the basis of the political sphere; on the other hand, the striving for an eternally durable good that would eliminate all societal tensions including the constitutive ones, as pursued by Hythlodaios, is clearly an instance of rejecting the political as the essence of the state.

### c) The two different philosophical point of departure

The differing answers to the question of the essence of the state and humanity stem from differences in one's philosophical understanding of the world. Hythlodaios's obstinate insistence that there is no place for philosophy at rulers' courts is, claims More, based on the scholastic way of philosophizing - as we already mentioned in the introduction -, a method that is typical for a group of friends but useless for a debate with a ruler. In advising a ruler, a completely different philosophical approach needs to be employed, one which More characterizes, as we have just mentioned, as an indirect course of action, *obliquus ductus*. Such a course is derived from the insight that to achieve general good in the world is an impossibility and that not all evil can be converted into good, so that the task in front of us is to try and convert bigger evil into a lesser evil.

Hythlodaios's philosophy, which employs the methods of Scholasticism, is construed on the notion that "everything fits everywhere" (*quae quidvis putet ubivis convenire*, p. 94), or in other words, that there is one truth only and it ought to be applied whatever the circumstances. Hythlodaios assumes that the philosopher knows "in advance", independently of the situation, what the good is -- which is then merely realized, in a "mechanical" manner, in various situations. In thinking so, Hythlodaios forgets that only the particular situation gives shape and form to our actions. Once we leave the situation aside, we end up rejecting its precariousness, and thus we reduce "all" situation to a single one. For this "single" situation, then, a "single" good is sufficient.

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<sup>29</sup> C. Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, Berlin 1996, p. 20.

However, besides this philosophy there is “another”, one that “knows its stage and is able to adapt to it” (p. 97). It is here that More claims to belong. Such a philosophy recognizes the situation in its particularity and acknowledges its precariousness. Following the comparison with a Plautus comedy, one can say that such philosophy is essentially unable to insert something improper into the situation, something contrary to the situation’s character, be it as good as it may. In particular, a situation characterized by precariousness will not allow us to realize ideas taken over from a world based on assumptions that are purely good, or on a single all-powerful truth, pure to the core.

In the background of More’s philosophy we find a notion of humanity whose essential feature is to be set in a situation that is problematic, precarious. This means that humans are unable to solve the issues with which they wrangle once for all and unambiguously, as these issues come up in new situations all the time. It is not within human powers and capacities to master and control the immense plurality of circumstances and potential views at each issue. In order to be able of a decision, a human person simplifies situations by neglecting some of their aspects, even though one is quite well aware of them -- the reason being most often that one holds them unimportant.

Hythlodaios’s notion of a good world simplifies the human condition just as well; however, it does so in an essential manner, one that More has to refuse, for it completely ignores a crucial feature of situation: its precariousness. This would resemble the state of absolute freedom when human life is ridden of all obstacles including fortuity. We encounter here a characteristic of most utopian visions. They implicitly assume that humans are afraid, terrified by incapacity to master and control the complexity of the situation, the human condition one lives in, as it originates from human imperfection and culpability. On this ground one proceeds to view the situation reductively, simplify it and rid it of fortuity, so that one could master it rationally and plan one’s own existence. If, on the contrary, one accepts the precariousness of the human condition, life remains pervaded by tensions that stem not only by the uncontrollable plurality of circumstances but also from the impossibility to determine unambiguously, in a world structured by both good and evil, what is actually good. Accordingly, the role of the philosopher differs in each framework. In Hythlodaios’s view, a philosopher-king implements a notion of the good that is given in advance; however, if the philosopher does *not* rule and yet participates in a public life that does not bring the notion of

the good to a full implementation, he helps mask a wrongful way of life, and turns wretched himself in consequence. If he intends to save his reputation, there is no other way but retreat from political existence and live in seclusion. This is how Hythlodaios sees the issue, and therefore he is unwilling to become a councillor of rulers. Hythlodaios's inspiration here is Plato's *Republic*, 496d, where Socrates mentions as an example the philosopher who refuses to take part in injustice. Since on his own he is unable to suppress it, and since he does not desire to die before his time, he withdraws from the public sphere and strives to live his life without participating in unfair actions. However, this means that the philosopher abstains from any participation in the matters of the community, and his approach to the communal process diverges sharply from the attitude of the philosopher depicted in Book VII of the *Republic*, who "returns into the cave" so as to help his co-citizens tell falsity from the truth, notwithstanding the fact that this may cost him his life (cf. 517a). Remaining "outside" of the community and here waiting for the "right" time when he could realize the ideas of philosophy and the good, Hythlodaios turns contrary to the basic notion of Plato's *Republic*, which is to say, the philosopher's essential care of the community. Hythlodaios defends his own attitude by claiming that "human foolery" being impossible to cure, he attempts to save, at least, himself.<sup>30</sup>

According to More, the philosopher adopts an "indirect" way, and step by step, he reaches smaller and smaller evil. Such an attitude does not oblige the philosopher to share the rulers' views and turn into an "assistant of foolery", as Hythlodaios believes; quite on the contrary. Having chosen the good, the philosopher will strive to make the ruler change opinion and this in an "indirect way", rather than in a direct confrontation with a world-view totally contradictory to the one he holds himself.

#### d) Justice and property

Another area where the difference in assessing the role of good and evil in the world shows up is the conception of justice. Wherever there is private property and everything is measured by means of money, it is impossible, claims Hythlodaios, to establish a just social

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<sup>30</sup> In such a situation, Hythlodaios sees no room for a philosopher, as he is afraid that, more likely, the wicked would influence the philosopher, rather than that the philosopher himself would in an indirect manner have impact on the wicked and make them better.



arrangement. By a just social arrangement Hythlodaios means a state of society where the best things are not channeled to the worst of people, where property is not distributed only among a small group of individuals, and where a few are not privileged at the disadvantage of many who plod in poverty. In a fair constitution, virtue is respected and in terms of possessions everyone is sufficient. The only way to happiness leads via equal property, as Hythlodaios sees it traced in Plato's *Republic*.<sup>31</sup>

More's objections against common ownership are quick to come and are almost identical to those formulated by Aristotle in Book II of the *Politics* (1261a10-1264b25). The abolishing of private ownership would rid the human existence of motivation and there would be no way of assuring a sufficient amount of material possessions. Everybody would rest their hopes with the others and do nothing themselves. As property would belong to nobody as much as to everybody, nobody would take care of it. The appointing of offices would be meaningless, as these would lack all respect and esteem. Nor would people esteem other people, for everybody would be pretty much the same.<sup>32</sup>

A debate about property will arise also in the conclusion of the whole book, after Hythlodaios has described the arrangements on Utopia which he holds for best, as well as the only ones that merit the title of commonwealth. On the island, everything belongs to everybody and no one misses privacy. The aim is to live without worries, with a joyful, serene mind, untroubled by fears about one's subsistence. This is claimed to be genuine justice. Its basis is equality -- both in terms of property and of human nature. The sameness of human nature steps in place of the social contract (p. 201). On Utopia, there is neither any longing for money nor criminality -- which, together with quarrels, fights and rebellions, is primarily caused by money. By abolishing money, one eliminates all the negative phenomena, including poverty. Yet the deepest cause of all human misery is judged by Hythlodaios to lie in human pride, which he calls a "monster, the prime plague and begetter of all others" (p. 247). The Utopians have uprooted it and destroyed, thus laying base to a state that will endure forever.

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<sup>31</sup> See *More: Utopia*, ed. by G. M. Logan et al., p. 101. He admits that poverty can be alleviated but not completely eliminated, unless private property be abolished, too.

<sup>32</sup> To counter these objections, Hythlodaios has only one argument available: his own experience. Throughout the book, his argument draws persuasive power only from his own personal experience -- which, however, Giles and More lack, since they have not visited Utopia and never will (as no-one, not even Hythlodaios, know where it is situated).

In response to the way of life depicted here, More in his commentary cites the same objections as he did at the end of Part I. To begin with, he rejects the most important aspect of the Utopian way of life, to wit, communitarian existence and economy without money. According to More, such arrangements shatter all dignity, majesty, grandness and stateliness, which the public opinion holds to be the true ornaments and decorations of the state. About a number of other features More is even convinced that they are absurd. Although he would be content to see some aspects of the Utopian commonwealth transposed into his own community, he does not believe it possible.

### Summary

In conclusion, let us come back to parts of our argument. To begin with, let us ask: what is the philosopher to do at times when everyone commits injustice? Should he, single-handed, come forth and defend fairness? Or should he rather lie in wait for a better time, when it will be easier for him to realize his proposals for a well-ordered state? For Hythlodaios the philosopher, one who has concluded that there is no interest in philosophical counsels, the only available solution is to remain outside of the political process. More, on the contrary, opts for participation in political matters -- and this not only in the *Utopia* but in his personal life as well. In doing so, he relies on the assumption that humans are burdened by guilt and simultaneously responsible for their actions and for the shape their state is in. In a situation that will not allow to tell the ruler directly, More thus opts for an "indirect course" of influencing the prince, striving to improve the circumstances.

The Utopian community, a representation of a world bare of evil, is also a community of friends, for similarly to the Epicurean Garden it eliminates a basic feature of the political community, to wit, *eris* or *polemos*.<sup>33</sup> It is inhabited only by friends who do not quarrel and do not clash, which makes away with the need for laws and courts. One's view of the role of the philosopher in the community and of the significance of private and public property will be necessarily an outcome of whether one believes the essential nature of the state to be friendship, but rather *polemos* -- or in other words, the good only, or rather good and evil.

If Hythlodaios pushes for the idea of an all-governing good, this stems from his effort

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Heraclitus, fr. B 53 and B 80 Diels-Kranz.

to break loose from a power that transcends him and escapes his control, to wit, the precariousness of the situation. He finds a way out in positing a “simplified”, a non-precarious situation -- not realizing how problematic this step is. For it rids human beings of desire, effort and respect. No longer responsible for anything, they become part and parcel of a mechanically functioning world where they are manipulated in accordance with the needs of the highest principle, which is Reason.<sup>34</sup> In the final outcome, they lose their own self -- just like in dogmatic Scholasticism, where everything is set up and decided in advance.

On the other hand, More’s world, one full of changes and transmuting situations, puts human beings in front of challenges, makes them active, induces them to pursue the truth and allows them to achieve dignity by opting for the good and subsequently, step by step, proceeding from a bigger to a lesser evil, strive for a realization of the good within a world that is structured by both good and evil. Without the precariousness of the situation, a person would turn into a mere executor of truths given in advance, one who lives -- just like the Utopians -- uprooted from space, time and tradition. The only link to “tradition” would be the expectations of a return of the Golden Age.

So if the question is whether More’s *Utopia* is utopian, we have to answer in the negative. It is true that the author of *Utopia* is favourable to the notion of the social good, but not of goodness supreme and pervasive, one realized in the form of common ownership, equal distribution of property, equal nature and strict supervision over all members of the community, one that rids human life of motivation and interest as well as the desire to know, or indeed, to philosophize. More believes that the good ought to be realized by the effort, put up by every single individual, to lessen the amount of evil in the world.

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<sup>34</sup> “Now above all reason urges us to love and venerate the Divine Majesty” (p. 163).