Towards the end of his discussion of the good life, happiness and unhappiness in Plato’s *Republic* (591a–592b), Socrates stresses the importance of self-rule or self-discipline as a key to producing ‘attunement and harmony’ within each individual. To become involved in the vexed business, turmoil and conflict of governing flawed communities, might make such interior harmony or peace of mind unattainable. The good, having struggled to achieve attunement and harmony, should seriously consider jeopardizing it before entering the fray of politics in an imperfect world. Only in the ideal society which Socrates and Glaucon, earlier in their dialogue, had ‘just been founding and describing’ but ‘which can’t be accommodated anywhere in the world, and therefore rests at the level of ideas’, might it be possible to be socially and politically active without corruption and self-destruction. Nevertheless, that ideal society ‘is retained in heaven as a paradigm for those who desire to see it and through seeing it, to return from exile’. Whether it actually exists or not is of no matter, since it remains the only community in whose government the good and happy person could participate without ceasing to be good or happy. It remained their only true home; their return from exile.

There are multiple tensions at work here. The dilemma of the good citizen confronting the disquieting, even corrupting, influence of politics in a dysfunctional world is paralleled by the choice between the inescapable turmoil of political participation and the possible ‘attunement and harmony’ of contemplative detachment. But the twist of the knife was that detaching oneself from the life and problems of the community induced a sense of alienation, failure of duty and compromised goodness, of exile. Contemplating a society in which these tensions could not arise, however fictitious that society was, might be the only source of relief.

This dilemma, Plato’s dual approach to it and the general precedent of his *Republic*, haunt, without ever dominating, More’s *Utopia*. Plato’s justification for utopian thinking is replicated there as are the tensions exposed
Thomas More’s *Utopia*

in his discussion of the good life. More’s masterpiece is, however, both a more eclectic work than this might suggest and one in which the question of human goodness, and its confrontation with social deficiency, is made even more intractable by the underlying context of Christian ethics.

Thomas More’s *Utopia* was the collaborative product of an early sixteenth-century European intellectual elite, in Latin but engaging with the classical Greek of which they were advocates. This linguistic complexity has not prevented it enjoying worldwide popularity, being translated into numerous vernaculars and scarcely ever out of print in the 500 years since its first publication in 1516. It is at once jocular and serious, seeking both to profit and delight the reader. One of its jokes is inherent in the word which came to be its title, ‘Utopia’. More coined this word from Greek roots, eu-topia (the place where things are well) and u-topia (no place) but it is a word which, overcoming its Latinized-Greek origins, has taken on a life of its own. Versions of it exist in all major languages. It has become a term of common parlance, its linguistic complexity lost to most of its users. More is often credited with re-establishing as well as naming, a tradition, the modern utopian, and by extension dystopian, tradition. Yet some see *Utopia* as a profoundly anti-utopian work. In its early editions the principal text accumulated supporting letters, poems, artwork, an alphabet and a map (the *parerga*) by More’s collaborators, all designed to clarify what the work meant to them, how it was written and how it should be read. Despite this, controversy has raged unabated about the correct interpretation of the text and, for many, *Utopia* has come to seem a question without an answer. It was More’s first extended prose publication and yet it is a masterpiece of European literature. Where did it come from: a moment when More confronted the option of state service or from a long intellectual gestation?

The interpretative debate begins within the text itself and in a manner which signals interpretative complexity. The story begins with Thomas More (a real person and author) meeting Peter Giles (a real person and friend) outside the church of Notre Dame, ‘the most beautiful and popular church in Antwerp’ (possibly a real encounter). Giles introduces More to Raphael Hythloday, a Portuguese traveller and intellectual. The fictional status of Hythloday would be immediately obvious to More’s scholarly readers by his names. ‘Raphael’ was both an angelic messenger and responsible for curing Tobit’s blindness in the Apocryphal Book of Tobit. In counterpoint, ‘Hythloday’ suggested to humanist grammarians an idle talker, a dealer in nonsense or an expert in trifles. Once this move was made, the name ‘Thomas More’ became fair game: ‘Thomas’, the sceptical, doubting apostle, and ‘Morus’, the fool – a particularly relevant inference given the publication of *Moriae Encomium* (*Praise of Folly*) by Erasmus in 1511. So learned
readers were immediately being asked to decide whether to attach credibility to an account by the most disinterested and experienced of travellers, a healer and divine messenger, but also perhaps a purveyor of nonsense, or to the reaction of a sceptic who might also be a fool. Responses to those characterizations continue to play a central part in the interpretative debate.

The issue is complicated by textual uncertainties. The first five (1516–19) Latin editions of the work all differed. The three earliest translations (German (1524), Italian (1548), French (1550)) all omitted Book I entirely, thus producing a work of a completely different character and, to cap it all, *Utopia* was not the original title of the book. The first Latin edition published in England did not appear until 1663, almost a century and a half after the first edition and after numerous Latin editions had been published in Louvain (six), Paris, Basel (three), Florence, Cologne (two), Wittenberg, Frankfurt, Hanover (two), Milan and Amsterdam (two). By the time an English translation was first in print (1551), *Utopia* was already available in German, Italian and French. It is important therefore to recognize that it was pre-eminently a work of European, not English, literature. More’s Latin was compressed but lucid, vigorous, elegant and allusive in complex ways. Translating it remains a challenge and one never satisfactorily met to all tastes.1 Addressing his patron, William Cecil, Ralph Robynson, translator of the first English edition (1551), noted that, as a Catholic martyr, More had remained blind to the true light of the Gospel. The adoption of a post-Reformation prism through which to view the work and its author was but the first of many adjustments of interpretation to changing times and contexts. Bishop Gilbert Burnet, translating *Utopia* in the 1680s, when Catholicism was resurgent, to dissociate More from that process presented him as ‘a Protestant reformer avant la lettre’.2 In Enlightenment Scotland an edition of Burnet’s translation published in 1743 was subtitled ‘A Philosophical Romance’. By the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *Utopia* was often seen as a foundation document of modern socialism. The most extreme manifestation of this was the inclusion of More’s name on an obelisk commemorating the eighteen founders of communism, erected on Lenin’s orders in post-revolutionary Moscow. *Utopia* continues to be hailed as one of the harbingers of modernity.3 But a text for which such weighty importance was claimed could also be read as a *jeu d’esprit*, an exhibition of Renaissance versatility, or, as C. S. Lewis put it, ‘a holiday work’.4

The publication of the most elaborate English/Latin edition of *Utopia* in 1965, in the Yale University Press edition of More’s complete works, was an attempt to escape anachronism and refine the contextualization of the work.5 This goal of establishing a more precise historical contextualization has dominated serious discussion of the work in the last half century. Debate
Thomas More’s *Utopia* has been engaged on two fronts: what is the appropriate context into which the work should be placed and what keys to the work’s meaning can be derived from that context? An ancillary debate has been over More’s seriousness about the utopian model presented in Book II. Was it meant, even if not as a blueprint for social change, then as a Platonic model to console and guide the good and wise political actor? Or, does it suggest the folly, the nowhere, of rigid idealism in the real world and is it, perhaps, a profoundly anti-utopian work? Or yet again, is it a witty but serious exploration of the problem of accommodating ideals to political realities, of the price the good and wise may have to pay to perform their civic duties, a work which raises questions that, in the end, it challenges the reader to answer? All of these issues have a moral dimension and for More and his collaborators, whether we call them Christian humanists or not, this raised the problem of the efficacy of Christian ethics. All of them are questions with a wider relevance for our general approach to modern utopian literature.

The conundrums of More’s great fiction continue to generate a rich and remarkable literature. This chapter will focus on where the contextual consensus has settled in the last two decades and where major differences remain. It suggests that there may be sufficient clues, both in the text itself and in other contemporary works, to guide us towards a closer approximation to More’s intentions.

In an influential series of essays, Quentin Skinner established the centrality to More’s text of the ‘best state’ exercise inaugurated by Plato and continuing to preoccupy his readers thereafter. Linked to these concerns was a divergence of views on ‘true nobility’ – merit only (Plato) or partially a function of lineage, leisure and wealth (Aristotle) – and to the relative merits of political engagement (*vita activa*) compared with political detachment (*vita contemplativa*). To this, David Wootton has added the notion of *Utopia* as a meditation on friendship, the ideal of a community of friends versus the reality of a society of enemies or, at least, rivals. Here More was influenced by Erasmus, himself building on ideas expressed by Pythagoras, Plato and Cicero. In the 1515 edition of his *Adages*, Erasmus began with two proverbs which seem to inform More’s utopian design: ‘Between friends all is common’ and ‘Friendship is equality. A friend is another self.’ In its equality of goods, labour and leisure, *Utopia* then looks like a Pythagorean society of friends. But Erasmus, discussing the two proverbs, had also been at pains to point out that ‘nothing that was said by a pagan philosopher comes closer to the mind of Christ’.

Most scholars working on *Utopia* would accept Skinner’s and Wootton’s findings but the reference to Erasmus points us to a further debate. To what extent was *Utopia* building on the work of Erasmus and the ‘Christian
humanists’ or was it, in effect, a critique of their views? For George M. Logan, *Utopia* rejects the view that politics is a matter of personal morality rather than of institutional and conventional constraints. In other words, it brushes aside the assumptions underpinning *The Education of a Christian Prince* which Erasmus wrote in the year that *Utopia* was first published.\(^{10}\) More recently, it has been suggested that More’s argument, rather than challenging, may have rested on Erasmus’s work, in particular the latter’s edition of Seneca on which he was working at the time that More was writing *Utopia*. In this view, the dialogue of Book I sets Seneca’s advocacy of the *vita contemplativa* against Cicero’s urging of the *vita activa*.\(^{11}\) Also attempting to locate More’s book in the context of Erasmian debates, Eric Nelson has argued that, in its willingness to embrace communism, its preference for happiness over glory and contemplation over participation, its values are Greek rather than Roman.\(^{12}\)

A problem with these interpretations is that they tend to polarize debates, within Erasmian circles, where an exploration of many positions was in process. It is also misleading to reduce the political thought of classical Greece and Rome to monolithic entities, readily opposed one to another. There are differences but writers like Cicero, Sallust, Augustine and Jerome – all admired by More and his friends – were self-conscious transmitters of a Greek heritage. Above all, *Utopia* is an enormously eclectic work, a bravura display of humanist learning and wit. It is this, allied with its playfulness, its Lucianic, ludic and serio-comic tone which has led to a growing emphasis on its interpretative indeterminacy. John Ruskin described it as ‘perhaps the most really mischievous book ever written’. Recent commentators have seen More’s intention in *Utopia* as to provoke a reader response rather than to give a definitive authorial direction. Two of the most probing and illuminating exponents of this view have been Dominic Baker-Smith and Elizabeth McCutcheon. The latter’s study of one item in the extensive *parerga*, More’s letter to Giles, stresses the destabilizing effect of paradox in *Utopia* typified by the ‘inexhaustible paradoxicality’ of this letter.\(^{13}\) Likewise, Baker-Smith concluded that ‘the function of the book is not to establish a preferred viewpoint but to convey through its literary form a complex interplay of ideas which lie at the very roots of Western political discussion’. In the end the reader was obliged ‘to shoulder the burden of interpretation’ but definitive meanings ran counter to the careful balance of More’s dialogue.\(^{14}\) Perhaps the extremes of interpretative indeterminacy are reached in Marina Leslie’s depiction of *Utopia* as a Foucaultian ‘heterotopia’ on the basis that, while most utopias run with the grain of language, and therefore of meaning, More’s work undermines both, so that the reader is ultimately left in a no place between cynical pragmatism and unyielding idealism.\(^{15}\)
There is a case for caution in reaching for any definitive interpretation of a work which has all the playfulness of a puzzle, teasing with both words and ideas. More’s intention is, in part, to present multiple perspectives, to open and reopen the question from many directions and to deepen our engagement with the problem. But, as always, indeterminacy has its limits. More chose to problematize some issues and not others. What do his choices tell us about his intentions in this work? There are limits to the questions *Utopia* sets. Can we discern any limitations on what he saw as the possible range of answers? Can we track down any reliable interpretative meaning – or does the modern utopian tradition begin in a blur of questions without answers?

The openness to interpretation of *Utopia* may in part be attributed to the fact that the work draws on a number of hotly debated issues which More’s friends encountered in their studies of classical authors. The most obvious of these is that of the state most conducive to the good life. The Platonic formula, that only the collaboration of philosophers and kings could be the basis for such an outcome, raised the problem of political counsel. On what terms could philosophy and wisdom inform politics? From Plato onwards, it was recognized that the good and wise (the philosopher) confronted a choice between the risk of corruption attendant on political engagement, and the sense of exile, or neglect of duty, inherent in a retreat to the contemplative life. While the much-admired Cicero chose the former, Pico della Mirandola (whose biography, translated by More, was published in 1510) had deliberately chosen the latter.

Introducing a Christian dimension at a time of serious religious renewal, heightened the urgency of these problems. In a fallen world how much could the moral heroics of devout individuals be expected to achieve? Augustine, on whose *City of God* More had lectured in 1501, had suggested that the most we could achieve in the earthly city was a kind of second best. How then should we engage with that city so as not to find ourselves slipping from that already compromised standard? Might we be able to restructure the earthly city to make engagement with it more morally satisfactory? Central to this cluster of questions for More, as a man strenuously committed to lay Christian piety, was how the optimum state of a commonwealth (*De Optimo Republicae Statu*) could be built around deficient human beings. Erasmus, in his *Education of a Christian Prince*, advised sinful human beings to act as if they had never fallen, to re-engage in the pursuit of moral standards which they had proven incapable of in the most favourable of circumstances, pre-lapsarian Eden. In this sense, *Utopia* is a critique, not only of ‘Erasmian humanism’, but of the whole perfect moral commonwealth, mirror-of-princes’ tradition.
Achieving the optimum – even if this was the optimum second best – was accordingly dependent on institutional and social restructuring, on envisaging an alternative world, not one mired in the flawed customs of the contemporary *polis*, nor one which assumed the transformation of nature, human or material. In imagining an alternative world, More could draw on three kinds of resources. The first were the examples of predecessors like Plato. Their fictions generally functioned at a high level of abstraction and *Utopia* was to take a different course, vigorously embracing the specific. Secondly, there were the exciting and recently published accounts of the ‘New World’. More’s brother-in-law, John Rastell, himself embarked, six months after the publication of *Utopia*, on a voyage to the ‘New Found Lands’. Since Hythloday was said to have accompanied Amerigo Vespucci on the last three of his four voyages, More may well have known the latter’s sensational accounts of his adventures. Equally, Pietro Martire d’Anghiera’s *De orbe novo* (1511) may have been a source of some inspiration. Both accounts alluded to communism, female involvement in warfare and contempt for gold – all features of utopian society. But arguably as important, if not more so, was the theatre, an alternative world following alternative scripts and conventions.

As a youth, in the household of Cardinal Morton, More had both witnessed and taken part in domestic theatrical performances. Henry Medwall, Morton’s chaplain at that time, was also a dramatist. More’s brother-in-law, John Rastell, had his own stage on his estate and Erasmus claimed that More not only performed but wrote plays for such private productions. But the theatre was also important to him as a metaphor, an alternative way of looking at the world. The trope of the world as a stage was conspicuous in works like Lucian’s *Necromantia*, Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly* and More’s own *Richard III* (where kings’ games were compared to stage plays on a scaffold, a political theatre which consumed its actors). Cicero used the drama metaphor repeatedly in *De Officiis* and in his political speeches. As well as in the *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus used it in his *Copia*, the *Adages* and *The Ciceronian*. Seeing the world as a stage suggested a social environment of illusion, where actors persuaded themselves that they were other than they were and conspired in the self-delusion of their audience. Players acted and responded to the particular conventions and scripts they were given. It might, nevertheless, be possible to see through the illusion and to adopt different scripts and conventions. Ultimately, the theatrical trope implied social and political plasticity, the possibility of conceiving alternative worlds.

‘Is that the King? I think you are fooling me. He seems to be a man in an embroidered garment.’ More’s epigram on monarchy as a form of political dissimulation typifies a strain which runs powerfully through his
work as a whole. Human life could seem ‘like a long pageant’ organized by Fortune, who allocated and changed roles. But when the pageant was over and death removed the costumes, the illusion collapsed. Everyone was the same. Should we accommodate ourselves to the play in hand, and the self-delusion that involved, or risk alienation (exile) by refusing to play our part? It is a question debated, in precisely these terms, by ‘More’ and Hythloday in *Utopia*. But it also raised the issue of whether the same actors could perform ‘better’ in a different theatre, with different conventions and scripts. In Book I of *Utopia* we are presented with one such theatre, with its own codes of dissimulation, its own fictions, and in Book II with another. In his contribution to the *parerga*, a letter to Peter Giles, More quotes a character from Terence’s play *The Lady of Andros* to establish the legitimacy of his fictional exercise (113–14). The theatre was, Stephen Greenblatt suggested, More’s favourite metaphor and while many have noted the theatrical element in *Utopia* – the conversation in the garden, the dramatic episodes, the flashbacks – the parallel has been drawn more in relation to form than substance. The argument here is that the theatre metaphor, like the references to the New World, opened a gateway to alternative possibilities and so is part of the substance of the book’s argument. Society is a theatre whose conventions and scripts constrain and circumscribe our roles and even our intentions. Might these scripts be rewritten, conventions be adapted so that our roles, intentions and behaviour are transformed? In particular, can we move from a stage (described in Book I) where self-interest rules against the common interest to one (Book II) where the common interest rules and subsumes self-interest, where wisdom and goodness prevail?

Renaissance humanism was not a narrowly philological enterprise. Certainly, grammar and rhetoric were central to it but poetry, history, moral philosophy, biblical studies, political thought, art, science and philosophy were also important. Such a range of activities gave scope for debates and controversies. A central feature of the ‘Christian humanists’ work was the self-conscious appropriation of classical learning for Christian purposes. They saw no innovation in this. What was new was their exploitation of the technology of print and the involvement of pious and learned laymen. More and Erasmus had been friends since 1499. They jointly published their translation of Lucian in 1506. *The Praise of Folly* was written in 1511 while Erasmus was a guest in More’s home and its title punned on the Latin version of his host’s surname, *Morus*. It was often read as a companion piece to *Utopia*. Erasmus and Giles were heavily involved and intervened textually in the production of the early editions of *Utopia*. The letters of the Erasmian network constantly evoke a sense of friendship, common endeavour and mutual support. What is striking is the number of lay intellectuals, men of
business – More, Budé, Busleyden and Giles – who were active participants in the group’s activities.

They and others furnished the *parerga* in which the main text came to be embedded. In all, these products of other hands amounted to just under a quarter of the total text. *Utopia* was emphatically a collaborative work and the nature of that collaboration may set some limits to the indeterminacy of its interpretation. The *parerga* are vital to the sense of a many-sided conversation rather than a two-sided dialogue. They add to the interpretative openness of the book while circumscribing the book’s intentions and immediate reception. They bring out, first, the international character and importance of the work as the product of a European intellectual milieu. Furthermore, they associate it with a particular strand of that milieu, the Erasmian humanist one with its agenda of classically assisted Christian renewal. They play on the overlap of fiction and reality, the blurring of illusion, self-delusion and dissimulation, on the theatrical, performative qualities of social, political and cultural life. Beyond this, the *parerga* provide a guide to the major preoccupations of the work itself.

The first of these – signalled in the book’s title – is the combination of profit and delight. As a truly golden handbook, *Utopia* is ‘No less beneficial than Entertaining’. Horace, Lucian and Erasmus had all emphasized that the combination of delight and profit could draw in and move readers. Repeatedly, the letters and poems emphasize that this is a work which will entertain but which it will also be in our interest to read. But where did real profit lie? More and Budé both use their letters to raise this question, the first in relation to writing the work, the second in relation to reading it. More excuses his delay in completing *Utopia* on the grounds of his distraction by worldly and family business, his pursuit of advantage for himself, his kin, his clients. Was this truly a more profitable busy-ness than writing the book? Likewise, Budé, on receiving his copy, was preoccupied with the business of his estate and legal affairs: the ‘nonsense’ of ‘getting and saving’, of ‘accumulating more and more’. The language of profit, interest, advantage runs, like a *leit-motif*, through More’s great work. Men’s pursuit of their own interests was a fact of nature which political calculation must recognize. In his Latin epigrams, More had noted that the only safe king was one perceived to rule in his subjects’ interests (*utiliorem*). Commenting on the adage ‘What is one’s own is beautiful’, Erasmus had observed, citing Cicero, that ‘Everyone is most influenced by his own particular interest.’ In *Utopia*, subject to the observance of properly ratified laws, ‘to pursue your interests is prudence’ (70). At the same time, following Aristotle, they recognized that the unreflective pursuit of self-interest could jeopardize the community which it was in our interests to preserve.
The questions which then arose were: what were our true interests and were we capable of identifying them?

A powerful claim made by Hythloday for Utopia as an ideal is that ‘every man’s perception of where his true interest lies, along with the authority of Christ our Saviour (whose wisdom could not fail to recognise the best, and whose goodness could not fail to counsel it) would long ago have brought the whole world to adopt utopian laws, were it not for one single monster, the prime plague and begetter of all others – I mean Pride’ (109). Here perception of our interests and the authority, wisdom and goodness of Christ converge to underwrite the claim of Utopia to be an optimal state. But it is, of course, the recognition of our true interest rather than the pursuit of perverse interest, driven by pride, which can lead us to this happy, and apparently sanctified, outcome.

How then are we to accurately and consistently discriminate between true and perverse interests? One answer was to accept the view of More’s favourite Roman historian Sallust, that the fundamental underpinning of political community, its concordia, was in friendship between equals. Or, as Cicero put it, ‘the whole human race should co-exist as a single fellowship cemented by reason and common speech’ adding the identification of such fellowship with the friendship between those who hold all things in common. As we have seen, Erasmus gave this motif the prominence of priority in his Adages. Not only was ‘nothing more wholesome’ but it was astonishing that ‘this common ownership of Plato’s’ was distasteful to Christians when ‘nothing was ever said by a pagan philosopher which comes closer to the mind of Christ’. This Pythagorean friendship, a ‘sharing of life and property’, was ‘the very thing Christ wants to happen among Christians’. So community of property was in our true interest as was the equal obligation to labour. As William Budé wrote in the letter to Thomas Lupset for which the third edition of Utopia was held up, Christ not only ‘left his followers a Pythagorean rule of mutual charity and community property’ but, in doing so, undermined the legitimacy of both civil and canon law which were devoted to the protection of false private interests. It was Utopia which maintained ‘the truly Christian customs and the authentic wisdom’ by adhering to the three ‘divine institutions’ of equality, love of peace and contempt for gold and silver (118–19). Generally the parerga breathe the spirit of friendship which may have been the subject regarded as the key to Utopia by Thomas More himself.

If friendship and the community of equals associated with it was in our true interest as human beings and Christians, could the wise and good engage in politics unscathed without the establishment of such a community and the redefinition of true nobility which it represented? The debates on
counsel, true nobility and friendship thus interlocked. Erasmus, meditating on the maxim ‘To be a slave to your theatre’, again anticipated the discussion in *Utopia* by asking how adaptable we can be, how accommodating to circumstances, without loss of integrity. In the world as it is and because of human variability, having many friends depended on a protean adaptability. On the one hand, as Horace had shown in his *Satires*, there was ‘a disgusting type of flattery which assents to everything in everybody’. In Holy Scripture we were told that ‘the fool is as inconstant as the moon; the wise man like the sun is always himself’. And yet, some accommodation to prevent danger to oneself or one’s household might be sensible. St Paul ‘became all things to all men, that he might win all for Christ’. Then again, the ambitious man, risking honour, conscience and peace of mind, might win the friendship of his prince, only to fall away from the friendship of Christ.  

Most commentators would agree that this balancing of integrity and accommodation to circumstance, nobility and its perversion, true and false interests and pleasures form powerful and consistent themes traversing the two books of *Utopia* and cementing their unity. They would also agree that Book I offers a devastating indictment of early sixteenth-century government and society. There, the pursuit of false pleasure and false interests is the norm. Friendship is negated in favour of competitive emulation, community eroded by gross inequality. Folly shuts out wisdom along with Christian precept in all areas of policy – fiscal, military, economic and penal. Wisdom is at such a disadvantage that Hythloday can mount a strong case for detachment from public life. As Budé points out, a society of emulative and destructive competition is sustained and operated by legally trained mediators and ‘fixers’ such as Budé and Thomas More himself (16–17). It relentlessly shapes its members’ expectations, aspirations and standards of behaviour. The discussion moves on to explore how the good and wise should operate in such a context – accepting corruption or appearing as idealistic fools – and whether it is possible to envisage an alternative world, another theatre in which friendship might flourish, wisdom be sustained, learning be valued and true pleasure be pursued; a theatre in which the truly good, noble and wise would not have to accommodate themselves to a context premised on the surrender of principle.

When ‘Thomas More’ is introduced to Raphael Hythloday by Peter Giles outside the church of Notre Dame in Antwerp he is encountering the perfectly equipped counsellor, a man designed to make a difference in politics. Having dispersed his patrimony, Raphael has no personal or familial interest in the acquisition of power and influence. He is without ambition and values his liberty more highly than the trappings of power. He is, moreover, vastly experienced and a shrewd analyst, a man who has not only ranged
across the face of the globe but one whose experiences have been refined by his deep learning, especially in philosophy and particularly in the Greeks. ‘More’ urges him to set aside his personal distaste for power since, devoid of ambition, Raphael is especially well equipped to guide and incite a great prince to do good things. Raphael responds by shifting the debate from the issue of ability to that of effectiveness. What hope would he have of being heard? His answer is ‘Very little’ and his reasons are given added impact by some case studies.

To begin with, Raphael insists that he would confront the predilection of princes for gloria, for war over peace, for the emulative struggle which equips them to triumph over their rivals. Secondly, in courts composed of ‘people who envy everyone else and admire only themselves’, he would confront minds closed by a similar emulative competition. He illustrates this with an account of a discussion in the court, familiar to More, of Archbishop John Morton. The debate is over a more rational and Christian penal practice than the harsh one already failing to reduce offending in a society where inequity and deprivation generate ever more crime. The portrait of Morton is deeply ambiguous and his court represented as fawning, competitive and closed-minded. The conclusion is that, in such a context, the philosopher and his counsel are barely relevant (15–28).

More’s riposte is to advise persistence: to ‘overcome your aversion’ (28). Otherwise, what hope was there for Plato’s desired collaboration between philosophers and kings? Perhaps alluding to Erasmus, Raphael pointed out that philosophers had already written books of advice for princes and that Plato’s own experience as royal counsellor had been miserable and fruitless. To underline the point he cited two further examples. The first was a discussion of aggressive foreign policy at the court of the King of France. To preach the curtailment of territorial ambition, to urge concentration on ruling well what you have, would be laughed out of a court where gloria and dynastic competition were the norm. Similarly, faced with the fiscal rapacity of dynastic state builders, to advise the limitation of royal treasuries would be to be dismissed (28–34). ‘More’ sees the validity of these points but complains that Raphael is behaving as if he were an actor in one theatre when the curial context is quite another. The philosophy to be used is one ‘better suited for the political arena, that takes its cue, adapts itself to the drama in hand, and acts its part neatly and appropriately’ (35–6). Not only behaviour but counsel, and the philosophy underpinning it, must be accommodated to the theatre of contemporary politics. Raphael’s rejoinder is extensive and vigorous. To adopt an accommodational mode would be like the healer attempting to cure madness by becoming mad himself. He rejects the lie involved in such practice and his radicalism is suddenly revealed in
his first reference to Utopia. The shaping force behind contemporary political culture, he alleges, is private property. In that context, to evoke the communism of the Utopians (and here More anticipated a common reader response to *Utopia*) ‘would seem inappropriate’. Yet to follow the politics of accommodation would be to set aside Christ’s rule and His injunction against dissembling. Those, who have accommodated Christ’s teachings to the world as it is, have only made men’s consciences secure in doing evil. For Raphael, the wise man’s choice is stark indeed. Either one maintains one’s integrity and remains different, aloof and ignored, or one adopts the mores of a distorted and distorting political culture and becomes as guilty as the others. There can be no just or happy government without the community of goods advocated by Plato and practised by the Utopians. The implication is that, if ‘More’ is right in his advocacy of political ‘realism’, Christ and Plato are wrong (35–9).

Yet, in a final vital move, Raphael suggests that even if good advice were listened to and resulted in desirable legislation it could never be fully effective. The indictment moves from the flaws of courts to those of society in general. ‘The social evils I mentioned may be alleviated and their effects mitigated for a while, but so long as private property remains, there is no hope at all of effecting a cure and restoring society to good health’ (39). Not only does wise counsel face an intimidating uphill struggle; even when it results in law-making it will be ineffective in society as it is, in the present theatre of politics. The culmination of the debate on counsel is, then, the issue of the limiting and constraining force of social and political structures, customs and conventions. Private property limits the possibilities in a damaging way. Utopia, based on communal property, offers, in Raphael’s view, an ideal alternative. ‘More’ rehearses the well-known Aristotelian objections to a society based on communal property: the absence of private incentives to effort, disorder and the collapse of all authority. To demonstrate the invalidity of these objections, Raphael offers to give a full account of Utopia. It will be a society in which the barriers to wisdom have collapsed and where minds are open to the philosophers’ teachings.

In his indictment of sixteenth-century society, More identifies the key source of its dysfunctionality as pride, but it is important to recognize that it is a particular kind of pride which causes such devastating damage. It is not simply pride in possessions, lineage, power or reputation, misguided though such a pride may be, but a pride in that these things enable us to triumph over others, an emulative pride. ‘Pride measures her advantages not by what she has but by what other people lack. Pride would not deign even to be made a goddess if there were no wretched for her to sneer at and domineer over. Her good fortune is dazzling only by contrast with the
miseries of others, her riches are valuable only as they torment and tantalise the poverty of others.’ The *sine qua non* of such pride is inequality and the grosser that is the more corrosive it becomes. It glories ‘in putting down others by superfluous display’ (109, 56–7). As Jerome Busleyden pointed out, in his contribution to the *parerga*, the pride of competitive emulation pits everyone against everyone else, creating a society of enemies rather than a community of friends (128).

More’s emphasis on what Budé called ‘idiot competition’ (119) is not unique to *Utopia*. His translations from Lucian contained the observation that ‘surely to deem another’s good fortune one’s own misfortune, to rage at the success of others, to be vexed by praise of others, to be tormented by another’s happiness – is not this the greatest misery, is it not the most extreme madness?’ And, in *Richard III*, More has King Edward IV, on his deathbed, condemn at length the destructiveness of emulative competition.

In the *Life of Pico* an envious man demanded to receive twice whatever his neighbour had. When the neighbour lost one eye, the man had both of his own put out. In his later work, More was still hammering on this theme of emulous madness. *A Dialogue of Comfort* warned his readers that prosperity all too easily nurtured pride and self-regard, which in turn fed emulative disdain for others. About the same time, in *A Treatise on the Passion*, they were urged to identify the pride which brought down Satan with those emulative qualities of aspiring to raise ourselves while being eager to demean others. Erasmus, in his book most closely associated with *Utopia*, *The Praise of Folly*, suggested that almost all relationships in existing society were dependent on illusions, self-satisfaction and self-delusion; that is, on folly. Such folly was common to all, at once a social glue, but in its emulative dimension poisoning all social relationships.

What Augustine had called the *libido domandi*, the lust to assert ourselves over others, needed the illusion that it was compatible with the ‘happiness’, glory and nobility of the ‘real’ world while denigrating the ‘unrealism’ of a society based on the Platonic-Pythagorean-Christian-Erasman ideal of equality and friendship, where the common good and private interest were become one in a culture of mutual support.

It followed that, in order to nourish that source of pride – the *libido domandi* – and the emulative triumph associated with it, dissimulation was essential. To protect the claim to superior wisdom, minds must be closed to the possible validity of the arguments of others. We indulge the fantasy of being wiser than anyone else, just as, to protect status and position, we amass superfluous possessions, assuring ourselves that they are the key to the good life when they clearly are not. The display of excess in food, housing, clothing, horses, retainers, servants, wives, lineage, ‘nobility’ and glory...
transcended the limitations of others’ lives. But these markers of social discrimination only worked when subscription to the illusion sustaining them was universal or near-universal and that depended on the wisdom of philosophy being shut out. To protect the Emperor’s new clothes, the small boy had to be kept away from the parade.

‘Pride is a serpent from hell that twists itself around the hearts of men acting like a suckfish to hold them back from choosing a better way of life’ (109–10). Ultimately, we must deceive ourselves as well as others, pretending that our bogus superiority is true nobility, true magnificence, true virtue and true pleasure when, on the contrary, it is both an expression of ‘the great emptiness lying concealed at the heart of things’ and a catalyst for our fear, suspicion and enmity towards others. If the good society was a community of friends, contemporary society had become a collection of enemies, bound together by little more than emulative competition. Piercing its self-delusion, we might, admittedly somewhat anachronistically, call it a dystopia, the dystopian reality which evokes Raphael’s, ‘More’’s and the readers’ sustained moral outrage.

Utopia’s claim to ideality, then, rests on overcoming or containing competitive emulation. It achieves this not by moral exhortation but by recon-textualizing the natural propensity of almost everyone to calculate and pursue their own interests. ‘In other places men talk very liberally of the commonwealth but what they mean is simply their own wealth; in Utopia, where there is no private business, every man zealously pursues the public business. And in both cases men are right to act as they do’ (107; my emphasis). Rationality and interest, though not morality, become relative to the circumstances in which they have to operate. To use a metaphor familiar to More and his collaborators, society can either be a theatre of competitive emulation or a theatre of equality and friendship. Both, in radically different ways, are theatres which shape what is perceived as rational and/or in their members’ interests.

How does Utopia achieve this shift in political culture, this redefinition of interests and rationality? A large part of that transformation rests on the detailed removal of every occasion for emulative triumph. Most critically, communal property eliminates all opportunities for displays of superfluous private wealth. In Utopia dress is almost entirely uniform, as is housing, which is regularly reallocated: ‘there is nothing private or exclusive’ (47). Dining is communal and all are equally free to draw upon the communal store. Jewels, gold and silver are demeaned. Cosmetic enhancement is detested. Travel is controlled. The household is made as uniform, in size and personnel, as possible. All have equal access to health care and education. The obligation to work hard for uniformly restricted hours is common to
all and all are obliged to work in both agriculture and trade. Everyone’s day conforms to a uniform pattern. Just as all must work equally, so all have equal leisure and use it to pursue those true pleasures which they associate with the mind. All have access to learning and public lectures. ‘The chief aim of their constitution is that, as far as public needs permit, all citizens should be free to withdraw as much time as possible from the service of the body and devote themselves to the freedom and culture of the mind. For that, they think, is the real happiness of life’ (55).

The markers commonly associated with elite culture or aristocratic prestige are absent. Horses are few and oxen, because of their usefulness, are preferred. Hunting and gambling are regarded as illusory pastimes, ‘unworthy of free men’ (73). Sexual promiscuity, or the attempt to practise it, is regarded as a crime. Surplus produce is either stored against future need or exported. There are, then, minimal markers of status: no prescriptive or inherited rights to authority over others, no legal exemptions or privileges, and canvassing for political preferment is proscribed. Women have the same entitlement to leisure and education as men. There is a representative form of government in which all households share equally. Faction and conspiracy, the emulative competition of rival political groups, are prevented by the proscription of political discussion outside of the senate or popular assembly. The only deviations from equality of status, privileges and esteem relate to those licensed from work, state officials, bondsmen and a general deferring to older over younger. The first of these categories includes those officers charged with supervising the work of others, although they tend not to take advantage of the exemption (51, 53). Slavery is reserved for those convicted of a crime, prisoners of war, foreigners condemned to death in their own country, and the overworked poor of foreign countries who voluntarily choose slavery in Utopia. These bondsmen are distinguished in their physical appearance and by being assigned the most demeaning work. Utopian citizens who have been sentenced to slavery are treated the most harshly since ‘they had an excellent education and the best of moral training, yet still couldn’t be restrained from wrongdoing’ (47, 80). Those most fitted for the pursuit of knowledge are exempted from manual work. If they are productive and excel, their exemption continues. Otherwise, they revert to physical labour. But equally those labourers who excel in their studies may be released from work for intellectual pursuits. The operative standard is merit and value to society, not privilege. Even the elected prince is not distinguished by dress or regalia: ‘he is known only by a sheaf of grain carried before him’ (84). Fear of want and pride ‘which glories in putting down others by superfluous display of possession’ may be common to Europe. ‘But this sort of vice has no place whatever in the Utopian way of life’ (56–7).
When these bases of emulative competition were eliminated, many of those things perversely regarded as pleasures went with them. The self-delusion of those who ‘act as if they were set apart by nature herself, rather than their own fantasies’ was punctured (71). Spurious pleasures were unobtainable in Utopia because the means of their satisfaction were unavailable. What then remained to be said about the pleasures of Utopian life? Raphael’s answer sounds so bold as to suggest a hedonism verging on a crudely understood Epicureanism: ‘… no kind of pleasure is forbidden, provided harm does not come of it’ (60). The qualification is vital for, as we have seen, the pursuit of false pleasure does enormous harm. They may ‘seem rather too much inclined to the view that all or the most important part of human happiness consists of pleasure’ (67–8). Two things offset that perception. The first is their religion which is serious, strict, stern and forbidding and to the principles of which they always relate considerations of true happiness. The second is their view of pleasure. Happiness is only found, they believe, in virtuous pleasure. Indeed, some of them, like St Augustine, claim that ‘virtue is itself happiness’ (68–9). The two rules of virtuous happiness are to love God, to whom we owe our existence and all happiness, and to live as free of anxiety and as full of joy as possible while helping others to do the same. True pleasure therefore does not injure others, is not followed by pain and does not preclude a greater pleasure. Amongst true pleasures they give priority to those of the mind. ‘Tireless in intellectual pursuits’, they include in these: knowledge, delight in contemplating truth and in looking back on a life well spent and in looking forward to the hope of happiness to come. The lesser pleasures of the body fall into two categories. Sensory pleasures remain true pleasures only as long as they bring no pain to ourselves or others. More valued than them is a ‘calm and harmonious state of the body’ (74–5). The concern for the welfare and happiness of others which is built into these principles is in itself anti-emulative. The same can be said of their attitude to religion.

Three basic religious truths are insisted upon: the beliefs that the soul is immortal, that we are born for happiness, and that, after death, we will be judged and rewarded according to the true virtue of our living. Without these ‘rational’ principles men would maximize pleasure and minimize pain without regard to virtue. No one would pursue hard and painful virtues or give up any pleasure, however vicious, or suffer pain, when the advantage was only to others and not to themselves.

Beyond these minimal fundamentals, Utopians may adopt whatever form of religious beliefs they choose, provided they do no harm to others. The vast majority believe in an unknown God: ‘a single power, unknown, eternal, infinite, inexplicable, far beyond the grasp of the human mind, and
diffused throughout the universe, not physically, but in influence’. Those who proselytize, slighting other religions and asserting the superiority of their own, are, however, sentenced to exile. The Utopians are impressed by Christianity, to which Raphael and his comrades introduce them, and some of them are baptized. What they find most impressive is Christ’s encouragement to community of goods and the persistence of this practice ‘among the truest groups of Christians’. In religion, as in other things, the Utopians are able to show an openness of mind which is unfettered by emulative pride. They may only preach ‘quietly, modestly, rationally and without bitterness towards others’. Resort to abuse or violence is punished by exile or slavery (96–7).

The emulative capacities associated with possessions, display, leisure, access to learning, food and housing, travel, work and religious superiority have been removed. Accordingly, they make war, emulative violence, in a way which robs it of all glory. Subterfuge, assassination, the encouragement of treachery, the exploitation of neighbours and hiring of mercenaries are amongst their first recourse. They despise war as ‘an activity fit only for beasts’ and treat it with contempt. So they hire ‘the worst possible men’ for the improper use of mercenary slaughter. War is an ignoble, not an ennobling, activity and when Utopians themselves fight it is always in defence of their own territory and a collective responsibility and burden. On no account would they allow foreign auxiliaries to fight on their land (92, 95).

The contrast with a Europe in which inequality and the triumphant exploitation of it in all conceivable forms were normal was indeed stark and shocking: ‘empty, ceremonial honours’, absent in Utopia, were the stock in trade of early modern Europe. The false nobility of slaughtering animals and humans, in hunting and war, was regarded as contemptible in Utopia, even if, in the last resort, war could become a necessity. But More would not concede that this meant that in Utopia people were more rational or, in essence, better than Europeans: ‘in both cases men are right to act as they do’ (107). ‘These and the like attitudes the Utopians have picked up partly from their upbringing, since the institutions of their community are completely opposed to such folly, partly from instruction and the reading of good books’ (65). ‘Different customs, different feelings’ (63). The visit to Utopia of the Anemolian ambassadors, accoutred in the full panoply of a display of superiority in dress, gold chains and jewels, illustrates the point. To the Utopians their finery looks clownish and the ambassadors are deeply embarrassed by this reaction. But, perhaps the significant point is that after a few days the Anemolians, realizing their mistake, leave off their display and adopt Utopian ways (63–5). The theatre in which we are called upon to act our part informs the rationality and good sense, the appropriateness
of our behaviour. In Europe the theatre of convention has gone badly and destructively wrong. *Utopia* raises the question of whether it is possible to conceive a better theatre in which it would be in our interests to act with true nobility, to pursue true happiness and to relate to others as equal friends not enemies, a theatre in which justice would prevail and the wise be able to return from exile to be listened to by open minds.

The final paragraphs of *Utopia* bring the conversation to a close with ‘More’ s own reflections on what he had heard. The note struck is one of indeterminacy, even scepticism, and some commentators have taken this to indicate the real More’s final attitude to Utopia – at best hesitation, at worst scepticism. ‘More’ reflects on the ‘absurdity’ of some Utopian customs and laws: those relating to war, religion but above all ‘their communal living and their moneyless economy’ (110). But, observing Raphael’s weariness and knowing his objection to those who ‘might not appear knowing enough unless they found something to criticise in other men’s ideas’, he ended by praising the Utopian way of life which in so many fundamental respects he found absurd. There is no finality here; no resolution of the prolonged dialogue we have been witness to. Yet we should note that this indeterminacy is powerfully charged with irony in two principal respects. The first is the preference of *Thomas Morus* – the sceptical fool – for the ‘nobility, magnificence, splendour and majesty, which (in the popular view) are the true ornaments and glory of any commonwealth’ but which are rejected by the Utopians as false, illusory and destructive. In other words, ‘More’ remains (realistically or is it tragically?) in the theatre of contemporary European society, an actor on its stage, his perceptions conditioned by its conventions and scripts. Secondly, Raphael has condemned the fawning condescension, the appeasement of evil, the accommodation with the world as it is, the desire to win favour rather than speak the truth and risk offending which he found so characteristic of European courts (14) and so alien to the open-minded culture of the Utopians. ‘This readiness to learn is, I think, the really important reason for their being better governed and living more happily than we do, though we are not inferior to them in brains or resources’ (41). ‘More’ remains silent about his objections and ‘with praise for the Utopian way of life and his account of it’ takes Raphael in to supper. The theatre of interests, in which ‘More’ continues to play his part, retains its hold. The question is whether the reader’s response will be governed by the same grip of convention and self-delusion.

*Utopia* is then unambiguously engaged with the issue of true interest/true pleasure and their necessary universality in a society which has eradicated emulative pride, a society embodying friendship and the ‘folly’ of Christian charity. But, however we look at it, the work leaves us with urgent and, in
some cases, disturbing questions. How can justice and law/custom be made convergent? How can goodness be given force in a society already distorted by pride and managed by legal chicanery (117)? How can the destructive consequences of an emulative and acquisitive social and political culture be eliminated and can this be done without removing the inequities of riches and poverty, without the ‘absurdity’ and ‘folly’ of communism? Perhaps the final unanswered question, the nub of the work’s interpretative indeterminacy, is whether wisdom and power can ever be reconciled or is power doomed to mistake wisdom and folly?

Like so many of the poets, novelists and satirists who came after him, More seems to be saying that we need fiction to see reality afresh: in particular, we need utopian fiction to see the reality of our own society and the costs of putting it right. Inevitably, for a humanist like More, such a project draws on the Platonic ‘best state’ exercise just as, for its inverse, it draws on the Socratic image of the cave. Plato, pursuing the logical path or dialectic of reason, produced limited fictions veiling an engagement with ideas on the level of abstraction. In order to engage reason with imagination and emotion, Thomas More had to embrace a richer but more elusive fiction. Raphael described his ideal society ‘as if he had walked its streets and sat in its gardens’. The challenge of the ideal society of More’s aspiration was how to reasonably manage imagination and emotion without crushing both under the imperative of reshaping the human will, without replicating the great emptiness at the heart of things. One of his tools was an elusive, teasing humour. Whether he succeeded is perhaps the most open of all the open questions.

NOTES

1 I have preferred the translation in G. M. Logan and R. M. Adams (eds.), Thomas More: Utopia (Cambridge University Press, 1989). References will be to this edition and will appear in brackets in the text (with one exception which is noted below).


The principal classical sources More draws on in *Utopia* include, as well as Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras, Cicero, Augustine, Aquinas, Anselm, Plutarch and Lucian.


Erasmus, *Adages*, p. 158. A sharper version of this is to be found in Aristotle, *Politics*, II.3.1161b35.


Thompson (ed.), *Translations of Lucian*, p. 97.

Thomas More’s *Utopia*


34. Wootton, ‘Friendship Portrayed’, p. 45.


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