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Scott M. Cameron
Huron University College, scamer45@uwo.ca

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Interdependencies of Idea and Practice in More’s *Utopia*

Scott M. Cameron, Huron University College

Abstract: In Thomas More’s *Utopia*, a prominent debate between the two characters Morus and Hythloday considers to what extent the philosopher should place himself at the service of government. Hythloday is uncompromisingly idealistic; if the philosopher’s purpose lies in uncovering ultimate truth, then performing even the most well-meaning public service would at best distract him from this goal. Morus, a fictionalised version of the historical author, counters with his pragmatic vision that individuals and ideas must both work in the best interests of the majority of the population, even in the face of entrenched immorality and corruption. Critical interpretations of the *Utopia* tend to read the text as favouring Morus’ position, a case bolstered by reference to the actions and words of the historical More. Interpreting the *Utopia* as a stand-alone text, however, reveals the interdependency of Morus’ practice and Hythloday’s ideals. The text presents an unresolved dialectic of ideal and practice, one in which each side cannot make its argument with constant reference and concession to the other. Ultimately, ideal and practice are inseparable; indeed they are drawn together, with mutual fascination, gracious hospitality, and not without the occasional clash, in a process which actively considers real world society in relation to the ideal for the ultimate betterment of both.

Keywords: Thomas More; Utopia; practice; ideal; Hythloday

For, as Aristotle saith, it is not *gnosis* [knowledge] but *praxis* [action] must be the fruit; and how *praxis* can be, without being moved to practise, it is no hard matter to consider.

- Philip Sidney, “The Defense of Poesy” (265)

More’s *Utopia* sparked an entire genre of literary and political thinking since its initial publication in 1516, with a copia of critical literature following inevitably in its wake.¹ A curious divide has emerged in readings of More’s work: while political thinkers tend to overlook the ways the text’s literary aspects inform its meaning, literary scholars tend to neglect the work’s political import. More’s *Utopia* presents an extended meditation on the relationship between philosophical ideals and socio-political practices; clearly this still divides political and literary readings of the text. This debate is staged explicitly between the characters of Morus and Hythloday in Part I – but the explicit debate, left unresolved, continues on the level of form in

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¹ *A note on terminology:* References to “More” refer to the historical author of the *Utopia*. References to “Morus” refer to the character within More’s text. References to the Utopia (in plain type) refer to More’s fictional ideal society; references to the *Utopia* (italicised) refer to his text.
the entirety of the *Utopia*. It stages a dialogic relationship between idea and practice, in which autonomy of either is not only impossible but entirely undesirable. This essay will consider the implications of Morus’ and Hythloday’s arguments, before examining the emergent resolution of the apparent binaries within the debate. In terms of the overall question of whether the text as a whole serves to endorse either Morus’ or Hythloday’s positions, I argue that the text privileges Morus’ pragmatic philosophy, but heavily emphasises its inherent reliance upon ideals.

The explicit debate between Morus and Hythloday in Book I over the issue of the role of the philosopher in public life foregrounds the question of how best to enact principle into practice. It establishes Morus as a pragmatic thinker in contrast to his rhetorical opponent’s idealism. Hythloday is militantly Platonic, arguing that true philosophy must remain unencumbered by ties to the imperfect world. By engaging in public life, the philosopher shackles his mind to the immorality and self-interest of rulers and their sycophants. Public discourse is fundamentally unsuitable for philosophy; what use, after all, do self-interested, scheming kings and councillors have for the great truths philosophers offer? Altering standards of philosophical discourse would but corrupt the philosopher: “while I try to cure others of madness, I’ll be raving along with them myself.” “There is no place for philosophy in the councils of kings” (More, 32-35). For Hythloday, principles are practice in and of themselves, needing no practical application.

Morus rebuts with measured pragmatism. “For Raphael it is the context that must adapt to philosophy”; by making philosophy suit its context, Morus advocates for “another philosophy… that takes its cue, adapts itself to the drama at hand, and acts its part neatly and appropriately” (Baker-Smith, 126; More, 35-36). Philosophy must serve the public interest by whatever means it can. Despite the limitations of current institutions, it must humbly aim to “make as little bad as possible” (More, 36). The philosopher must assume the role of an actor, even at the expense of ideal truth. Morus privileges flawed practice over perfect ideals – a political philosophy I label as ‘pragmatic’. His is not, to be clear, the nineteenth century Pragmatism of William James – Morus would not have affirmed that “Truth HAPPENS to an idea. It BECOMES true, is MADE true by events.” But Morus might well agree that ideas are proven true by events. His outlook incorporates practice as an inherent part of his epistemology. The best idea is not necessarily true in an idealist sense, but rather is able to make the greatest positive change in the most individual lives. Duty thus trumps philosophical perfectionism: “If you cannot pluck up bad ideas by the root, or cure long-standing evils to your heart’s content, you must not therefore abandon the commonwealth” (More, 36). Hythloday strives to reach philosophical perfection for himself as a thinker; Morus seeks to better the population at large by implementing philosophically-based practices.

Morus’ and Hythloday’s debate in Book I, left conspicuously unresolved, challenges its readers to determine whether Hythloday’s subsequent description of the Utopia serves to validate either his or Morus’ argument (Fox, 92). Since the narrative refuses to resolve the debate explicitly, the reader must actively look beyond either argument and towards the narrative as a complete structure for resolution. The text’s meaning is a product of both its arguments and its
mode of presentation – a meaning which is inherently ambiguous, and one which has provoked remarkable scholarly debate.

What roles then does the *Utopia* prescribe for idealistic and pragmatic philosophies? Can the two coexist, even cooperate, or are they fundamentally opposed? Critical debate over these questions tends to fall between two extremes and is centred on the question of to what degree Morus can be said to represent More. No critics argue that Hythloday is entirely correct; therefore the question is to what degree the text endorses or undermines Morus’ arguments. If Morus does represent More the historical author, it follows that the text presents Hythloday as a peddler of idealist nonsense, in contrast to More/Morus’ responsible pragmatism. The historical More’s work in royal courts would support this view. But if Morus is a less direct representation of More, then the text still presents two opposing positions of ideal and practice, but it must endorse a position incorporating more of Hythloday’s idealism in addition to Morus’ strong pragmatic sense. Gerard Wegemer represents the former position best, advocating for a synonymous More/Morus, and Alistair Fox the latter, advocating for a divided More/Morus. I stand closer to Fox on this issue, considering More and Morus separated in the *Utopia* as a text, though I will disagree with his understanding of Morus’ and Hythloday’s debate as a fruitless argument; I concede on the other hand that from a biographical standpoint, as Wegemer argues, More may have intended Morus to represent himself.

On the one hand, Wegemer argues that More’s/Morus’ position, as expressed in the *Utopia* and More’s other writings, manifests a Christian ideal of duty and sacrifice. Christian devotion and philosophy prove their strength through actions serving the population at large. “(Duty) was an indispensable part of our human condition and therefore an indispensable means of perfection” (Wegemer, “Civic Life,” 79). Wegemer aligns the historical More with the fictional Morus against Hythloday’s idealism (Wegemer, Statesmanship, 107). He points out the flaws in Hythloday’s arguments, such as the equivocal readings his classical and Biblical allusions offer (Wegemer, “Civic Life,” 70-72). The sole difference between More and Morus, Wegemer argues, is Morus’ failure to verbalise More’s Christian sense of obligation – a difference following from Morus’ aversion to divine appeals in a Renaissance humanist tradition of recognizing the autonomy of the spheres of God and of Creation (Wegemer, “Civic Life,” 73). Wegemer reads Morus as a mere mouthpiece for More's views about the value of imperfect practice over pure ideal.

Wegemer’s approach to the *Utopia* is biographical and historical as well as literary; naturally, Alistair Fox’s opposing position grants distance between the textual Morus and the historical More. Fox sees Hythloday and Morus as representing conflicting idealistic and pragmatic impulses within the historical author.

Hythlodaeus’s idealistic optimism – the view that society can be radically reformed – paradoxically supports an extreme form of pessimistic withdrawal, while [Morus’] skeptical pessimism – based on a belief that human nature is irremediably imperfect – motivates a comparatively optimistic attempt to ameliorate the worst effects of that imperfection (Fox, 81).
Fox sees these two impulses embattled in unresolved conflict: we see the ideal emerge alongside the reasons for its ultimate practical irrelevance. Where Wegemer emphasises the victory of Morus’ pragmatic position, Fox emphasises the text’s conflicted, “equivocal” and “inconclusive” nature. Attempts to realise utopias, he writes, demand a complete authoritarian control which “...can promote tyranny and dehumanization, as the experience… of Stalinist Russia of Maoist China proves.” The *Utopia* represents the ideal society and the problems inherent in realizing it – its very name being etymologically “happy place,” eu-topia, and “not-place,” ou-topia, the text must present a dual vision which inspires in the face of the practical realities which may lead “to neuroticism or, worse, despair” (13, 106-7). The text leaves the reader in a state of paralysis in the face of conflicting practices and ideals, but one which offers tacit hope.

The readings of Wegemer and Fox both have their strengths: given More’s religious convictions, Wegemer’s emphasis on the *Utopia*’s Christian underpinnings foregrounds a major aspect of his thought overlooked in criticism offered by more secular scholars. Fox elucidates well the internal tensions of idealism, satire, and pragmatism in the *Utopia*’s rhetorical structure. But Wegemer’s and Fox’s approaches both understand ideals and practices as necessarily opposed in a fruitless conflict – an approach which we might see as being validated by the rigorous debate staged between Morus and Hythloday. The convivial character of their discussion undermines this conflictive reading, however. Morus refers to “My dear Raphael,” carrying through the formality’s affection by taking “him by the hand and lead[ing] him in to supper” (More, 41). This leads us to the synthetic critical view which sees the passionate debate between ideal and practice as not only a necessity, but a positive good. I wish to emphasise the generative aspect of this debate, which Fox and Wegemer undervalue. The text leans towards supporting Morus’ pragmatism but envisages the most practical philosophies as underwritten by idealism.

Lucy Sargisson’s a vision of the “Curious Relationship Between Politics and Utopia” sees the two as inextricably entwined. Sargisson’s interdisciplinary study sees a symbiotic relationship of politics and Utopian literature; political realities give Utopian thinkers a context in which to imagine a better world, as Utopian visions give politics purpose and direction. Utopian visions, read with sensitivity and perspicacity, can and should “(drive) and (inspire) us to move onwards towards our particular vision of the better world” (41-44).

How does this symbiotic relationship of practice and ideals manifest itself in the relationship of Morus the pragmatist and Hythloday the idealist? I will begin to answer this question by refuting Wegemer’s oppositional understanding of Morus’ and Hythloday’s relationship. Wegemer, a staunch supporter of More/Morus as an upright, Christian, and moral individual, argues convincingly that Hythloday displays ingratitude and closed-mindedness in comparison with Morus’ Christian generosity. Morus shows great charity to Raphael throughout both books. Morus does not respond to Raphael’s harsh tone and blunt criticisms; and since Raphael has shown that he is not interested in considering views contrary to his own, Morus treats this intolerant old man kindly, takes him by the arm and leads him to lunch, and later to dinner (Civic Life, 73).
Hythloday is something of an ingrate. But I posit that we should reread Hythloday’s comparative ingratitude as a part of a larger commentary on the hospitality owed to idealist thinkers. Wegemer overlooks the hospitality Hythloday enjoys in his voyages. The itinerant philosopher can speak “...as shrewdly about the manners and governments of each place he had briefly visited as if he had lived there all his life” (More, 13). These societies would have had little to gain by welcoming this strange, scholastic visitor, and yet he clearly has been welcomed, sheltered, and fed, all his curiosities answered. True, this is implied evidence, but more compellingly, Hythloday’s relationship with Morus follows a model of Homeric hospitality. Giles comments that Hythloday’s traveling was like “that of Ulysses [Odysseus], or rather Plato” – indeed an apt lineage (More, 10). Both Hythloday and Odysseus represent the figure of the traveller offering personal narratives in exchange for hospitality. “In the Odyssey hospitality is often blind”, being extended without second thought from kings and swineherds alike (Hefferman, 14). This blind hospitality is paralleled in the Utopia, a text very conscious of its Classical forebears. After going through but “the usual civilities of strangers upon their first meeting,” Morus receives Hythloday in his home for food and conversation (More, 11). Symbolic offerings of real food and shelter such as these sustain the aged nomad.

In the Odyssey and the Utopia, hospitality is reciprocal. As the host provides for his guest, so must the guest repay it in gratitude and congeniality (Hefferman, 15). Receiving material hospitality, the thinker offers naturally his thoughts, just as Odysseus offers “the tale of all my trials” to his host, promising that

.... I may–
when I’ve escaped from fate’s most cruel day–
receive you, though my home is far away (Homer, IX.14-20).

As Wegemer charges, Hythloday does come up short here. But his arrogance serves to emphasise what the practical world owes the idealistic world in spite of. Aloof attitudes, haughty conceits, and near-disdain for the world of affairs – the idealist can present such a face. Morus’ example is in overlooking such faults in favour of the substantial wisdom Hythloday offers. Morus finds much to criticise in pure idealism and scholastic philosophies – but he never denies their place at the table, be it for conference or for dinner. This tangible hospitality is the first aspect of the relationship the Utopia advocates for between idealists and the rest of the world: even in the face of seeming ingratitude, warmth, provision, and sustenance should be offered readily to thinkers. Morus leaves Hythloday and his recollections with criticisms, but also with a desire “for talking them over in more detail,” illustrating his constant openness to ideas (More, 110). Displays of hospitality enable and parallel this reciprocity of ideal and practice.

The Utopia goes beyond this voluntary reciprocity by viewing ideals and practice as inherently inseparable. Morus and Hythloday, appearing first as a binary of pragmatic and idealistic, move from this hospitable, reciprocal conversation towards utter interdependence. Nina Chordas points out the real-world implications of the Utopian form; as much as Hythloday might consider himself untainted by the world of politics, he can avoid it neither in his own discourse nor in the narrative he is a part of. Utopian descriptions engage in political discourse
by describing “real” (fictional) societies, ultimately challenging reality to meet the standards laid out in fiction (iv-v, 4-7). Hythloday’s account of the vaguely placed New World Utopia functions within the conventions established within Vespucci’s accounts of the Americas, concerning itself with many of the same curiosities and issues such as attitudes towards gold, religious devotions, or martial practices (34-37). Chordas’ insights emphasise the text’s very real import for the world beyond scholastic philosophy. Hythloday’s recollected ideal is doused with the contaminants of practice. In the narrative, it is a set of ideas recollected from ideal practice; in its cultural context, its ideals consider outright what European societies might learn from the strange New World societies, and how their ideals and examples might be implemented in European societies. But in an imperial, literary and historical context, it also asks to what extent new European settlements in the New World can be constructed according to idealist aspirations. Hythloday’s argument for ideals in isolation is unsustainable: ideals have inherent implications for the practical world. As Morus makes explicit concessions to practice, so too does Hythloday, if only by necessity.

Morus’ statement that “it is impossible to make everything good unless all men are good” underlies the text’s attitude towards ideals and practice as a whole. Renaissance humanism underpins his statement in placing ultimate responsibility for earthly affairs in the hands of individual men. The process of negotiation Morus and Hythloday undergo in the Utopia represents a gradual movement towards betterment, if not perfection. “Aspiration and performance are at odds” at the end of the text (Baker-Smith, 225). But Morus and Hythloday began the text as strangers; yes, they disagree fundamentally over how the learned should apply their knowledge, but they leave having gained from the other and desiring to learn more from the other. The reader too participates in this conversation; the reader listens with Morus and Giles to Hythloday’s tale and is drawn into Morus’ and Hythloday’s unresolved debates. In Morus’ pragmatic philosophy, readily apparent potential for practical application does not mark good ideas – rather, all philosophical ideas of merit inherently contain potential for application. By forcing his readers’ participation in a discussion of ideas of real practical import, More brings his readers towards the qualities he hopes might move humankind towards the ideal society. The cynic might remark that it is but inches closer, but the idealist literature penned and real governments constructed over the centuries with such aspirations in mind would be the best testament to the contrary.

Thus, the opposed pragmatic and idealist viewpoints of Morus and Hythloday in Book I’s central argument prove, upon further examination, to possess interrelations, exchanges, and interdependencies which belie any distancing of ideals and practice as outwardly presented in the text. More tells a story about men coming together to talk about an ideal society. Neither can discuss ideals without reference to practice – nor do they want to. Their ideas will trickle into practice, as Hythloday’s thoughts, received and digested by Morus, reach the kings and politicians Morus counsels; Morus’ practical knowledge will influence Hythloday, just as his knowledge of the real world Utopian ideal originates too in practice. Ideal and practice are inseparable; indeed they are drawn together, with mutual fascination, gracious hospitality, and
not without the occasional clash, in a process which actively considers real world society in relation to the ideal for the ultimate betterment of both.

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SCOTT CAMERON is a third year student at Huron University College, pursuing a Specialisation in History and a Major in English Language and Literature. His research interests include the American South and Scottish Jacobitism.