

Excerpts from Utopia

Thomas More, 1516

From Wikipedia: *Utopia* is “A little, true book, not less beneficial than enjoyable, about how things should be in a state and about the new island Utopia”) is a work of fiction and socio-political satire by Thomas More (1478–1535), written in Latin and published in 1516. The book is a frame narrative primarily depicting a fictional island society and its religious, social, and political customs. Many aspects of description of Utopia are reminiscent of life in monasteries.

Description of the Island of Utopia

The island of Utopia is 200 miles broad in the middle, and over a great part of it, but grows narrower at either end. The figure of it is not unlike a crescent. Eleven miles breadth of sea washeth its horns and formeth a considerable bay, encompassed by a shore about 500 miles in extent, and well sheltered from storms. In the bay is no great current. The whole coast is as it were a continued harbour, affording the whole island every advantage of mutual intercourse. Yet the entrance into the bay, owing to rocks and shoals, is very dangerous.

In the middle is a rock which appeareth above water, on whose top is a tower inhabited by a garrison. The other rocks lie under water, and are very dangerous. The channel is known only by the natives, and a stranger entering the bay without one of their pilots would be in imminent danger of shipwreck. Themselves could not pass it in safety, without certain marks on the coast to direct their way. And if these were a little altered, any fleet coming against them, however large, would certainly be lost. On the other side of the island are likewise many harbours; and the coast is so fortified by nature as well as art, that a small force could hinder the descent of a large army. Report saith (and marks of its credibility remain) that this island was originally a part of the continent. Utopus, the conqueror of it, and whose name it now bears (having previously been called Abraxa), brought the government and civility of the rude inhabitants to their present highly improved state. Having easily subdued them, he formed the design of separating them from the continent and encompassing them with the sea. To this end, he ordered a deep channel to be dug 15 miles long; and that the natives might not think he treated them like slaves, he not only obliged them, but also his own soldiers to labour at the work. From the number of hands employed, it was finished with dispatch exceeding every man's expectation; and his neighbours, who at first laughed at the folly of the undertaking, when they saw it accomplished, were struck with admiration and terror.

There are 54 cities in the island, all of them large and well built. Their laws, manners, and customs, are the same, and they resemble each other as nearly as the ground they stand on will allow. The nearest to each other are at least 24 miles asunder; and the most remote, not above a day's journey on foot. Every city sendeth three of her wisest senators once a-year to Amaurot (the capital of the island, and situate in the center), to consult on their common interests. The jurisdiction of every city extendeth at least 20 miles, and farther where they lie wider asunder. No one desireth to enlarge her boundary, for the people consider themselves in the light of good husbands, rather than owners, of their lands.

Question 1. Why would More make it so that his “perfect society” could only exist on an island?

Question 2. What is the point of the last sentence, and what would that imply for a “general” utopia?

Laws of Utopia

If a man aspire ambitiously to any office, he loseth it for certain. They live in loving intercourse with each other, the magistrates never behaving either insolently or cruelly to the people. They affect rather to be called fathers, and by really being such, well merit the appellation. The people pay them all marks of honour, the more freely because none are exacted from them. The prince himself hath no distinction either of garments or a crown; a sheaf of corn only is carried before him, and a wax-light before the high-priest. They have few laws and such is their constitution, they require not many. They much condemn other countries, whose laws, with the commentaries on them, swell so many volumes; esteeming it unreasonable to oblige men to obey a body of laws so large and intricate, as not to be read and understood by every subject.

They have no lawyers among them. For they esteem them a class, whose profession it is to disguise matters, and to writhe the laws. Therefore they think it much better that every man should plead his own cause, and trust it to the judge, as elsewhere the client trusteth it to his counsellor. By this plan they avoid many delays, and find out the truth with more certainty. For after the parties have opened the merits of the cause without the artifices of lawyers, the judge examines the matter and supports the simplicity of those well-meaning persons whom otherwise the crafty would run down. And thus they avoid those evils which appear so remarkable in those countries which labour under a vast load of laws.

Every one of them is skilled in their law. It is a very short study, and the plainest meaning of which words are capable, is ever the sense of it. They argue thus. All laws are promulgated that every man may know his duty. Therefore the plainest construction of words is, what ought to be put upon them. A more refined exposition could not easily be comprehended, and would only make the laws useless to the greater part of mankind, especially to those who most need the guidance of them. It is the same thing, whether you make no law at all, or couch it in terms of which, without a quick apprehension and much study, men cannot find out the true meaning; for the generality of mankind are so dull and so busied in their avocations, that they have neither the leisure nor capacity requisite for such an inquiry.

Some of their neighbours, who long ago, by the assistance of the Utopians, shook off the yoke of tyranny, being struck with the virtue they observed among them, have come to desire magistrates of them, some changing them yearly, others every five years. When they change them, it is with strong expressions of honour and esteem; and in this they seem to have hit upon a very good expedient for their own happiness and safety. Since the good or ill condition of a country dependeth so much on its magistrates, they could not have made a better choice than men whom no advantages can bias. Wealth is of no use to them, who must so soon return to their own country; and being strangers among them, no party interests can agitate them. When public judicatories are swayed by avarice or partiality, justice, the grand sinew of society, is lost.

Question 3. What is More's view of government and law in general?

Question 4. What type of message is More sending out to the Kings of Europe by writing this?