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Epicurean Philosophy of Pleasure in Saint Thomas More's *Utopia*, Part II: **Epicureanism in *Utopia***

Some philological notes

Since Epicureanism was not particularly popular in More's time, we wonder how he got access to this philosophy of pleasure and why he appeared to be fascinated by it. According to Surtz (1949a, p. 89), much has been said of the debt of More to Vespucci. The latter writes in his *New World* "[The Indians] live according to nature, and may be called Epicureans, rather than Stoics" (Vespucci/Nurthrup 1916, p. 6). On the surface, this seems to be a strong argument. The Utopians worship nature (or Nature) and their *summum bonum* is pleasure, rather than virtue (as the Stoics hold it). The American Indians and the Utopians, however, were far apart in their degree of political and social development, the Utopians having reached the peak of civilization imaginable at the time. Why would such a culture follow a "barbaric" ethical system? "Humanistic documents, rather than explorative records, should be considered as furnishing the basic material which More's imagination transformed and utilized in the construction of his literary masterpiece" (Surtz 1949a, p. 90). Since Epicurus has the (well deserved) reputation of being the "master of hedonism", it is only natural to analyze the relation between him and More. As mentioned above, Epicurus was in general disregard for a long time as his philosophy was seen as anti-Christian and utterly immoral. This even went so far that scholars argued: "In their struggle to place pleasure at the summit of creation, they cast down even virtue, the most excellent and most beautiful of all things, and foully command her, the queen of the universe, to serve as a handmaid to brutish exhilaration of the senses" (Vives 1784, 3.17). But even despite such pronouncements made by literary men, Epicurean philosophy started to have its own renaissance. Important for that was Ambrigio Traversari's Latin translation of Diogenes Laertius' *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, in which Laertius, in the 5th century, collected the knowledge of his time and dedicated his entire 10th book to Epicurus. Thanks to him the truth about Epicurus' philosophy and about the man's great character and virtuousness became known. After this book was published, Lorenzo Valla composed his work *De Voluptate ac de Vero Bono (On Pleasure and the True Good)*, which was a momentous piece of writing that influenced humanistic writers drastically and made them "oppose Epicurus to the Epicureans" (as known at the time) and see him as "the moralist of pleasure" (Vansteenbergh 1920, p. 439).

It is likely that especially important for Thomas More was Desiderius Erasmus. Early in his career Erasmus, one of the most significant humanistic scholars and a good friend to More, wrote his work *De Contemptu Mundi (On Contempt for the World)* in which he argues clearly pro-Epicurean, most probably being familiar with Laertius' and/or Valla's respective books. That Erasmus was very fond of Epicurean philosophy becomes very clear in his later colloquy *The Epicurean*. This also coincides with More's position toward the alleged contradiction between Epicureanism and Christianity he should logically have disapproved of, since Erasmus himself wrote "none are greater Epicureans than those Christians that live a pious life" (*Colloquies*, 2, p. 327).

Religion and the fear of God

From a religious point of view, Epicurus would earn great disdain from the Utopians, since he strictly denies the three fundamental truths every Utopian has to believe: the immortality of the human soul (1), the providence of God (2) and retribution in a future life for good and evil deeds (3). Epicurus' position, however, has to be understood in the context of his time. In classical antiquity the Olympian gods were seen as selfish and often acted in arbitrary and excessive manners, therefore people constantly had to literally fear something may happen to them, in both this and the next life. This is quite different to modern Christianity or Buddhism, which promote the development of ones ['God given'] intellect in order to live a moral life, rather than producing sacrifices and engaging in bizarre rituals to please their gods (see Keown 2005, Long 2010). Without the elimination of superstitious fears on the one hand, and anxiety towards death on the other, Epicurean *ataraxia* would be difficult to imagine. Therefore Epicurus portrays the gods as absolutely indifferent to human affairs, existing in their own realm without influencing human actions whatsoever, and even goes so far as to say that there is no afterlife, thus eliminating (religious) concerns about death entirely. Christian philosophers like More or Erasmus, on the contrary, were convinced that the highest pleasure lies exactly in God's eternal rewards of one's good and righteous actions. There are, however, aspects of Epicurean philosophy that work in concordance with the pro-Christian philosophy as expounded in *Utopia*. The Roman author Lucian (Lat. Lucianus Samosatensis; not to be confused with Titus Lucretius Carus), several of whose works were translated by More and Erasmus, frequently refers to both Christians and Epicureans in his works. In his *Pseudomantis*, Lucian tells of Alexander of Abonoteichus (ca. 105-170 AD), a fraudulent 'oracle monger' who deeply hated both Christians and Epicureans as his enemies, the former because their faith is too deep-rooted, the latter because they consider his tricks ridiculous and are immune to religious pretenders like him. Commenting on the fact that Alexander burned Epicurus' writings, Lucian says

That impious character did not at all consider how great advantage that volume would bring to those who set themselves to reading it, and how great peace, tranquility and liberty it would produce in them, for the reason that it would release them from bondage to fears, spectres, and portents, and would take away vain hopes and unbridled desires, and would implant a sane mind and the truth, and would thoroughly purify the soul... by right reason as well as freedom. (Erasmus, *Opera Omnia*, 1, p. 240-41).

The Utopians do not fear specters and portents and have a very clear and positive image of God, and, indeed, the Old Testament also goes to great lengths to show how the religious cults of the Levant and Asia Minor are nothing short of ridiculous. Religion, for the Utopians, equals following rationality, or "a sane mind", to use Lucian's words. Their deity is Nature, and the only way to please Nature is, for one, leading a sensible and righteous life, and, for another, living life with pleasure, for if it is righteous to help others live a pleasant life, and it would be unnatural to deny it to oneself:

After all, you've a duty to yourself as well as to your neighbour, and, if Nature says you must be kind to others, she can't turn round the next moment and say you must be cruel to yourself. The Utopians therefore regard the enjoyment of life – that is pleasure – as the natural object of all human efforts, and natural, as they define it, is synonymous with virtuous. (Utopia, p. 73).

In this respect, Utopian religion and Epicurean philosophy of pleasure are extremely similar, and the type of gods Epicurus rejects are miles apart from the Utopian “Nature” or the Christian “LORD”. Though Epicurus still does deny the three Utopian ‘fundamental truths’, the consequences for people’s lives, here spiritually motivated, there purely philosophically motivated, are widely identical.

On the Nature of Pleasure

Epicurus clearly teaches that mankind’s highest good is pleasure, as opposed to the teachings of most other ancient philosophers, who establish virtue as the highest good. In his *Letter to Menoeceus*, Epicurus writes

Pleasure is the beginning and the end of a felicitous life. We realized that it is the first and innate good and we take it as the starting-point for every choice and aversion and to it we always come back when we assess a good. (Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus)

Pleasure Epicurus defines as the absence of pain and reckons it a matter of course that every creature strive for the largest amount of pleasure and the least amount of pain. These aspects we find apprehended by Erasmus in his *The Epicurean*, in which he allows Hedonius to call the sentiment of Epicurus “divine”, since he “places the Happiness of Man in Pleasure, and judges that Life to be most blessed, that has most Pleasure, and least Pain” (*Colloquies*, 2, p. 327). To Epicurus every pleasure is good and desirable, but not every pleasure should be indulged. This is because some action can ultimately produce greater pain than the initial pleasure it provided, or become an actual hindrance to future pleasure. Epicurus offers us a clear principle of selection, however:

Oftentimes we don't take every pleasure, but pass over many of them in order to avoid a greater annoyance ensuing from them; the same way we prefer many pains to pleasures if enduring these pains brings a greater pleasure as a consequence. [Therefore] not all pleasure is choiceworthy [but] by measuring aspects of utility against aspects of harm we are able to assess things properly. (Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus).

This is again a principle which would please a strictly Catholic person like Thomas More, since such a person is neither desirous of becoming rich, nor of obtaining any kind of social status. The same holds true for the Utopians, who not only do not desire riches, but who disdain them, and whose state system does not even make it possible pursuing a course leading to social status and power by pleasing their superiors or engaging in intrigues. Their election system necessitates possible candidates to have proven themselves trustworthy and virtuous. The Utopians’ disdain for riches becomes obvious in the description of the day when a legation of Flatulentines (people of a neighboring nation) arrived in Utopia, all dressed up with cloth of gold, great golden chains, rings, glittering robes and things of this kind. When they walked through the town, the Utopians thought they were slaves. The children made fun of them for wearing jewelry as adults and the Utopian diplomats addressed the Flatulentines’ slaves, who they reckoned to be the officials (*Utopia*, p. 68). This is because the Utopians all wear the same type of fairly crude clothes and put their gold on slaves as they see absolutely no value in it and use it merely for indicating that someone is a slave and for keeping them bound to their

workplace¹. The Utopians realize that allowing people in any given society to prank themselves with certain goods is a source of anger, envy and eventual hatred. Indeed, they see the pursuit of virtue as a valid alternative to fulfill the socio-psychological desire to positively set oneself apart: “the Utopians strongly disapprove of make-up [...]. A pretty face may be enough to catch a man, but it takes character and good nature to hold him” (*Utopia*, p. 86). This is further substantiated by the way they spend their spare time, i.e. with studying and reading intellectual works, rather than gambling or reading trivia.

The depiction of the Utopians’ way of life is conducive to the understanding of the nature of Utopian pleasure. In a society such as the Utopians’, material goods are only available to a limited extent. Food, clothes, houses, means of transport, everything is organized by a central administration and distributed equally in quantity, as well as quality. For Utopians, the only pleasures they can easily attain are intellectual ones, and by training their minds – as mentioned before the usual way of spending one’s (limited) spare time – they realize that this is, as a matter of fact, the wisest type of pleasure anyway. Thus, the way their society as well as their private lives are organized forces them, in a sense, into such a perception of pleasure. However, their studies allow them to realize that this way of life is not just some kind of totalitarian ideology or some redundant cultural habit, but, indeed, the best way to go.

This latter point deserves some further explanation. If the organization of a country and the habitual way of living were the only drives behind a philosophy of pleasure, it is likely that people in a democratic society would reject it eventually as they shape their own opinions. Let us consider common behavior patterns in our society. For example, every once in a while fashion changes and many people feel the urge to go and buy the latest fashion in order to increase their feeling of personal worth, even though they may have better use for their money. Another example is make-up. A good amount of people spend hours and lots of effort and energy to wear make-up as they consider perfect for going out, though the utility of this is minimal. As a last example the obsession for cars in some cultures could be mentioned: people take the higher risk of robbery and of costly repairs and expensive insurances upon themselves, just so as to be able to drive a very expensive car for the purpose of making people aware of their personal dignity, as it were. Of course the people in all these cases are convinced that this is simply great and to their taste, but if they were in different positions, this perception would change to some extent as well, for society has a very strong influence on what people come to like or not. The more intellectually and philosophically educated people become, the more they realize that such things are insignificant, and that ensuing consequences may well not be worth the pleasure gained by it. Thus, if the Utopian way of life was shaped by habits as described, such a universally intellectual society would most probably discard them in no time. Now it could be argued (even though the history of philosophy has shown that this is very unlikely) that they just did not have any intellectual breakthroughs and that their philosophy simply re-emphasizes what they are used to, but the fact that Hythlodæus brought them the writings of the greatest Greek and Roman philosophers and that they were able to fit these teachings easily into their own concepts suggests that their philosophy of pleasure seems to have some universal value of its own.

It must be noted that the Utopians add another rule of selection to the two already mentioned (i.e. that joy must not interfere with greater pleasures or cause unpleasant aftereffects). They state that we are also “impelled by reason as well as an instinct to enjoy ourselves in any natural way which doesn’t hurt other people” (*Utopia*, p. 74). That means pleasure must not be obtained by wrong or injustice. Epicurus does not mention this as a rule

¹ Note that Utopians do not engage in any kind of slave trade. Rather, criminals and prisoners of war, instead of facing death or imprisonment, lose their freedom and enter a state of slavery (which is forced labor and does not comprise barbaric practices as known from factual history).

of selection, but he mentions the avoidance of crime in his passages against the “disturbance of the soul”, referring to the pains of a guilty conscience. This position is also obvious in his passages about friendship, in the context of which immoral behavior is clearly unacceptable as well. This aspect will be discussed in depth in the section on virtue of this article.

On the Criteria of Pleasure

By pleasure, Epicurus means “the absence of pain in the body and of disturbance of the soul”. This is the greatest state of happiness that can be attained. The Cyrenaics, for instance, argue that pleasure cannot exist in rest and is only achieved by motion. For Epicurus, however, pleasure can arise from tranquility as well as from motion. The latter, however, is inferior since it cannot exist without discomfort. Pleasure arising from motion is achieved through the satisfaction of desires, but desires, being an absence of something, are necessarily accompanied by discomfort, as for example hunger. This very much coincides with the opinion of the Utopians, who would argue in this context that “undoubtedly, these pleasures should come right at the bottom of the list, because they are so impure [...] for the pain [preceding the pleasure] is both more intense and more prolonged” (*Utopia*, p. 78). The Epicurean in Cicero’s *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* (*On the Ends of Good and Evil*) gives a good account of the Epicurean position toward the allegedly neutral state between pleasure and pain, that is when there is no motion involved:

there is no such thing as a neutral state of feeling intermediate between pleasure and pain; for the state supposed by some thinkers to be neutral, being characterized as it is by entire absence of pain, is itself, he held, a pleasure, and, what is more, a pleasure of the highest order. A man who is conscious of his condition at all must necessarily feel either pleasure or pain (Cicero, *De Finibus*, p. 43).

Not only Epicurus holds this position, but the Utopians very much agree, as portrayed by their cultural concept of health and illness. Even without the help of external pleasures, the “calm and regular functioning of the body” is considered the greatest pleasure in life and the basis of all others. It does not take much to believe this point, since an omnipresent pain, even a slight one, is always ‘just a bit’ disturbing, and this re-occurrence can grow into great disturbance in its own right. To take an example, probably everyone knows the difference between a good night’s sleep or a body that is being kept forcefully awake after just a few hours of sleep. Even though there is no pain as such, it is very hard to feel and enjoy pleasures, so all it takes is to extend the definition of pain to general illness of the body or the mind. The Utopian argument goes like this: “illness involves pain, which is the direct opposite of pleasure, and illness is the direct opposite of health, therefore health involves pleasure” (*Utopia*, p. 77). In ancient philosophy this physical state without pain was referred to as ἀπονία (aponia). More compares this circumstance to a battle fought by the body. Once victory over illness is achieved, the body does not just fall into a coma. It would hardly be possible not to feel the refreshment and to take advantage of the body’s ‘victory’. In this context More also clearly argues that “[e]veryone’s perfectly aware of feeling well, unless he’s asleep or actually feeling ill. Even the most insensitive and apathetic sort of person will admit that it’s delightful to be healthy – and what is delight, but a synonym for pleasure?” (*Utopia*, p. 78). For both Epicurus and the Utopians the concept of physical health applies just as well to mental well-being, since a troubled mind is just as disturbing as great physical pain. Generalized anxiety disorder (GDA), for example, is characterized by excessive and often irrational worrying. Over 50% of people have been found to worry every day or every two to three days (Freeman & Freeman, p.87), and it is not clear where worry ends and where a ‘disorder’ begins. People who ever faced any kind of anxiety or depression will know how mind-destroying this can be in the long run, and how it could easily be defined as the diametrical opposite of pleasure or happiness. Therefore, it is not surprising

that a state of physical and mental tranquility (*aponia* and *ataraxia*) is Epicurus', as well as the Utopians' *summum bonum*, and that when it comes to active pleasures, both agree on accounting the mental ones superior to the corporal ones. Mental pleasures include "the satisfaction that one gets from understanding something, or from contemplating truth. They also include the memory of a well-spent life, and the confident expectation of good things to come" (*Utopia*, p. 76). Whereas the first point stresses the study of philosophy and quality literature, the second point is something Epicurus himself emphasized, a point that earned him great adoration. Epicurus died of kidney failure, a highly painful death that includes a time of great suffering, but "the master of serenity" is said to have kept his *ataraxia* and his positive and inspiring spirit. He used to say that he can nourish his mind with all the memories of a great life and of his friends and disciples, who loved and adored him, and like that he could feel pleasure even in great pain, so much stronger are indeed the mental pleasures and pains than the physical ones.

Such cognitive pleasures can be past or future-directed. Positive expectation is something that most people probably experienced at some point of their lives: by intensively imagining a pleasant (possible) future situation, one is able to feel it almost as intensely as it would really be and the mental excitement and pleasure evoked by doing so is very strong. This kind of visualization is an aspect also sometimes utilized in psychotherapy and psychology of motivation. The strong feeling of this future expectation may very well enable one to go through unpleasant situations or to endure hard labor. Purely physical pleasures, as achieved through "replacing physical substances", "discharge of excess" or "relief or irritation" (*Utopia*, p. 76f) are temporal and can impossibly have such a strong effect on a person. Of course the Utopians believe in enjoying good food, drink and so forth and are "grateful to Mother Nature for encouraging her children to do things that have to be done so often, by making them so attractive" (*Utopia*, p. 78f), but the point has been made that these pleasures are significantly inferior to the pleasure of mental and physical health and to the different types of mental pleasures².

As indicated before, a last criterion of pleasure for the Utopians is God. "For the Utopians man's highest good is God in Whom, above every created thing, man is to find his joy and gladness" (Surtz 1957, p. 15). One of the Utopians' motivations for being virtuous and furthering others' pleasure is because they fear punishment in the next life; another is that they believe in the providence of God in ordaining human beings to happiness. As noted before, Epicurus defied such teachings because the superstitions of fearing the ancient Greek deities was an utterly unnecessary disturbance of the soul and hindered the free pursuit of good pleasure. Nonetheless, even Augustine said in his *Confessions*: "Epicurus would certainly have won the palm in my judgment if I had not believed that after death there remained life for the soul and treatment according to its deserts, which Epicurus did not hold" (Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 127). Likewise, it did not take much for Erasmus and More to 'correct' Epicurus and to add the Christian doctrine of an afterlife to his philosophy. Owing to this combination, the Utopians have a variety of very strong and fruitful criteria for achieving pleasure at their disposal.

The Pursuit of Virtue: Versus the Disturbance of the Soul

The Utopians consider mental pleasures of primary importance and attribute them mostly to good behavior and a clear conscience (*Utopia*, p. 78). But how is a clear conscience achieved and what defines good behavior? In other words, how does pleasure relate to virtue? Preliminarily it needs to be mentioned that the philosophical

² Scholars in the field of research on Epicureanism designate these two types of pleasures "kinetic" and "katastematic". Kinetic, referring by definition to physical movement, are temporary and inferior pleasures, whereas katastematic pleasures, first and foremost the freedom from pain (*aponia*) and the state of serenity (*ataraxia*), are lasting and superior to the others (compare Held 2007).

definition of virtue differs somewhat from the colloquial one. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary describes virtue 1) as "behaviour or attitudes that show high moral standards: *He led a life of virtue; She was certainly no paragon of virtue!*", 2) as "a particular good quality or habit: *Patience is not one of her virtues, I'm afraid*" and 3) as "an attractive or useful quality: *The plan has the virtue of simplicity; They could see no virtue in discussing it further*". In philosophy, the second sense, that of a "particular good quality" is of prime importance. This quality may then ideally develop into a habit (i.e. be internalized) and shape high moral standards and good behavior.

Prudence (Greek *φρόνησις* (*phronēsis*), Latin *prudentia* "foresight, sagacity") is the virtue that enables us to judge between right and wrong, which, in the context of hedonism, is between pains and pleasures. Some philosophers see prudence as the highest virtue of all and Epicurus even calls it "greater and more valuable than philosophy"³. He writes to Menoecus

[prudence] is the source of all other virtues, for it teaches that we cannot lead a life of pleasure which is not also a life of prudence, honor and justice; nor lead a life of prudence, honor and justice, which is not also a life of pleasure. For the virtues have grown into people with a pleasant life, and a pleasant life is inseparable from them. (Epicurus, Letter to Menoecus)

Accordingly, pursuing pleasure is not possible without relying on prudence (remember that pleasure is found in a state of 'tranquility of the soul'), and prudence teaches us that pleasure can only be achieved through an honorable and just life. Once such a life is led, pleasure is thought to follow as an inevitable consequence.

This, to some extent, is the foundation of Utopian society. It is part of our idea of good social behavior, especially among friends, to prove oneself grateful when being helped out with something or if one received any kind of benefit owing to another person's acts. In other words, furthering one's neighbors' pleasures gets them to further one's own pleasure in return. In Utopian society people are "positively obliged to make it possible for them" and "you've a duty to yourself as well as to your neighbour" (*Utopia*, p.73). So far it is not clear, though, if this only happens in order to take advantage of ones fellow citizens, or if this motivation results from the conviction to lead an honorable, just and virtuous life, as mentioned before. On justifying the pursuit of pleasure, More writes that

[such attempts to improve the human situation are] laudable acts of humanity for obviously nothing could be more humane, or more natural for a human being, than to relieve other people's sufferings, put an end to their miseries, and restore their joie de vivre, that is, their capacity for pleasure (Utopia, p. 72).

This attitude is also depicted in the Utopians' intensive care for the sick in hospitals. Many philosophers who criticized Epicurus held that virtue is the highest good, not pleasure, and that virtue ought to be sought for its own sake and not in order to obtain something else (like pleasures). Based on the above quote it seems that the Utopians also consider noble deeds or virtue humane and good for their own sake, but this is qualified soon after (though I encourage the reader to judge if this really reduces the ethical value of the philosophy portrayed here):

It's wrong to deprive someone else of a pleasure so that you can enjoy one yourself, but to deprive yourself of a pleasure so that you can add to someone else's enjoyment is an act of humanity by which you always gain more than you lose. For one thing, such benefits are usually repaid in kind. For another, the mere sense

³ Note that "philosophy" means "love of wisdom" (from *σοφία* (*sophia*) "wisdom"), so that he prioritizes prudence over wisdom *per se*.

of having done somebody a kindness, and so earned his affection and good will, produces a spiritual satisfaction which far outweighs the loss of a physical one. And lastly [...] God will reward us. (Utopia, p. 73).

Disregarding the little religious addendum, this could easily be a literal quote from Epicurus himself, who is famous for placing great value in the “spiritual satisfaction” gained by living in a community of close friends. In inquiring into the question whether the Utopians seek virtue for its own sake or for personal benefit (the same question would apply to Epicureanism as a whole), it is necessary to take a complementary position. On the one hand it is necessary to live a life of prudence, honor and justice, on the other hand striving for pleasure is the highest goal. Furthermore, on the one hand it is an act of humanity to help your fellow citizens, on the other doing so has a utility since they repay in kind and it furthers mental pleasure. One may ask if these positions actually do exclude each other. It is a great advantage of helping people that they may repay kindness, but this would much rather be considered “by the way”. Also, the feeling of spiritual satisfaction is not the reason for a good deed; it is much more the insight that it is the “right” thing to do. As Epicurus says, prudence teaches us to act this way, and acting this way inevitably brings pleasure. Utopian society is based on a mutual system of give and take, which they were quoted to consider “natural”. In their context *natural* seems to be carrying two meanings. For one, it is according to Nature, who obviously is a symbol of morals and humanity, for another it is ‘natural’ in the meaning that this is an essential principle of Utopian ethics. The idea is not to help someone gain a benefit in the first instance, it is rather a moral imperative of society that proved itself to work perfectly well. Epicurus was quoted in saying that “virtues have grown into people with a pleasant life, and a pleasant life is inseparable from them”. These virtues have indeed grown into Utopian mentality and are omnipresent in their lives. Because of this internalized concept, Utopians have a strongly developed conscience. A Utopian person would never think of depriving someone of his or her pleasures for his own benefit, their conscience would tell them that this is absolutely wrong. Furthermore, it is a great mental pleasure to look back at one’s life and see that it has been lived righteously.

In the role of human conscience, Epicurus, the Utopians and Thomas More stand especially united. Epicurus held it that it is absolutely unacceptable to commit crimes. Both for the fear to be caught and for the resulting guilty conscience (which would mean a significant disturbance of the mind), both of which making true pleasure impossible. For the Utopians, criminality is against everything they were shown to stand for and therefore practically impossible (though there are always ‘black sheep’ everywhere). Thomas More himself refused to accept Henry VIII’s position as supreme head of the church since this is the role of the Holy Father in Rome alone, and would mean a separation from his Holy Catholic Church. Owing to his refusal of signing a paper stating approval and loyalty of and to the king, respectively, Thomas More was forced into martyrdom. His conscience as a true catholic with his irrevocable faith in the Roman Catholic Church and in the good nature of human beings did not allow him to turn his back on the Holy Chair and to accept Henry’s unchristian reign of violence. In such cases Thomas More, as well as his Utopians, are able to rely on a source of strength Epicurus did not need: God. Epicurus came to think that the classical Greek gods are mere fairytales and that some kind of deity probably created the world but has no influence on it anymore. For him it was important to dissolve the fear of all these gods, since unjustified fear is a great and unnecessary trouble of the mind, as has been elaborated before. In *Utopia* a divine reward for a virtuous and moral life is mentioned many times and Erasmus (taking a rather extreme position as will be shown shortly) in *The Epicurean* equates pleasure with piety, because a person who lives piously “enjoys the true Good,” for it is “only Piety that gains the Favour of God, the Fountain of the chiefest Good, that makes a Man happy” (*Colloquies*, 2, p. 330). Wherever one may personally stand as regards religious faith, practiced in a pure and virtuous way as religious philosophers, be it Christian, Buddhist, Taoist, Jainist or of

any other belief system would do, it does not seem a big leap to unite Epicurean philosophy of pleasure with a sense of religious piety under principles like wisdom, prudence, friendship and keeping a clear conscience.

Conclusion

Edward L. Surtz writes in the conclusion to his article: “The author of *Utopia* borrows from religion the fundamental truths which Erasmus has used to correct Epicurus, and then treats the whole question of happiness and pleasure, independently of revelation and Christianity, on the basis of pure reason” (1949a, p. 103). This is indeed a remarkable achievement of Thomas More’s and more apprehensible than Erasmus’ writings. Whereas Erasmus’ logic in blending religious and philosophical aspects sometimes is rather obscure and lost in spiritualism, More takes pure reason, as he also states in his *Utopia*, as his only means of creating his philosophy. Thomas More does not exclusively extol mental and spiritual pleasures, he starts with praising physical ones, and mentions several times that they indeed are pleasant and even pictures people as hypocrites who claim to live an ascetic life without pursuing any pleasures (*Utopia*, p. 72). Only then he mentions mental pleasure and again only then he includes Nature, a very Christian type of deity, and takes rewards in a future life as a *further* type of pleasure, connected to the mental pleasure of having prospects for future happiness. His philosophy, as depicted in *Utopia*, is very much down to earth and is very tangible, and by writing a piece of literature, and not a highly complicated philosophical treatise, he makes it quite accessible to his readers. Also, More does a fine job in combating the general ill-repute in which Epicurus still stood during More’s lifetime. Defending hedonism by appealing to true virtue, reason and God put the whole concept in a much better light and helped to understand Epicurus’ writings as they were meant. As Surtz (1949a, p. 103) put it:

Far from being really radical, subversive, and corrupting, the Utopian philosophy is revealed underneath to be conservative, beneficial, moral, and salutary – a triumphant tribute to More’s power of rhetoric.

Besides his positive effect on philosophy, More’s book also had a great impact on utopian literature. During the century following *Utopia*, utopian literature flourished, inspired by More’s book and given added impetus through the discovery of the New World. A direct evidence can be found in Rebelais’ first book (1532) of his *The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel* series, in which Utopia is explicitly mentioned. In the final analysis, the theory of Utopian Epicureanism proves to be constructive. Its practice is fruitful and altruistic and manages to unite various seemingly conflicting lines of thought.

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