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Epicurean Philosophy of Pleasure in Saint Thomas More's *Utopia*, Part I: *Utopia* as the 'Morean Synthesis'¹

*The following piece was contributed by **Sasha S. Euler**, who holds an MA in Philosophy and English Studies from the University of Trier in Germany as well as additional qualifications in pedagogical psychology. He specializes on ethics and the pursuit of happiness and is particularly passionate about reconciling and synthesizing thoughts from various intellectual and cultural traditions. This article is in line with this passion by highlighting how Thomas More, a saint of the Catholic Church, was able to create a utopic society following a life of Epicurean hedonism.*

The book *Utopia*, published in 1516, is a significant step in Thomas More's philosophical development, as well as in the history of utopian literature, being the first modern work of its kind. The first part of this article is going to discuss the contents of *Utopia* in regard to More's personal and philosophical development, after which, in part 2, I am going to relate the nature of this philosophy as depicted in *Utopia* to that of the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, the 'master of hedonism'.

In the philosopher's working process, philosophical thoughts and insights are inspired by the circumstances one experiences, as well as by the (philosophical) literature one is exposed to. Once an idea is forged, it is far from being complete and consistent, however. In order to reach relative consistency, an efficient way is to put ones ideas into writing within a specific context. Doing so brings new clearness and generates new ideas and new insights on the quality and potential of these thoughts. For Thomas More, according to Alistair Fox, who produced an impressive analysis of More's career and development as a philosopher and statesman in his *Thomas More: History and Providence*, *Utopia* was a significant step toward achieving such clearness and developing a consistent philosophical model More would try to follow in his life. As regards clearness, we will see that More does by no means stick to one extreme position, however, but, in a sense, tries to synthesize two ways of life.

¹ I echo the title of chapter 2 of Fox's study *Thomas More: History and Providence*.

Thomas More was a highly religious person who was prepared to eventually suffer martyrdom and who was even recognized as a Saint three centuries after his death. That given, one may wonder why he decided to pursue the vocation of layman rather than priest. Indeed, More seems to have been divided by his own (intellectual) impulses. On the one hand he tried to explore the possibilities of secular life and to embody the virtues of the cloister, but on the other hand he was a humanist who actively proclaimed his ideas. Under the reign of Christian kings and with his enthusiastic hopes towards Henry VIII, More was hopeful that serious political developments should be possible, but still human nature seemed to prevent drastic changes for a “utopian” state and life. This conflict between More’s idealism and realism is clearly visible in his *Utopia*. It is therefore no surprise to find in *Utopia* that even though More created an image of an ideal and happy world for humans to live in, he subjected it to penetrating critique, which he realized by ‘selling’ his *Utopia* in the format of a fictional novel, rather than a philosophical treatise (though, reminiscent of e.g. Plato’s or Buddhist work, the fictional framework only opens the gate for extensive philosophical argumentation). In practice this happens primarily through a discussion between Hythlodæus (roughly translatable as Nonsenso), a world-travelled scholar, More’s contemporary Gilles, and Morus, a fictional version of the author. In More’s fictional critique he “contemplated the frustration of his own utopianism” because, as mentioned before, “the fundamental realities of human experience would remain unchanged” (Fox 1982, p. 51).

Utopia consists of two books, the second being Hythlodæus’ report of his observations in the land of Utopia. This is put into the context of a short dialogue in book 1, which introduces the characters’ perspectives by means of discussing various political issues of their time. Here, in book 1, we already see the ambiguity of the name “Utopia” (in Greek εὖ-τόπος (*eu-topos*) means “happy land” and οὐ-τόπος (*ou-topos*) “no land”), interpretable, at the same time, as ideal and impossible land. This contradiction can be seen in Hythlodæus’ stance toward the possibility of becoming a king’s advisor (which he ultimately rejects) in that he is conflicted between two impulses: his desperateness and resignation reflected in his willingness to withdraw from the world because no one would appreciate his fabulous ideas (or experiences) and his enthusiasm for the mere possibility of indeed changing the world. The first issue is provoked by Morus, a person who would not even consider his suggestions and who “feels the presence in life of a calling to achieve rather more by aspiring to less” (Fox 1982, p. 52).

When More wrote his *Utopia*, the circumstances were quite ideal for him. His imagination was inspired by the discoveries made in the New World (Vespucci, for example, described some native populations as Epicureans, as will be mentioned later) and Erasmian humanism was reaching its peak. In addition, with contemporaries like Tunstal, Busleyden and Gilles, More had good intellectual company who shared his interests and humanistic ambitions. In the context of such intellectually stimulating circumstances, More created the Utopians according to beliefs and habits he cultivated at the time. This can be seen in their rejection – or even disdain – of gold and jewelry as means of raising one’s personal status and value, in their belief in the cultivation of people’s minds (More was very interested in the education of his children, boys and girls equally), and in the communal domestic order More also imposed in his own household (he being the chief of the family, different generations living together and sharing everything). It is also known that More had a strong affection for gardens and music and was very receptive toward foreign guests. All these things he projected into his Utopians – and are very much in line with Epicurus’ way of life.

In analyzing the book as a Morean self-projection, it is of course very interesting to consider how the Epicurean hedonism (briefly outlined below) the Utopians live fits into More’s concept of life. For a person like More, being

deeply rooted in religious doctrine on the one hand, but living an active philosophical life on the other², it is naturally an important question whether enjoying life's pleasures is compatible with living a strictly virtuous life as defined by Roman Catholicism. More, in a way, proposes an axiom:

Either it's a bad thing to enjoy life, in other words, to experience pleasure – in which case you shouldn't help anyone to do it, but should try to save the whole human race from such a frightful fate – or else, if it's good for other people, and you are not only allowed, but possibly obliged to make it possible for them, why shouldn't charity begin at home? After all, you've a duty to yourself as well as to your neighbours, and, if Nature says you must be kind to others, she can't turn around the next moment and say you must be cruel to yourself. (Utopia, p. 72f)

Here More allows his Utopians a privilege he would not have unconditionally allowed himself: the assumption that pleasure and virtue indeed *are* compatible – or even “synonymous” (discussed in further depth below). Even though the break between a sternly ascetic religious life and a life of pleasure is clear, it is true that clerics see it as their objective to help people, but in doing so they (and any other human being following a (personal) moral imperative) may well feel pleasure, which is certainly a motivating force to them – the pleasant feeling to do good deeds and to help others, as well as the positive expectation of a divine reward in an afterlife³. It is even more interesting when we compare the religious beliefs on salvation of Christianity with those of the Utopians and their “Nature” goddess, since Christianity, as well as “Nature”, says that the soul is immortal and born for happiness through the benefice of God and that our virtues and good deeds are rewarded in an afterlife. Therefore it can be argued that the Utopians are *de facto* Christians, even though their disbelief – or ignorance – of Christ as savior makes them pagans. Here More even takes a further step to justify the concept of a hedonistic way of life by religion: Not only is the Utopians' view strongly encouraged by their religious beliefs, it is dependent on it, since the pursuit of happiness by mere means of reason is seen as impossible, just as it would be impossible to reach happiness by mere means of faith. Both complement each other in perfect synergy, as will be shown later. More emphasizes this belief further in *Verses for the Book of Fortune* and in his later *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, explicitly arguing that reason and faith must co-operate. More allowed the Utopians to live a life he may have wished for, but which was impossible for himself: to be a married priest and to purely enjoy the harmless pleasures of life. Basically, More's Utopians portray customs and ethic principles of Christianity in daily life in declaring the equality of things among citizens, in their love of peace and calmness and in their contempt of gold, silver and jewelry. Again, principles highly compatible with Epicurean thought.

Now that More's personal attitudes and conflicts regarding the book as a whole have been expounded, we shall have a brief look at the end of the book. Hythlodæus renders himself impotent and denies his moral responsibility toward the public. Morus, on the other hand, requires one to compromise himself. Book 1 “forces the reader into a state of intellectual helplessness” (Fox 1982, p. 66), which makes them eager to hear Hythlodæus' report (and solutions). At the end of book 2, the reader is driven into a corner by Morus' unwillingness to appreciate Hythlodæus' points and is forced either to a form of self-deception, or to acknowledge “the helplessness as a human being to determine the shape and condition of his existence” (ibid.).

² Of course I do not wish to put religious and philosophical doctrine in opposition as both often complement each other (as the history of both philosophy and religion in the East and West have repeatedly shown), but especially Epicurus' philosophy has often been misunderstood as implicitly anti-Christian, so that this combination may appear at odds to readers new to this topic (and to many of More's contemporaries).

³ Note that philosophers like Immanuel Kant would reject such (very natural and unavoidable!) motivations as unethical because they are too subjective and cannot serve as foundation for any kind of moral imperative.

More showed his readers a utopian world according to his concepts, even with an “improved” Christian religion, but also confronts them with the reality of a humanistic philosopher: that the conditions of human life and the nature of human beings cannot simply be changed and that in the end ‘if we cannot turn things into good, we have to try to make them as little bad as possible’, a famous attitude of Thomas More’s.

Philosophy of Pleasure: A brief overview

The main concept of philosophy of pleasure is that the promotion of pleasure and the avoidance of pain are the main impulses for human beings in their pursuit of happiness. In philosophy, this is more commonly referred to as hedonism (*ἡδονισμός* (*hēdonismos*) from *ἡδονή* (*hēdonē*) "pleasure"). Hedonistic philosophy started on a broad scale with Cyrenaicism. This school took the main principle of practical philosophy, that the ultimate goal of human actions, the *summum bonum*, is happiness (or *ευδαιμονία* (*eudaimonia*) in Greek), and equated happiness with pleasure, preferably physical. This is probably what lay people would initially expect from the term “philosophy of pleasure”, but this is very exceptional in the history of philosophy and differs drastically from the Epicurean way. In English, the term “epicure” describes a person who takes great joy in eating high quality food. This is the subverted image furthered by the Christian church from the beginning of the Middle Ages onward, but actual Epicureanism is different in its entirety. Epicurus did say that the ultimate good is pleasure, but he strictly qualified it and even preferred the emotional elimination of pleasure before a lifestyle of immediate gratification. Epicurus’ main goal in his strive for happiness through pleasure was the acquisition of *ἀταραξία* (*ataraxia*) “serenity/tranquility”, which *de facto* makes his hedonism rather ascetic, although *ataraxia* is ‘positive’ emotional calmness, rather than the more ‘negative’ *apatheia* of other philosophers as a kind of emotional vacuum. Many thinkers throughout the history of philosophy dealt with such topics at some point, but only few made them their foundational principle and became “hedonists”. Later examples are Jeremy Bentham and John Steward Mill in the 19th century, whose so-called Utilitarianism is defined by bringing the greatest amount of pleasure (by doing things that have a *utility* for this purpose) to the greatest amount of people. Later on also some psychologists, starting with Sigmund Freud, pursued a type of psychological hedonism.

During the period of humanism, scholars were highly educated in ancient philosophy. In antiquity we had four dominating philosophical schools: Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism and Epicureanism. The first two rarely dealt with the concept of pleasure in their philosophy, the latter two, however, both had sophisticated theories on pleasure and serenity, theories that overlapped significantly, but that were also characterized by considerable opposition. Discussions on this topic between Epicureans and Stoics are depicted well by the Roman philosopher Cicero.

Even though Christianity was very fond of the philosophy of Seneca and the Stoics, and very much against Epicureanism, Thomas More was primarily taking into account the *Epicurean* philosophy of pleasure when dealing with the topic of hedonism (for further discussion, see Don Cameron’s *The Rehabilitation of Epicurus and His Theory of Pleasure in the Early Renaissance*).