Thomas More and his "Utopia"

Post by “Cassius” of August 31, 2023 at 3:19 PM

As Joshua points out in several of our podcasts, More seems to want to accept many of the "life for happiness and pleasure" aspects of Epicurus, but he wants to condemn and banish as totally unacceptable the core viewpoints of an absence of providential god and reward and punishment after death.

I have not read this material recently enough to pass judgment on the extent to which More really believed this, or was just hedging his bets or protecting himself from the church, but the way Joshua describes his enthusiasm in the position, it sounds to me like More may serve as a classic example of the type of person who wants to pick and choose what they regard as beneficial ethics without taking the full medicine of a proper understanding of the universe.

Joshua indicates that More would expel true Epicureans from his otherwise "Epicurean-lite" society, and so it sounds to me like "Utopia" might serve as an ultimate example of the problems with an "eclectic" or "syncretic" approach to Epicurus that fails to appreciate the full philosophy.

These hazards are such that if this reading of "Utopia" is accurate, I would label More as "Anti-Epicurean."

Post by “Joshua” of August 31, 2023 at 10:56 PM

Part One

I will do as much as I can in a reasonable amount of time to draw together the Epicurean aspects of More's project in writing *Utopia*. The first thing to observe is the title, which is a clever play on words--the prefix ου- is a term of negation, while εὐ- in Greek means *well* or *good* , as in words like εὐδαιμονία (good spirit) and εὐάγγελος (good news, and the origin of *evangelism*). "Good Place" and "No Place" all in one breath--and for Thomas More it was certainly "No Place". For Thomas More, no culture on Earth could possibly sustain the kind of society described in this book.

The setting for this story is the early sixteenth century. The followers of John Wycliffe, a dissident fourteenth century English priest, were circulating a version of the Bible translated into Middle English (the English of Chaucer) in the teeth of Catholic orthodoxy. One of the men

he inspired, a Czech theologian named Jan Hus, was executed at the Council of Constance in 1415 two years before the rediscovery of the manuscript of Lucretius. *Utopia* was published in 1516, about 15 years before the final break with Rome over the issue (or should I say, the lack of any male issue) of Henry VIII, and while the author was a hardline Catholic who likely wanted nothing more than a thoroughgoing return of England and Europe to the Catholic faith, it was increasingly apparent that the Vatican's hold on Northern Europe was becoming tenuous at best. The church was breaking apart--Thomas More was, evidently, wistful for a solution through compromise--a solution seemingly out of reach. The solution when it finally did come was religious toleration, as expressed by John Locke in his *Letter Concerning Religious Toleration* in 1689;

> Quote
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> All the life and power of true religion consist in the inward and full persuasion of the mind; and faith is not faith without believing. Whatever profession we make, to whatever outward worship we conform, if we are not fully satisfied in our own mind that the one is true and the other well pleasing unto God, such profession and such practice, far from being any furtherance, are indeed great obstacles to our salvation.
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> The care, therefore, of every man’s
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> soul belongs unto himself and is to be left unto himself. But what if he
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> neglect the care of his soul? I answer: What if he neglect the care of his
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> health or of his estate, which things are nearlier related to the government of the magistrate than the other?
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> ...
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> No way whatsoever that I shall walk in against the dictates of my conscience will ever bring me to the mansions of the blessed. I may grow rich by an art that I take not delight in; I may be cured of some disease by remedies that I have not faith in; but I cannot be saved by a religion that I distrust and by a worship that I abhor.
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> ...
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> [And finally, the rub]
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> Lastly, those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the being of a God. Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all; besides also, those that by their atheism undermine and destroy all religion, can have no pretence of

> religion whereupon to challenge the privilege of a toleration.
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Two more detours; the first, a letter from Poggio Bracciolini to Niccolo Niccoli in 1417--the year Lucretius was discovered--about his experience of the Baths of the German town of Baden;

> Quote
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> “I wrote to you from Constance, on the first of March, if my memory be correct, a letter, which, if it came to hand, I imagine made you tolerably merry. It was rather long, and pregnant with wit. I gave you in it a long account of my Hebrew studies, and passed many jokes upon my tutor, a stupid, unsteady, and illiterate man; which indeed is the general character of those who are converted from Judaism to Christianity. But I am inclined to suspect, that this letter, and another which I addressed to Leonardo 60Aretino, did not reach their destination. Had you received my epistle, you would surely have answered it, were it only with the view of congratulating me on me new course of study, which you have so frequently exhorted me to undertake. I cannot find that the study of Hebrew adds to my stock of philosophical knowledge; but it so far promotes my acquaintance with literature, that I am thereby enabled to investigate the principles which St. Jerome founded his translation of the scriptures. But I write to you from these baths, (to which I am come to try whether they can remove an eruption which has taken place between my fingers) to describe to you the situation of he place, and the manners of its inhabitants, together with the customs of the company who resort hither for the benefit of the waters. Much is said by the ancients of the pleasant baths of Puteoli, which were frequented by almost all the people of Rome. But in my opinion, those boasted baths must, in the article of pleasure, yield the palm to the baths of Baden. For the pleasantness of the baths of Puteoli was founded more on the beauty of the circumjacent country, and the magnificence of the neighbouring villas, than on the festive manners of the company by which they were frequented. The scenery of Baden, on the contrary, has but few attractions: but every other circumstance relating to its medicinal springs, is so pregnant with delight, that I frequently imagine that Venus, and all her attendant joys, have migrated hither from Cyprus. The frequenters of these waters 61so faithfully observe her institutes, so accurately copy her manners, that though they have not read the discourse of Heliogabalus, they seem to be amply instructed by simple nature. But I must in the first place give you an account of my journey hither.
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> In this day’s journey we saw the Rhine precipitating itself from a considerable height, over craggy rocks, with a sound which seemed to express the indignation of the river at

being thus impeded in its course. When I contemplated this sight, I recollected the stories which are related concerning the cataracts of the Nile, and I did not wonder that the people who live in the vicinity of those waterfalls, were deprived of their hearing by their noise, when a river of so comparatively small a magnitude, that with respect to the Nile it may be denominated a torrent, may be heard to the distance of half a mile. The next town is Baden, which word, in the German language, signifies a bath. Baden is a place of considerable opulence, situated in a valley surrounded by mountains, 62upon a broad and rapid river, which forms a junction with the Rhine, about six miles from the town. About half a mile from Baden, and on the bank of the river, there is a very beautiful range of buildings, constructed for the accommodation of the bathers. These buildings form a square, composed of lodging houses, in which a great multitude of guests are commodiously entertained. Each lodging house has its private bath, appropriated to its tenants. The baths are altogether thirty in number. Of these, two only are public baths, which are exposed to view on every side, and are frequented by the lower orders of people, of all ages, and of each sex. Here the males and females, entertaining not hostile dispositions towards each other, are separated only by a simple railing. It is a droll sight to see decrepit old women and blooming maidens, stepping into the water, and exposing their charms to the profane eyes of the men. I have often laughed at this exhibition, which reminded me of the Floral games of Rome. And I have at the same time admired the simplicity of these people, who take no notice of these violations of propriety, and are totally unconscious of any indecorum. The baths belonging to the private houses are very neat. They too are common to males and females, who are separated by a partition. In this partition, however, there are low windows, through which they can see and converse with, and touch each other, and also drink together; all which circumstances are matters of common occurrences.

...

Besides these various pastimes, there is also another, which is a source of no small gratification. There is a large meadow behind the village, near the river. This meadow, which is shaded by abundance of trees, is our usual place of resort after supper. Here the people engage in various sports. Some dance, others sing, and others play at ball, but in a manner very different from the fashion of our country. For the men and women throw, in different directions, a ball, 66filled with little bells. When the ball is thrown, they all run to catch it, and whoever lays hold of it is the conqueror, and again throws it at somebody for whom he wishes to testify a particular regard. When the thrower is ready to toss the ball, all the rest stand with outstretched hands, and the former frequently keeps them in a state of suspense, by pretending to aim, sometimes at one, and sometimes at another. Many other games are here practised, which it would be tedious to enumerate. I have related enough to give you an idea what a numerous school of Epicureans is established in Baden. I think this must be the place where the

> first man was created, which the Hebrews call the garden of pleasure. If pleasure can make a man happy, this place is certainly possessed of every requisite for the promotion of felicity.
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> ...
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> Hence it happens, that the name of jealousy, that plague, which is elsewhere productive of so much misery, is here unknown. How unlike are the manners of these people to ours, who always see things on the dark side, and who are so much given to censoriousness, that in our minds the slightest suspicion instantly grows into full proof of guilt. I often envy the apathy of these Germans, and I execrate our perversity, who are always wishing for what we have not, and are continually exposed to present calamity by our dread of the future. But these people, content with little, enjoy their day of life in mirth and merriment; they do not hanker after wealth; they are not anxious for the morrow; and they bear adversity with patience. Thus are they rich by the mere disposition of their minds. Their motto is, “live while you live.” But of this enough — it is not my object to extol my new friends at the expense of my countrymen. I wish my epistle to consist of unqualified good humour, that I may impart to you a portion of the pleasure I derived from the baths of Baden.”
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I cite this letter merely to demonstrate that in learned circles in the Renaissance, the Epicureans were beginning to get the kind of reputation which they deserved and not one that was surreptitiously foist upon them. A reputation for enjoying innocent pleasure, not burdening oneself by fear of the future and of death, and of considering themselves rich in they enjoyment of what they have and not spoiling it by lusting for what they lack. It's not perfect, but it's not a bad start--Epicurus the inveterate glutton is falling away, and his fall reveals far more accurately (if not completely) his real nature--Epicurus the Philosopher.

The second necessary excursion in prelude to Utopia is into the travelogues of the Florentine explorer Amerigo Vespucci, born 1451. There are two sets of documents relating to Vespucci's voyages to the New World; the first is a letter addressed to Piero Soderini, and it was published in Florence in 1505. The second set of documents contains several letters written to the Medici family--and here's the thing; no one knows for sure if the first letter, the "Soderini Letter" was genuine or a forgery. The Soderini letter describes four voyages; the Medici letters only describe two. According the Soderini Letter, Vespucci arrived on the continents that still bear his name *before* Christopher Columbus! The Medici letters put him there after; no one knows for sure.

What does matter is that these letters were enormously popular reading all over Europe. Think of how many people around the world tuned into the Apollo 11 moon landing--now imagine if instead of barren rock, Neil Armstrong had stumbled into an inhabited world thriving with strange life and strange people--people no European had ever contacted before. The discovery

of the New World was without exception the most startling and mind-altering occurrence to have happened since the fall of Rome. There was stuff here, interesting stuff, that neither the Hebrews nor the Greeks had ever encountered, never written about, never left reams of advice and council on what to do with it all. When Lucretius wrote eloquently about an infinity of inhabited worlds, no one in the Renaissance could possibly have taken his words so thoroughly to heart as to imagine that that very century would put them into contact with one of these other worlds, though right here on Earth.

So I don't know if the Soderini Letter was a clever patriotic forgery meant to secure the palm for Florence in discovering the New World--the point is that the ideas that letter contained were at the core of a momentous change in European affairs. And it is this letter, this strange, alien document, which pulls the name of Epicurus out of the mists of the far distant past and places it squarely in a hesitant and uncertain future.

> Quote
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> After humble reverence and due commendations, etc. It may be that your Magnificence will be surprised by (this conjunction of) my rashness and your customary wisdom, in that I should so absurdly bestir myself to write to your Magnificence the present so-prolix letter: knowing (as I do) that your Magnificence is continually employed in high councils and affairs concerning the good government of this sublime Republic. And will hold me not only presumptuous, but also idly-meddlesome in setting myself to write things, neither suitable to your station, nor entertaining, and written in barbarous style, and outside of every canon of polite literature: but my confidence which I have in your virtues and in the truth of my writing, which are things (that) are not found written neither by the ancients nor by modern writers, as your Magnificence will in the sequel perceive, makes me bold.
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> ...
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> for as saith Petrarch, I should be another man than what I am. Howbeit soever I grieve not: because I have ever taken delight in worthy matters: and although these trifles of mine may not be suitable to your virtues, I will say to you as said Pliny to Maecenas, you were sometime wont to take pleasure in my prattlings: even though your Magnificence be continuously busied in public affairs, you will take some hour of relaxation to consume a little time in frivolous or amusing things: and as fennel is customarily given atop of delicious viands to fit them for better digestion, so may you, for a relief from your so heavy occupations, order this letter of mine to be read: so that they may withdraw you somewhat from the continual anxiety and assiduous reflection upon public affairs.
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> ...

I pursued this intent [trade] about four years: during which I saw and knew the inconstant shiftings of Fortune: and how she kept changing those frail and transitory benefits: and how at one time she holds man on the summit of the wheel, and at another time drives him back from her, and despoils him of what may be called his borrowed riches: so that, knowing the continuous toil which main undergoes to win them, submitting himself to so many anxieties and risks, I resolved to abandon trade, and to fix my aim upon something more praiseworthy and stable: whence it was that I made preparation for going to see part of the world and its wonders: and herefor the time and place presented themselves most opportunely to me: which was that the King Don Ferrando of Castile being about to despatch four ships to discover new lands towards the west, I was chosen by his Highness to go in that fleet to aid in making discovery: and we set out from the port of Cadiz on the 10th day of May 1497, and took our route through the great gulf of the Ocean-sea; in which voyage we were eighteen months (engaged): and discovered much continental land and innumerable islands, and great part of them inhabited: whereas there is no mention made by the ancient writers of them: I believe, because they had no knowledge thereof: for, if I remember well, I have read in some one (of those writers) that he considered that this Ocean-sea was an unpeopled sea: and of this opinion was Dante our poet in the xxvi. chapter of the Inferno, where he feigns the death of Ulysses, in which voyage I beheld things of great wondrousness, as your Magnificence shall understand.

...

and so we sailed on till at the end of 37 days we reached a land which we deemed to be a continent: which is distant westwardly from the isles of Canary about a thousand leagues beyond the inhabited region note within the torrid zone:

...

we made towards the land, and before we reached it, had sight of a great number of people who were going along the shore: by which we were much rejoiced: and we observed that they were a naked race: they shewed themselves to stand in fear of us: I believe (it was) because they saw us clothed and of other appearance (than their own): they all withdrew to a hill, and for whatsoever signals we made to them of peace and of friendliness, they would not come to parley with us: so that, as the night was now coming on, and as the ships were anchored in a dangerous place, being on a rough and shelterless coast, we decided to remove from there the next day, and to go in search of some harbour or bay, where we might place our ships in safety: and we sailed with the maestrale wind, note thus running along the coast with the land ever in sight, continually in our course observing people along the shore: till after having navigated for two days, we found a place sufficiently secure for the ships, and anchored half a league from land, on which we saw a very great number of people

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For so much as we learned of their manner of life and customs, it was that they go entirely naked, as well the men as the women. They are of medium stature, very well proportioned: their flesh is of a colour the verges into red like a lion's mane: and I believe that if they went clothed, they would be as white as we.

...

they are very light footed in walking and in running, as well the men as the women: so that a woman recks nothing of running a league or two, as many times we saw them do: and herein they have a very great advantage over us Christians: they swim (with an expertness) beyond all belief, and the women better than the men: for we have many times found and seen them swimming two leagues out at sea without anything to rest upon.

...

these people have neither King, nor Lord, nor do they yield obedience to any one, for they live in their own liberty

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they have no judicial system, nor do they punish the ill-doer: nor does the father, nor the mother chastise the children and marvelously (seldom) or never did we see any dispute among them: in their conversation they appear simple, and they are very cunning and acute in that which concerns them: they speak little and in a low tone: they use the same articulations as we, since they form their utterances either with the palate, or with the teeth, or on the lips: note except that they give different names to things. Many are the varieties of tongues: for in every 100 leagues we found a change of language, so that they are not understandable each to the other.

...

they sleep in certain very large nettings made of cotton, suspended in the air: and although this their (fashion of) sleeping may seem uncomfortable, I say that it is sweet to sleep in those (nettings): and we slept better in them than in the counterpanes. They are a people smooth and clean of body, because of so continually washing themselves as they do. Amongst those people we did not learn that they had any law, nor can they be called Moors nor Jews, and (they are) worse than pagans: because we did not observe that they offered any sacrifice: nor even had they a house of prayer: their manner of living I judge to be Epicurean: their dwellings are in common: and their houses (are) made in the style of huts, but strongly made, and constructed with very

> large trees, and covered over with palm-leaves, secure against storms and winds: and in some places (they are) of so great breadth and length, that in one single house we found there were 600 souls: and we saw a village of only thirteen houses where there were four thousand souls: every eight or ten years they change their habitations: and when asked why they did so: (they said it was) because of the soil which, from its filthiness, was already unhealthy and corrupted, and that it bred aches in their bodies, which seemed to us a good reason:
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> ...
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> The wealth that we enjoy in this our Europe and elsewhere, such as gold, jewels, pearls, and other riches, they hold as nothing; and although they have them in their own lands, they do not labour to obtain them, nor do they value them. They are liberal in giving, for it is rarely they deny you anything: and on the other hand, liberal in asking, when they shew themselves your friends.
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That will have to serve as part one of this story. Tomorrow we shall enter Utopia.

Post by “Joshua” of September 1, 2023 at 5:06 PM

Part Two (scroll to the "  " for the important part)

It is worth noting that in his own lifetime, according to scholars here and elsewhere, Thomas More was known more for his part in translating Lucian of Samosata than he was for the book now under consideration. Lucian had prepared the ground for this kind of fictional travelogue in his *True Story*, and More may have been looking for an opportunity to explore certain contemporary European dilemmas by an analysis akin to that in Plato's Republic. In More's work, the analysis would take the turn of satire as it does in Lucian--this is an avowedly fictional and nonsensical tall tale, related to his readers with far more than just a wink.

First, a link to the text at Project Gutenberg;

The Project Gutenberg eBook of Utopia, by Thomas More

As you may observe, More begins his story by explaining that King Henry VIII sent him on a diplomatic mission to the continent which led him to the city of Antwerp in Belgium. There he fell in with a fast friend named Peter Giles, who introduced him to a weatherbeaten old traveler;

> Quote
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> Said [More], “I did not guess amiss, for at first sight I took him for a seaman.” “But you are much mistaken,” said [Peter], “for he has not sailed as a seaman, but as a traveller, or rather a philosopher. This Raphael, who from his family carries the name of Hythloday, is not ignorant of the Latin tongue, but is eminently learned in the Greek, having applied himself more particularly to that than to the former, because he had given himself much to philosophy, in which he knew that the Romans have left us nothing that is valuable, except what is to be found in Seneca and Cicero. He is a Portuguese by birth, and was so desirous of seeing the world, that he divided his estate among his brothers, ran the same hazard as Americus Vesputius, and bore a share in three of his four voyages that are now published; only he did not return with him in his last, but obtained leave of him, almost by force, that he might be one of those twenty-four who were left at the farthest place at which they touched in their last voyage to New Castile. The leaving him thus did not a little gratify one that was more fond of travelling than of returning home to be buried in his own country; for he used often to say, that the way to heaven was the same from all places, and he that had no grave had the heavens still over him. Yet this disposition of mind had cost him dear, if God had not been very gracious to him; for after he, with five Castalians, had travelled over many countries, at last, by strange good fortune, he got to Ceylon, and from thence to Calicut, where he, very happily, found some Portuguese ships; and, beyond all men’s expectations, returned to his native country.”

It is, then, this Raphael Hythloday who will be our conductor to the island of Utopia--a man who sailed with Amerigo Vespucci to the New World, and remained there for several years. This is our first implicit connection with Epicurus.

> Quote
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> I ordered my servants to take care that none might come and interrupt us, and both Peter and I desired Raphael to be as good as his word. When he saw that we were very intent upon it he paused a little to recollect himself, and began in this manner:—
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> “The island of Utopia is in the middle two hundred miles broad, and holds almost at the same breadth over a great part of it, but it grows narrower towards both ends. Its figure is not unlike a crescent. Between its horns the sea comes in eleven miles broad, and spreads itself into a great bay, which is environed with land to the compass of about five hundred miles, and is well secured from winds. In this bay there is no great current; the whole coast is, as it were, one continued harbour, which gives all that live in the island great convenience for mutual commerce.

Let me pause there, and simply observe the description that Homer gives of the island of Pharos in the Iliad:

> Quote
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> “In Egypt, eager though I was to journey hither, the gods still held me back, because I offered not to them hecatombs that bring fulfillment, and the gods ever wished that men should be mindful of their commands. Now there is an island in the surging sea in front of Egypt, and men call it Pharos, distant as far as a hollow ship runs in a whole day when the shrill wind blows fair behind her. Therein is a harbor with good anchorage, whence men launch the shapely ships into the sea, when they have drawn supplies of water.

It was this passage that led Alexander the Great to choose Pharos and the coast opposite as the site of Alexandria, the greatest city and commercial hub in the ancient world. Unlike Alexandria, Utopia after its great king was governed in a manner something like a Republic;

> Quote
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> “There are fifty-four cities in the island, all large and well built, the manners, customs, and laws of which are the same, and they are all contrived as near in the same manner as the ground on which they stand will allow. The nearest lie at least twenty-four miles’ distance from one another, and the most remote are not so far distant but that a man can go on foot in one day from it to that which lies next it. Every city sends three of their wisest senators once a year to Amaurot, to consult about their common concerns; for that is the chief town of the island, being situated near the centre of it, so that it is the most convenient place for their assemblies.

Here follows a great deal about their manners and modes and life, and I will be liberally skipping over most of it. He describes that Utopians labor for only six hours a day, and by keeping their wants few (and not being asked to support idle priests, monks, and nobility) they are able to spend there time in healthful leisure and improving their minds.

> Quote
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> dividing the day and night into twenty-four hours, appoint six of these for work, three of which are before dinner and three after; they then sup, and at eight o’clock, counting from noon, go to bed and sleep eight hours: the rest of their time, besides that taken up in work, eating, and sleeping, is left to every man’s discretion; yet they are not to abuse that interval to luxury and idleness, but must employ it in some proper exercise,

> according to their various inclinations, which is, for the most part, reading. It is ordinary to have public lectures every morning before daybreak, at which none are obliged to appear but those who are marked out for literature; yet a great many, both men and women, of all ranks, go to hear lectures of one sort or other, according to their inclinations:

The similarities between the Utopians and the monastic orders of Europe in how they spend their time is often noted by scholars. Actually, they are claimed to have managed this six hour work day by the simplicity of their societies in contrast to Europe;

> Quote
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> It is so far from being true that this time is not sufficient for supplying them with plenty of all things, either necessary or convenient, that it is rather too much; and this you will easily apprehend if you consider how great a part of all other nations is quite idle. First, women generally do little, who are the half of mankind; and if some few women are diligent, their husbands are idle: then consider the great company of idle priests, and of those that are called religious men; add to these all rich men, chiefly those that have estates in land, who are called noblemen and gentlemen, together with their families, made up of idle persons, that are kept more for show than use; add to these all those strong and lusty beggars that go about pretending some disease in excuse for their begging; and upon the whole account you will find that the number of those by whose labours mankind is supplied is much less than you perhaps imagined.

Other aspects of their lives;

> Quote
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> They despatch their dinners quickly, but sit long at supper, because they go to work after the one, and are to sleep after the other, during which they think the stomach carries on the concoction more vigorously. They never sup without music, and there is always fruit served up after meat; while they are at table some burn perfumes and sprinkle about fragrant ointments and sweet waters—in short, they want nothing that may cheer up their spirits; they give themselves a large allowance that way, and indulge themselves in all such pleasures as are attended with no inconvenience.

> Quote
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> So that it is plain they must prefer iron either to gold or silver, for men can no more live without iron than without fire or water; but Nature has marked out no use for the other metals so essential as not easily to be dispensed with. The folly of men has enhanced

> the value of gold and silver because of their scarcity; whereas, on the contrary, it is their opinion that Nature, as an indulgent parent, has freely given us all the best things in great abundance, such as water and earth, but has laid up and hid from us the things that are vain and useless.

> Quote
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> They had never so much as heard of the names of any of those philosophers that are so famous in these parts of the world, before we went among them; and yet they had made the same discoveries as the Greeks, both in music, logic, arithmetic, and geometry. But as they are almost in everything equal to the ancient philosophers, so they far exceed our modern logicians for they have never yet fallen upon the barbarous niceties that our youth are forced to learn in those trifling logical schools that are among us. They are so far from minding chimeras and fantastical images made in the mind that none of them could comprehend what we meant when we talked to them of a man in the abstract as common to all men in particular (so that though we spoke of him as a thing that we could point at with our fingers, yet none of them could perceive him) and yet distinct from every one, as if he were some monstrous Colossus or giant; yet, for all this ignorance of these empty notions, they knew astronomy, and were perfectly acquainted with the motions of the heavenly bodies; and have many instruments, well contrived and divided, by which they very accurately compute the course and positions of the sun, moon, and stars. But for the cheat of divining by the stars, by their oppositions or conjunctions, it has not so much as entered into their thoughts. They have a particular sagacity, founded upon much observation, in judging of the weather, by which they know when they may look for rain, wind, or other alterations in the air; but as to the philosophy of these things, the cause of the saltness of the sea, of its ebbing and flowing, and of the original and nature both of the heavens and the earth, they dispute of them partly as our ancient philosophers have done, and partly upon some new hypothesis, in which, as they differ from them, so they do not in all things agree among themselves.

 And here is the most important part--a discussion of the philosophy of the Utopians, of their understanding of the chief good, and of the end toward which nature persuades us in all things.

> Quote
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> “As to moral philosophy, they have the same disputes among them as we have here. They examine what are properly good, both for the body and the mind; and whether any outward thing can be called truly good, or if that term belong only to the

endowments of the soul. They inquire, likewise, into the nature of virtue and pleasure. But their chief dispute is concerning the happiness of a man, and wherein it consists—whether in some one thing or in a great many. They seem, indeed, more inclinable to that opinion that places, if not the whole, yet the chief part, of a man's happiness in pleasure; and, what may seem more strange, they make use of arguments even from religion, notwithstanding its severity and roughness, for the support of that opinion so indulgent to pleasure; for they never dispute concerning happiness without fetching some arguments from the principles of religion as well as from natural reason, since without the former they reckon that all our inquiries after happiness must be but conjectural and defective.

"These are their religious principles:—That the soul of man is immortal, and that God of His goodness has designed that it should be happy; and that He has, therefore, appointed rewards for good and virtuous actions, and punishments for vice, to be distributed after this life. Though these principles of religion are conveyed down among them by tradition, they think that even reason itself determines a man to believe and acknowledge them; and freely confess that if these were taken away, no man would be so insensible as not to seek after pleasure by all possible means, lawful or unlawful, using only this caution—that a lesser pleasure might not stand in the way of a greater, and that no pleasure ought to be pursued that should draw a great deal of pain after it; for they think it the maddest thing in the world to pursue virtue, that is a sour and difficult thing, and not only to renounce the pleasures of life, but willingly to undergo much pain and trouble, if a man has no prospect of a reward. And what reward can there be for one that has passed his whole life, not only without pleasure, but in pain, if there is nothing to be expected after death? Yet they do not place happiness in all sorts of pleasures, but only in those that in themselves are good and honest. There is a party among them who place happiness in bare virtue; others think that our natures are conducted by virtue to happiness, as that which is the chief good of man. They define virtue thus—that it is a living according to Nature, and think that we are made by God for that end; they believe that a man then follows the dictates of Nature when he pursues or avoids things according to the direction of reason. They say that the first dictate of reason is the kindling in us a love and reverence for the Divine Majesty, to whom we owe both all that we have and, all that we can ever hope for. In the next place, reason directs us to keep our minds as free from passion and as cheerful as we can, and that we should consider ourselves as bound by the ties of good-nature and humanity to use our utmost endeavours to help forward the happiness of all other persons; for there never was any man such a morose and severe pursuer of virtue, such an enemy to pleasure, that though he set hard rules for men to undergo, much pain, many watchings, and other rigors, yet did not at the same time advise them to do all they could in order to relieve and ease the miserable, and who did not represent

gentleness and good-nature as amiable dispositions. And from thence they infer that if a man ought to advance the welfare and comfort of the rest of mankind (there being no virtue more proper and peculiar to our nature than to ease the miseries of others, to free from trouble and anxiety, in furnishing them with the comforts of life, in which pleasure consists) Nature much more vigorously leads them to do all this for himself. A life of pleasure is either a real evil, and in that case we ought not to assist others in their pursuit of it, but, on the contrary, to keep them from it all we can, as from that which is most hurtful and deadly; or if it is a good thing, so that we not only may but ought to help others to it, why, then, ought not a man to begin with himself? since no man can be more bound to look after the good of another than after his own; for Nature cannot direct us to be good and kind to others, and yet at the same time to be unmerciful and cruel to ourselves.  **Thus as they define virtue to be living according to Nature, so they imagine that Nature prompts all people on to seek after pleasure as the end of all they do**. They also observe that in order to our supporting the pleasures of life, Nature inclines us to enter into society; for there is no man so much raised above the rest of mankind as to be the only favourite of Nature, who, on the contrary, seems to have placed on a level all those that belong to the same species. Upon this they infer that no man ought to seek his own conveniences so eagerly as to prejudice others; and therefore they think that not only all agreements between private persons ought to be observed, but likewise that all those laws ought to be kept which either a good prince has published in due form, or to which a people that is neither oppressed with tyranny nor circumvented by fraud has consented, for distributing those conveniences of life which afford us all our pleasures.

"They think it is an evidence of true wisdom for a man to pursue his own advantage as far as the laws allow it, they account it piety to prefer the public good to one's private concerns, but they think it unjust for a man to seek for pleasure by snatching another man's pleasures from him; and, on the contrary, they think it a sign of a gentle and good soul for a man to dispense with his own advantage for the good of others, and that by this means a good man finds as much pleasure one way as he parts with another; for as he may expect the like from others when he may come to need it, so, if that should fail him, yet the sense of a good action, and the reflections that he makes on the love and gratitude of those whom he has so obliged, gives the mind more pleasure than the body could have found in that from which it had restrained itself. They are also persuaded that God will make up the loss of those small pleasures with a vast and endless joy, of which religion easily convinces a good soul.

"Thus, upon an inquiry into the whole matter, they reckon that all our actions, and even all our virtues, terminate in pleasure, as in our chief end and greatest happiness; and they call every motion or state, either of body or mind, in which Nature teaches us to delight, a pleasure. Thus they cautiously limit pleasure only to those appetites to which

> Nature leads us; for they say that Nature leads us only to those delights to which reason, as well as sense, carries us, and by which we neither injure any other person nor lose the possession of greater pleasures, and of such as draw no troubles after them. But they look upon those delights which men by a foolish, though common, mistake call pleasure, as if they could change as easily the nature of things as the use of words, as things that greatly obstruct their real happiness, instead of advancing it, because they so entirely possess the minds of those that are once captivated by them with a false notion of pleasure that there is no room left for pleasures of a truer or purer kind.

And finally, the fatal flaw:

> Quote
>
> [Utopus] made a solemn and severe law against such as should so far degenerate from the dignity of human nature, as to think that our souls died with our bodies, or that the world was governed by chance, without a wise overruling Providence: for they all formerly believed that there was a state of rewards and punishments to the good and bad after this life; and they now look on those that think otherwise as scarce fit to be counted men, since they degrade so noble a being as the soul, and reckon it no better than a beast's: thus they are far from looking on such men as fit for human society, or to be citizens of a well-ordered commonwealth; since a man of such principles must needs, as oft as he dares do it, despise all their laws and customs: for there is no doubt to be made, that a man who is afraid of nothing but the law, and apprehends nothing after death, will not scruple to break through all the laws of his country, either by fraud or force, when by this means he may satisfy his appetites.

Utopia is far from perfect in it's treatment of Epicureanism, but it has gone some way. The author's motives in writing this book are hotly contested still today, and yet as resource for understanding the reception of Epicureanism in England we would be hard pressed to find much better. His anticipation of a socialist state in *Utopia* foreshadows the coming of English Utilitarianism and also of Karl Marx, who wrote his dissertation on Epicurus.

An maybe the most important takeaway is that Epicurus was none of these things. If we wish to understand how we should go about reviving Epicurean Philosophy, we cannot escape the necessity of trying to understand where previous efforts have failed. And *that* conversation starts with Thomas More.

Post by "Joshua" of September 1, 2023 at 5:31 PM

I should also use this occasion to recommend *The Swerve* by Stephen Greenblatt, which touches on not only Thomas More but Lorenzo Valla, Michael Marullus, Montaigne, Thomas Jefferson, Gassendi, Giordano Bruno, and many many others. The controversy surrounding the book is in my opinion frequently absurd, generally overblown, and it comes to us from the kind of people who out of one side of their mouths praise the Medieval period as one of great learning and humanity, and who out of the other side heap accolades on men like Thomas Aquinas (who advocated murdering heretics), and who downplay the sanguinary history of Christianity as it concerns the Inquisition, the Witch-hunts, the Crusades, and much more besides.

I personally prefer the audiobook, expertly read by Edoardo Ballerini and available on Audible--and I can say honestly that I return to it often and always with delight.

Post by “Cassius” of September 1, 2023 at 8:00 PM

Thank you for all that information Joshua! It seems clear now that More definitely provides us a good example of the issues involved in mixing incompatible views.

Unfortunately we have lots of those examples to choose from and too few of the Frances Wright variety who in the main stuck to Epicurus.

While some of what More is saying could possibly be described as Platonic or Aristotelian friendliness to some amount of pleasure, sounds like he is clearly aware of the Stoic hostility to the word and his utopians would clearly fail any test of Stoicism.

Again thanks for all those cites.