

## A VISION OF AN IDEAL SOCIETY IN UTOPIA BY THOMAS MORE

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**Abstract.** *This article examines More's vision of an ideal society, analyzing its fundamental principles, internal conflicts, and enduring significance as both a political treatise and a literary work. The work innovates by combining political theory with the emerging genre of the travelogue, a form that allowed European writers to critique their own societies through the invented perspective of an outsider observing alien customs.*

**Keywords:** *Utopia, an ideal state, Thomas More, Plato's Republic; Francis Bacon, New Atlantis, mirror for princes, contemporary states, Raphael Hythloday, monetary economics.*

In the year 1516, as Europe convulsed with the early tremors of the Reformation and the stark inequalities of early modern capitalism, the English humanist, lawyer, and statesman Sir Thomas More penned a work of enduring paradox. Titled *Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus, de optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula Utopia* (A Truly Golden Little Book, No Less Beneficial Than Entertaining, of a Republic's Best State and of the New Island Utopia), the book introduced a new word into the political lexicon and launched an entire literary genre. More's Utopia, however, is no straightforward manifesto. It is a sophisticated, deeply ironic, and multi-layered dialogue that uses the description of an ideal society on a distant island as a profound critique of contemporary European, and specifically English, social order.

This article will argue that the "ideal society" presented in Utopia is not a model to be slavishly imitated, but a heuristic device a provocative thought experiment designed to interrogate the foundations of property, power, justice, and human nature itself. Through an analysis of its core institutions, its narrative framing, and its pervasive irony, we will explore how More's vision functions as both a compelling ideal and a cautionary mirror.

Understanding More's ideal society requires first engaging with the critical framework established in Book I. This section is not a preamble but the essential thesis to which Utopia is the antithesis. The conversation between More (the character), Peter Giles, and the philosopher-traveler Raphael Hythloday in Antwerp centers on the concrete social evils of England.

Hythloday delivers a blistering critique of the enclosure movement, where common lands were fenced for sheep pasture, dispossessing peasants and creating "sheep that eat men" [More, 18]. He lambasts a corrupt judiciary that hangs petty thieves while ignoring the root causes of crime: systemic poverty and the abolition of community. This critique extends to the futility of counseling princes, whom Hythloday sees as more interested in war and wealth accumulation than in the philosophical pursuit of justice.

This dialogue sets up the central political dilemma: Can true justice be achieved through incremental reform within a corrupt system, as the character More suggests, or does it require a radical, foundational overhaul of society's structures? Book I forces the reader to feel the urgency of the problem. Only then does Hythloday offer his account of Utopia as the solution, making the island's institutions a direct rebuttal to European failures. The ideal society is thus born from a specific, searing critique.

The cornerstone of Utopia is the complete eradication of private property. "For where every man gets whatever he can, and all that a man has gotten he calls his own property," Hythloday explains, "there all things will... fall into the hands of a few" [More, 48].

In Utopia, all houses are exchanged by lot every decade, goods are taken from communal warehouses as needed, and markets and money are nonexistent. Gold and silver are symbols of folly, used for chamber pots and slave chains. This economic communism aims to extinguish the very psychology of avarice and the class stratification it produces. As scholar J.H. Hexter notes, this was More's most radical departure, challenging the fundamental assumption that private property was a natural and necessary institution [Hexter, 24].

Utopian social organization ensures both sufficiency and equity. There is no leisure class; every citizen practices both agriculture and a specific craft. The six-hour workday made possible because all engage in productive labor—provides ample time for “liberal studies,” communal meals, and recreation. This system honors manual labor, ensures collective food security, and grants citizens what the modern philosopher Bertrand Russell would call “leisure for the many” [Russell, 1932]. Society is orderly and uniform: cities are identically planned, clothing is simple and functional, and the day follows a regulated schedule. This standardization is intended to eliminate envy, vanity, and the competitive consumption that fuels social strife in Europe.

Utopia is a patriarchal but rational republic. Families are the primary social units, under the authority of the eldest male. Households are grouped into larger units overseen by elected officials, culminating in a prince chosen by representatives. The system is designed to be meritocratic and focused on the common good. In matters of faith, Utopia is astonishingly tolerant for its time. While many worship celestial bodies or virtuous ancestors, some have adopted Christianity. The only beliefs prohibited are atheism (which undermines social contracts) and dogmatic intolerance. Their overarching philosophy is a form of rational theism, where virtue is defined as “living according to nature,” which means using reason to seek pleasure for the whole community [More, 73].

Here, the ambiguity of More's “ideal” becomes stark. Utopians abhor war but will fight for defense, to liberate the oppressed, or to claim underused land. They prefer to achieve their ends through assassination, bribery, and mercenaries rather than risk their own citizens.

Enslavement is the punishment for serious crimes or for prisoners of war taken in conflict.

Furthermore, their policy of colonizing under-utilized mainland territory, justified by their more efficient use, carries uncomfortable echoes of imperial logic. These elements act as critical fissures in the utopian facade, prompting the reader to question the moral compromises even an ideal society might make to sustain itself.

The true genius of Utopia lies in its pervasive irony, which complicates any simplistic reading of the society as purely ideal. More layers the text with clues that Hythloday's account is not to be accepted uncritically.

The traveler is “Hythloday” (Greek: *hythlos*, “nonsense” + *daiein*, “to distribute”). The island is “Utopia” (*ou-topos*, “no-place”). Its river is “Anydrus” (“no-water”), and its ruler is “Ademus” (“no-people”). These are not the labels of a real society but the signposts of a philosophical construct.

At the narrative's close, the character More delivers the author's masterstroke of ambiguity: “I cannot agree with everything he said... Yet I confess there are many things in the Commonwealth of Utopia which I wish our own country would imitate though I don't really expect it will” [More, 111]. This final judgment frames Utopia not as a blueprint but as a provocation.



Practices like pre-marital nude inspections (to prevent deception) and the strict regulation of travel, while logically consistent within the system, strike the reader as intrusive and potentially dystopian.

Through this irony, More achieves two things. First, he protects himself politically from charges of sedition; the work can be dismissed as mere intellectual play. Second, and more importantly, he transforms Utopia from a prescription into a dialogue with the reader. As literary scholar Dominic Baker-Smith argues, “Utopia is not a program but a perspective, a standpoint from which to survey the follies of one’s own world” [Baker-Smith, 87]. The “ideal” is held at a distance, inviting critique and comparison.

Utopia’s enduring power lies in its dual nature as both a visionary ideal and a critical mirror. It spawned the utopian literary tradition, from Francis Bacon’s scientific New Atlantis to the socialist visions of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*. Its darker, ironic undercurrents equally prefigure the dystopian genre of the 20th century, where attempts at perfect order lead to tyranny, as in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Today, More’s questions remain urgent. In an age of extreme wealth inequality, his critique of property resonates. His vision of a six-hour workday and the value of leisure speaks to modern debates about automation and well-being. Conversely, his depiction of societal uniformity raises critical questions about the tension between collective good and individual liberty, a central dilemma for any social democracy. Utopia forces us to consider: Does human flourishing require the eradication of private ambition, or is that ambition an essential driver of progress? Can perfect equality only be achieved at the cost of personal freedom?

Overall, Thomas More’s Utopia presents an ideal society that is profoundly dialectical. It is a detailed, logical construct built to solve the glaring injustices of its time, featuring communal property, equitable labor, religious tolerance, and a commitment to collective welfare. Yet, this ideal is meticulously framed within layers of irony, critique, and ambiguity. It is simultaneously a radiant alternative and a potential cautionary tale. More’s ultimate achievement is not in providing answers, but in sharpening the questions. Utopia does not tell us what the perfect society is; it compels us to interrogate our own values, to weigh justice against liberty, order against individuality, and communal peace against the complexities of human nature. The ideal society, More suggests, is not a destination to be reached but a conversation to be sustained a perpetual and necessary dialogue between the world as it is and the world as it might, for better or worse, be imagined.

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