**Utopia & the Human Predicament: Plato & More’s Political Realist Prognosis?**

**By Ramona J. Grey**

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Despite their many limitations, utopias touch on an area Lewis Mumford thought “weedy with neglect.”[[1]](#endnote-1) In the nineteen thirties, he joined with George Bernard Shaw in urging that our political prescriptions be entirely utopian. They saw the world as ‘too dangerous for anything less than utopia.’ With the future looking uncertain in the 21st century, perhaps it is time again to revisit utopian political thought. Given the global nature of present problems—a pandemic, climate change, food insecurity, income inequality, utopias may be the only schemes that stand a chance of working. At the same time, there is nothing inherently optimistic about utopian speculation. Recognizing that a desperate situation may require desperate measures, the utopian is likely to be more alarmed than hopeful. His or her immediate task is to awaken us to our predicament, “for it is only after the storm that we dare to look for the rainbow.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Unlike Mumford’s generation, we no longer have the luxury of waiting for the storm to pass before considering more sustainable (and hopefully better) ways of living. By disrupting our complacency with the status quo, the utopian theorist can prompt wide-ranging critical engagement with, and understanding of the world. Nevertheless, mixing utopianism with political thought is fraught with controversy.

Calls to take utopian theories seriously have been with us for a long time, but then so too have attacks on utopia going as far back as Aristotle. First, there are ‘friendly critics’ and scholars—including Marie Louise Berneri (1950), Barbara Goodwin (1978), Krishan Kumar (1987), Lewis Mumford (1922), Lyman Tower Sargent (2010), for whom utopian thought is essential to the human condition. However, even they are quick to point out the multiple flaws in the classic utopias. In his survey of utopias, Mumford concluded that such visions for a new social order “have been as dull as mud” because they are “abstract and haughty.” For Mumford and other friendly critics, our utopias have failed to “take into account the immense diversity and complexity of man’s environment. . .”[[3]](#endnote-3) Sympathetic to the utopian’s quixotic justice-seeking, Mumford was baffled as to why ‘the human imagination, supposedly liberated from the constraints of actual life, could be so impoverished?’[[4]](#endnote-4) Still other friendly critics are disappointed with the utopian’s failure to sufficiently appreciate the human desire for power, glory, and wealth. While these commentators find utopian dreams have been, at best, politically naive and, at worse, “a sterile desert, unfit for human occupation,”[[5]](#endnote-5) they are reluctant to abandon utopianism, or the search for eutopia (the good place). Many of them express the fear that utopian political thought has entered a phase of terminal decline. With the proliferation of dystopias (the hellish place), century, they lament that ‘the 21st has yet to produce a utopia to seize the public imagination in the way Bellamy and Morris’s works did over a century ago.’ “It may be,” Kumar finds:

that, once invented, the utopian idea can never entirely disappear—not, that is, so long as Western society itself continues.” But utopia as a form of the social imagination has clearly weakened—whether fatally we cannot say. It has not in recent times found the power to instill its vision in the public consciousness. If it cannot do so again some time in the future, we should be aware of the seriousness of the failure.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Approvingly, he and other scholars cite Mannheim’s warning of what a world without utopia would mean:

The disappearance of utopia brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes no more than a thing. We would be faced then with the greatest paradox imaginable, namely, that man, who has achieved the highest degree of rational mastery of existence, left without any ideals, becomes a mere creature of impulses. Thus, after a long torturous, but heroic development, just at the highest stage of awareness, when history is ceasing to be blind fate, and is becoming more and more man’s own creation, with the relinquishment of utopia, man would lose his will to shape history and therewith his ability to understand it.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Unsurprisingly, these friendly critics and scholars associate the demise of utopia with social stagnation and, ultimately, the loss of human agency. Although they concede that the idea of utopia is subject to abuse, nevertheless, these friendly critics consider utopia “an essential ingredient of freedom, civilization, and even of being human.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

‘Unfriendly’ critics, essentially anti-utopians, (many of whom were liberals of the Cold War generation), equate utopianism with the opposite values: the denial of freedom, disregard for cultural diversity, and a misplaced faith in human goodness.[[9]](#endnote-9) Utopian political thought—to cite the title of Thomas Molnar’s 1967 work, is ‘the perennial heresy’ of human hubris. Whenever political theory is mixed with utopian thought, they argue it inevitably becomes a dangerous ideology. These anti-utopian critics—including Thomas Molnar, Karl Popper, and Judith Shklar link utopianism of the 20th century with a totalitarian and regimented society. Consequently, for these ‘unfriendly’ critics the ‘perfect society’ represents an ominous idea not because it is unachievable, but it is something to be feared. In the 20th century (and 21st century), nothing is as simple as it was once; science has taught us utopianism is naïve, history has taught us utopianism is dangerous. We best resign ourselves, Judith Shklar informs readers, to the fact that “we know too much to be daring,” and (she hoped) utopianism is dead or dying for want of interest.[[10]](#endnote-10) Apparently, the friendly and unfriendly critics do agree on one thing: whether we regret its passing, or wish it, the classic utopia we have studied, and sometimes admired (despite our reservations), is in trouble.

Many commentators on utopia agree that we have seemingly reached the ‘end of utopia;’ that is, so no further utopias need or *can* be conceived, at least not without embracing ethical absolutism and the denial of individual freedom. But what would it mean for political theory if the search for utopia was called off? Would it be a loss (as well as a gain) if not only the utopian’s habit of playing with ideal alternatives, but also his or her indictment of society was discredited? In addressing these questions, contemporary scholars stress the importance of utopia in providing a standard by which to gauge ‘life as it is’ by ‘life as it should be.[[11]](#endnote-11) Imagining new ways of living and radically different social arrangements encourages us to aspire for something better than the present. Still, the analysis of politics and political ‘realism’ in utopia should not be confined (as is often the case) to the obvious, albeit important question of whether the ideal society and its laws, customs, and social institutions is conceivably plausible, let alone desirable. Human beings think about and write utopias because they are also distressed by the social and political problems that they see all around them; hence, it is important to ask ourselves: how compelling and ‘realistic’is the utopian’s view of what ails society?

In this paper I wish to draw attention to what many agree is an essential characteristic of utopian thought: fostering the desire for a better society by making us acutely aware of our *discontent with the existing one*. Arguably, it is the centrality of the utopian’s diagnosis of social ills—shedding light on what ‘is,’ or the world most people inhabit that provides not only a catalyst to imagining social alternatives, but an essential link between normative political theory and utopia. In an effort to develop this thesis, the following essay examines the indictment of society presented in Books I and II of Plato’s *Republic* and Book I of More’s *Utopia.* Specifically, I grapple with two related questions regarding the ‘political realism’ of Plato and More’s opening dialogues to their utopias; namely, can we identify with the utopian’s account of the human predicament? And based on his indictment of society, how ‘realistically’ can the utopian be sure that we will be receptive to considering his or her vision of eutopia, the good place? Simply put, how well does the utopian *knows us*?

Before embarking on the substantive analysis, a clarification of the essay’s goals is necessary. Approaches to political theory and, ultimately, the ‘purpose’ of theorizing about politics remain a subject of contentious debate.[[12]](#endnote-12) Similarly, debate over the conceptual meaning of utopia remains contentious and messy. That is, should utopianism be confined to “canonical” literary works beginning with Thomas More, (many say no) or does the elasticity of concept defy any fixed definition (which risks finding utopias everywhere in political thought and, therefore, nowhere)? My purpose is not to resolve these conceptual debates about political theory or utopia, but rather to consider one key aspect of the relationship between them, a dissatisfaction with the human condition. Furthermore, I do not wish to suggest that all great works in normative political theory have a hidden utopia, or all political theorists engaged in ‘justice seeking’ must, ipso facto, be utopian. Rather, this essay has a more modest goal; namely, to suggest that, to his credit, the utopian as a political thinker—in this case, Plato & More, provides an account of the human condition in existing society with a high degree of forcefulness and plausibility because he must make it clear, at the outset, he is aware of the gap between reality and what most people value, or *think* they value.

**I.**

It is characteristic of political philosophers, Michael Oakeshott found, that “they take a sober view of the human situation: they deal in darkness.” “Human life in their writings appears, generally, not as a feast or even a journey, but as a predicament.”[[13]](#endnote-13) This is certainly true of the utopian and, most notably, the quintessence political philosopher, Plato. In Book I of *The Republic*, Plato gives us the first glimpse of this ‘human predicament.’ Socrates and Plato’s brother, Glaucon, are returning from a religious festival when Polemarchus and his companions stop them. Planning to gather for all-night celebrations, Polemarchus insists that Socrates come home with him. Polemarchus points out his ‘many’ friends has given them power over one man, Socrates. From this initial exchange between Socrates and Polemarchus, we get a preview of the political definition of justice that Thrasymachus will later offer; namely, not that might always makes right, but the mighty aim to get their way. As one might expect, the old philosopher suggests entertaining ‘another alternative;’ rather than demonstrating a show of physical force or numerical strength, Socrates asks if perhaps “we can persuade you that you should let us go” (327c10)? But, Polemarchus sarcastically quips, “could you persuade us, if we won’t listen” (327c10)?[[14]](#endnote-14) In this seemingly innocent banter between Polemarchus and Socrates, we are meant to encounter a confrontation between the philosopher’s wisdom and power politics. Immediately, Plato has raised a dilemma that the justice-seeking political philosopher and utopian, including Thomas More (albeit in a different context), will perpetually confront; namely, how to get people, particularly those with power, to listen to what the wise philosopher has to say.

To move his audience to contemplate an ideal society and better way of life, it is important that Plato, the utopian, show that he is aware of how people in the ‘real world’ think about justice and behave accordingly. Adopting what will be a common feature of subsequent utopias, Plato resorts to the literary art of a constructed dialogue, which relies on philosophical argument and allegory. Specifically, in Books 1 and 2 of *The Republic*, he has Polemarchus, Thrasymachus, Glaucon and Adeimantus offering familiar definitions of justice. Their arguments reflect not only the prevailing beliefs in Athenian society, but also set forth propositions about politics and the human personality that still resonate in 21st century public discourse. So, what do each of these characters tell us about the way people think about justice and injustice in Plato’s world and ours?

Having enticed Socrates to join him and friends for conversation, Polemarchus is eager to defend his father’s Cephalus’ conventional notion of justice. His admiration of justice as “giving to each what is owed him” (331e5) makes sense for one who will inherit his father’s entails and wealth. From Polemarchus we learn that justice (like medicine) is a craft that ‘gives benefit to friends and harm to enemies’(332d5). Whether on the individual or city-state level, justice comes down to a transactional, power relationship between people. Polemarchus’ self-serving definition of justice, based on one’s perception of friends and enemies, as Socrates points out, means that justice will continually mutate with changing social circumstances and political alliances. Initially, Polemarchus does not seem entirely troubled by this. However, the relationship between justice conceived as one’s own good verses justice conceived as a universal good is a central concern to Plato’s Socrates. Like many of his contemporary Athenians and, no doubt, for many still, Polemarchus’ view of justice, Socrates contends, echoes the adage of some “wealthy man who thought he had great power” (335e5). Still, despite having convinced Polemarchus of the limitations of his notion of justice, Socrates leaves open the question: is the pursuit of one’s advantage over others an inescapable political and, perhaps, psychological fact of social existence?

Entering the dialogue “like a wild beast,” Thrasymachus forcefully and eagerly wants to respond. Rather than ‘acting naïve,’ we should face the realities of power politics and, when we do so, Thrasymachus says, we see that everywhere ‘justice is the advantage of the stronger,’ by which he means those who exercise power over others. All governments, he informs Socrates, “make laws that are advantageous for itself: democracy makes democratic ones, tyranny tyrannical ones, as so on with the others. And by so legislating, each declares that what is just for its subjects is what is advantageous for itself—the ruler(s)—and it punishes anyone who deviates from this as lawless and unjust” (338e). He accuses Socrates of ‘straying so far from reality’ that he cannot see that “justice is really the good of another, what is advantageous for the stronger and the ruler, and harmful to the one who obeys and serves” (343c). Injustice rules over ‘simpleminded’ people who obey the laws and pay their debts. According to Thrasymachus, the real world consists of two types of people: winners (the unjust) and losers (the just). The fool, who behave justly towards others, is “always a loser.” In business contracts, if a just man takes an unjust man as a partner, when their contract is dissolved, invariably the unjust man walks away with the lion’s share of the assets. And “when taxes are being paid,” Thrasymachus continues:

a just man pays more on an equal amount of property, an unjust one less; but when the city is giving out refunds, a just man gets nothing while an unjust one makes a large profit. Finally, when each of them holds public office, a just person—even if he is not penalized in other ways—finds his private affairs deteriorate more because he has to neglect them. . .and that he is hated by friends and acquaintances because he unwilling to do them an unjust favor. The opposite is true of an unjust man in every respect. I mean, of course. . .the man of great power who does better than everyone else (343d-e).

Justice, Thrasymachus reminds Socrates, has no redeeming value for those who wish to get ahead in this world. Socrates understands him to be saying that standards of right and wrong, truth and falsehood derive their practical meaning from the power relationships in society. Hence, good and bad, wisdom and folly are neither permanent nor real. It is those who live according to what the philosopher calls “injustice” that gain the most from living in a city-state. In answer to Socrates’ question, ‘Are you not concerned with how people should live their lives?, Thrasymachus responds that if we want the best life in this world, we would do well to heed his account of it. Moreover, he argues that most people, who are not philosophers, are quite prepared to give their approval to the *successful* use of power. What might, in other social contexts, be regarded as sacrilege or common thief is seen as legitimate, even admirable conduct on the part of those who rule. Admiring the life of the rich and powerful, the average person venerates injustice, but only ‘in a big way’and, doing so, makes it into the embodiment of justice. What is *real* and, therefore, permanent in this world, according to Thrasymachus, are interest, which people seek to further, and will do so, unless hindered by others or by unforeseen circumstances.

To Plato’s credit, he has Thrasymachus[[15]](#endnote-15) present a very recognizable ‘unjust’ individual—who ruthlessly seeks his own good; thus, it not hard to identify his or her counterpart in the world today. Nor does Socrates, for that matter, deny Thrasymachus’ observation that “the stronger” rule in existing city-states or “that justice *is* what is in the interest of the stronger” (emphasis added, 347d). Instead, Socrates repeatedly shifts the conversation away from a corrupt world of amoral human beings who, at best, are more bothered by having injustice done to them than by doing it to others—to considering ‘complete justice’ alongside ‘complete injustice.’ At this point, Plato alters Thrasymachus’ character slightly. Uninterested in petty pickpockets, Thrasymachus makes it clear that he speaks of *perfectly* unjust people, who are most wise and good, and capable of pushing injustice to its logical limits by bringing ‘whole cities and nations under their power’ (348d). In making this claim, he has unwittingly, so-to-speak, stepped on the utopian’s turf of talking about ideal types of rulers and the ideal ways of living. As against Plato’s Callipolis of perfect justice, Thrasymachus, encouraged by Socrates, presents a dystopia of perfect injustice where the ‘complete’ tyrant—engaged in stealing property, manipulating the laws, and exploiting others with impunity— lives the freest and most fulfilling life possible.

Neither Glaucon nor Adeimantus find Thrasymachus’s dystopian vision very appealing, but they (like many of us) also find Socrates’ responses to claims that “the life of an unjust person is better than that of a just one” (347e) weak and unsatisfying. Glaucon and Adeimantus, therefore, proceed to enlighten Socrates on the view of justice generally held by people in society. Initially, Glaucon wants to continue with Thrasymachus’ arguments. But whereas Thrasymachus focuses on the unpleasant truths about the role of power in determining values, Glaucon is concerned with the practical importance of law in any consideration of justice. This, Glaucon argues, can be traced to the fact that “people say, you see, that to do injustice is naturally good and to suffer injustice is bad.” And they further acknowledge that “the badness of suffering (injustice) far exceeds the goodness of doing it” (358e). All people—strong or weak, wise or foolish, just or unjust—must live their entire lives in the company of others. And since no one is able to exercise absolute power to do injustice as he pleases, (like Gyges with his magic ring), human beings ‘operationalize’ justice by making laws and legal contracts so they may avoid suffering injustice. The weak, who comprise the majority, are more likely to experience ‘being wronged’ than being able to inflict wrong on others; thus, they are equally vulnerable to suffering injustice “without being able to take revenge.” The one (albeit tenuous) glimmer of hope Glaucon offers stems from his observation that people are capable of making compromises with their fellow citizens to protect and advance their interests. Most people put their own well-being ahead of others, but they realize that the “appearance” of justice is something they cannot live without. Justice is, at best, a social convention derived from laws that people grudgingly obey for the sake of reputation and material rewards.

Glaucon’s description of what people, non-philosophers, really think about justice and injustice suggests the presence of selfishness, greed and vice are inescapable aspects of human existence, which can only be checked by a social contact. The way human beings, in general, think and behave in existing society, as described by Glaucon, is far more Machiavellian than even Thrasymachus had initially assumed. Whereas Thrasymachus’ account of social reality highlights ‘the strong ruler’ who imposes his will on others without a great deal of resistance, Glaucon grants that rulers and average citizens alike are smart enough to recognize that the exercise raw power will only get them so far. Successful individuals develop a range of skills—e.g., using the art of persuasion, cultivating loyal partners, and, frequently, wielding power “by mobilizing friends and money” (361b)—to gain the advantages they seek. What was previously associated with justice—paying debts and telling the truth (Cephalus), benefiting friends and harming enemies (Polemarchus)—is, according to Glaucon, merely a cover for carrying out injustice. The fact is one can never know for certain in this world who is genuinely just and who is *seeming* to be just for the sake of ‘honors and gifts.’ Worse still, one cannot be certain that anyone who is appears blatantly *unjust* will suffer the consequences, especially given how much people admire success for its own sake.

Elaborating on his brother’s observations, Adeimantus draws attention to the gap between conventional opinion, favoring of justice and disparaging of injustice, and the reality of successful swindlers and charlatans. Everyone praises justice as fair and noble, but, at the same time, most find it difficult and tiresome. In the present world, injustice pays better dividends and, frankly, people find it more attractive than justice. Injustice is only shameful because law and convention condemns it; meanwhile, private individuals and even poets, Adeimantus adds, are “perfectly willing to bestow public and private honors on bad people—provided they have wealth and other types of power—and to declare them to be happy, they dishonor and disregard those who happen to be in any way weak or poor, even though they admit that they are better than the others” (364a-b). Unlike his brother, Adeimantus holds out little hope that a system of laws can or will protect the weak and poor from injustice by curbing the power of the stronger. On the contrary, his view of the human capacity to deceive both fellow citizens and the gods suggests the rule of law, instead of limiting those with power, is just another device used in “appearing just” while committing unjust acts. To be sure, this all points to a rather dismal prospect for human beings ever realizing a better way of living in society, let alone finding ‘true ‘justice’ in the afterlife.

Clearly, Socrates’ four companions—particularly Thrasymachus, Glaucon and Adeimantus, are intent on showing us the way things are, what justice is *really* about. Plato may not agree, but it is important that he makes it clear that he, (the utopian) is aware of how people *actually* talk about justice and injustice, morality and politics, and the meaning of a good life. He aims not only to show us that he recognizes (vis-à-vis Thrasymachus) the Machiavellian forces at play in existing society, but also is willing to confront (vis-à-vis Glaucon and Adeimantus) the most serious of all the barriers to utopia: a complacency in accepting the status quo, in which “justice is unattainable and injustice unavoidable” (359). Hence, Plato not only engages in a debate with us, his readers, but with himself. This enables him to raise questions that we, if present, would also raise. If the ideal polis is ever to be considered other than a Cloudcuckooland, then he (and we) must come to terms with our doubts and disbelief.

Through the arguments presented in Books I and II of his *Republic*, Plato also speaks to the worries and dismay of those who observe practical politics from Athenian times down to the present day. But it is not the cynic, Thrasymachus, that he would like us to identify with, but Glaucon, the open-minded skeptic. After the verbal sparring between Socrates and Thrasymachus, Glaucon wants from Socrates more than refutation of their (anti-utopian) arguments, but rather an alternative vision of a society where justice is “some kind of good we ought to strive for, not because we expect it will bring profitable results but simply because we value the good for its own sake?” Having considered the dark side of human nature, Glaucon hopes it might still be possible to conceive a world where genuine justice is something that brings joy in itself, “or those sorts of harmless pleasures that leave nothing behind except the memory of enjoyment” (357b-c[[16]](#endnote-16)). Indeed, the appeal to that which brings ‘harmless pleasures,’ Sir Thomas More, apparently, took to heart in composing his masterpiece, *Utopia*.

**II.**

In writing his *Utopia* (1515), Sir Thomas More took great pleasure in entertaining and mystifying his fellow Renaissance humanists. He appears to have succeeded beyond his expectations. Over five hundred years after its publication, his famous text continues to perplex scholars of all stripes. Drawing from Plato’s *Republic* and other canonical sources familiar to his contemporaries,[[17]](#endnote-17) More created a unique literary genre that mixes whimsy with reality and an abundance of wit with paradox. Consider the title, ‘*Utopia*,’ a word he invented as a pun derived from the Greek words, *ou* (meaning no or not), *eu* (meaning good), and *topos* (meaning place).[[18]](#endnote-18) He clearly enjoyed playing with words, but, as a political thinker, More’s is playfulness with the purpose of making his audience aware of the complexity of social problems. After completing the writing of his ideal, island commonwealth in Book II, More was unsatisfied with the work until he added Book I’s depiction of blight in present government and society.[[19]](#endnote-19) Thomas More understood that utopian ideas had to be reconciled with reality. It was a reconciliation that would prove far from easy, however. Whereas Plato associates the human predicament with the failure to understand and appreciate the nature of true justice—a metaphysical and epistemological dilemma, More’s opening dialogue raises questions related to the relationship between virtue and politics with direct references to ‘certain weighty matters’ preoccupying monarchs of the period. Most of all, he focuses on the everyday economic hardships and general social maladies characterizing the lives of ordinary people.

Once again, we find the utopian wrestling with the dilemma of whether those with power will listen or can be persuaded to listed to the ‘detached’ *philosopher-physician*—who is most able to diagnosis social ills and offer a prescription. And who better to fill this role than More’s imaginary character, Raphael Hythloday? Whose first name, ‘Raphael’ alludes to the archangel responsible for healing Tobit’s blindness in the Catholic Old Testament scripture and whose surname, ‘Hythloday,’ is taken from the Greek compound meaning ‘an expert in non-sense.’ Our first glimpse of Raphael Hythloday comes from More (a.k.a. the literary ‘Morus’), who after attending mass in the church of Notre Dame notices his friend, Peter Giles (a real person) speaking to “a stranger, a man of quite advanced years, with sunburned face, a long beard, and a cloak hanging loosely from his shoulders” (*Utopia*, 11).[[20]](#endnote-20) Following Plato’s lead, More’s *Utopia* takes the form of a conversation resulting from this chance encounter after a religious ceremony. More has Giles introduce him to this stranger—a Portuguese voyager, who joined Amerigo Vespucci’s exploration of new lands. More mistakes Raphael for a ship’s captain (although he would certainly qualify as a ‘true navigator’ in the ship allegory of Plato’s *Republic*, 488-489). If truth be told, Giles informs his friend, Raphael’s “sailing has not been like that of Palinurus, but more that of Ulysses, or rather Plato” (*Utopia*, 10). Are we not surprised given the unmistakable parallels between Socrates’ and Raphael’s “advanced years” and “loosely hanging cloths?”

Raphael Hythloday, like Plato’s mentor—Socrates, can best be described a pilgrim seeking to free his mind from false opinions and old prejudices. He is a traveler who can articulate a theory of government based on reflection and experience but shares Plato’s distain for participating in public affairs. He would rather discuss politics and public policy with friends and companions than with rulers and royal councils vying for status in a power hierarchy. In contrast, the ensuing discussion with Raphael in More’s garden at Antwerp depicts ‘a fellowship of equals, or what Wootton calls a “friendship portrayed,” who enjoy one another’s company and share a mutual desire to better understand themselves and the world around them.[[21]](#endnote-21) Their debate is lively, but More and his two companions do not engage in any competitive intellectual rivalry. Among them, we do not find a Thrasymachus, the sophist, intent on proving himself superior in debate. As Wootton points out, More never lets any ‘one voice establish itself as reliable and authoritative.’[[22]](#endnote-22) Consequently, More’s relationship to his main character, Raphael Hythloday, remains ambiguous, particularly with regard to the stranger’s proposals for remedying present social ills. However, he accepts Raphael’s account of the social injustice pervasive in so-called ‘civilized’ commonwealths. They discuss these socio-economic problems with reference to the fundamental questions that political philosophers have, with varying degrees of success, tried to answer.

Specifically, the dialogue in More’s Book I addresses a perennial dilemma Plato had raised nearly two-thousand years prior—only now framed in the context of 16th century English and European politics; that is, can an honest counselor persuade a king ‘to act justly and honestly,’ especially if those around the seat of power sanction immoral acts? Should a counselor act according to higher moral law and risk being ostracized (even persecuted) or accept the laws of an immoral government for the sake of gaining (and retaining) influence over those who make the laws? In religious terms, if he chooses the latter course of action, would he not be going against Christian teachings? In other words, how does one act ethically and make expedient decisions according to the circumstances? For More the relationship between fidelity to one’s principles and fulfilling one’s public duty was not merely a philosophical question, but a pressing and deeply personal one. At the time of his writing *Utopia*, More was considering whether to serve as a counselor to Henry VIII.

Naturally, More and his friend, Peter Giles, are curious as to why Raphael—with his “knowledge of various countries and peoples”—has not entered public service as a counsel to some king, especially given the personal advantages of serving those in power. “You might,” says Giles, “admirably advance your own interests and be of great use at the same time to all your relatives and friends” *(Utopia*, 13). Like Polemarchus in the Plato’s *Republic*, Giles takes it for granted that individual self-interest is the primary currency in human affairs. But Raphael, who prefers pursuing moral goods over material benefits, informs his campanions that he has distributed his possessions among his relatives, thereby ensuring he is not burdened by personal obligations that require enslaving himself in servitude (or in service) to ‘any king whatever.’ Still, Giles persists: “I do not see any other way in which you can be useful to your friends or to the general public” (the latter he adds almost as an afterthought), “in addition to making *yourself* happier” (*Utopia*, 13, emphasis added,). At this point, the fictional More enters the dialogue praising the fact that Raphael seeks “neither wealth nor power” and, with overtones of Socrates’ cave allegory speech (520b-d), urges the philosopher-voyager to reconsider public service: “Yet I think if you could bring yourself to devote your intelligence and energy to public affairs, you would be doing something worthy of your noble and truly philosophical nature, even if you did not much like it” (*Utopia*, 14). It seems reasonable to assume that the real More considered this argument persuasive, but his fictional (alter-ego?) Raphael is unmoved by it. Never mind the odds of realizing a philosopher-king, finding even a *philosophy-loving* king is extremely unlikely in the real world of politics.

From Raphael’s vantage point, all existing regimes presuppose a conventional view of morality and justice are, as a consequence, equally objectionable. Rebuffing More’s call for him to “become a councilor to some great prince,” Raphael observes that “most princes apply themselves to the arts of war” and “they are generally more set on acquiring new kingdoms by hook or crook than on governing well those they already have” (*Utopia*, 14). From Raphael’s perspective, More fails to appreciate the extent to which ambition, envy, greed and the desire for power holds sway over human affairs, and especially in those who rule over others. For Raphael the problem is not simply duplicity, but the judgement of these councilors has become corrupted. They genuinely believe the ruler, as the embodiment of a commonwealth’s destiny, has a natural right to pursue any means available for their king and country’s greatness. Accordingly, councilors advise the ruler on various ways to use trickery for political gain. It is not that Raphael (the worldly-wise philosopher) would be incapable of challenging advisors competing for the king’s attention and favor, but that rulers, their councilors, and *citizens*, (as Adeimantus had claimed) accept the presence of vice in government and even admire those who successfully pull it off. According to More’s Raphael, most people in public and private life subscribe to Thrasymachus’ insistence that ‘justice is whatever serves the interest of the stronger’ because it is ingrained in their thinking.

To further illustrate this gulf between philosophical wisdom and the world of practical politics, More has Raphael critique the inequity and injustice of the present legal and economic system. Raphael recounts his dinner conversation with Cardinal John Morton, then Lord Chancellor of England (and More’s former mentor). Also present was a “laymen, learned in the laws, who,” Raphael recalls, “for some reason took occasion to praise the rigid execution of justice then being practiced on thieves.” Despite ‘as many as twenty at a time being hanged on a single gallows,’ the lawyer is baffled as to why “so many thieves sprang up everywhere when so few of escaped hanging” (*Utopia*, 16). Incensed by the widespread and indiscriminate use of the death penalty, Raphael warns the lawyer that hanging people for thief may look superficially like justice, but it is neither just nor expedient. He argues that it is not only immoral to treat ‘the killing of a man and taking a coin from him’ as equal under the law, but such extreme sentencing is socially dangerous. If thief carries the same penalty as murder, then the offender will be motivated “to kill the victim whom otherwise he would only have robbed” in order to eliminate the witness to his crime (*Utopia*, 23.) Not only does Raphael condemns the inequitable laws which allow the rich to exploit the poor, but his critical analysis of the existing economic system anticipates that of later liberal reformers and socialists.[[23]](#endnote-23)

While oppression of the population by the rulers, nobility, and clergy—accompanied by “wanton luxury” and vice—plagues all European ‘civilized’ countries, Raphael finds that the livelihood of the English farmer and the welfare of his family is imperiled by a danger particular to sixteenth-century England—its sheep and the enclosure of common lands. Hence Raphael’s famous image of ‘sheep devouring human beings’ coalesces with the image of the gentry ‘devouring’ the lives of their retainers to reveal the source of this insidious corruption, greed: “They devastate and depopulate fields, houses and towns. For in whatever parts of the land sheep yield the finest and thus the most expensive wool, there the nobility and gentry, yes, and even a good many abbots—holy man—are not content with the old rents that the land yielded to their predecessors”  
 (*Utopia,* 19). The enclosure movement uproots the local population, severs community ties stretching back generations, and negates the social value of a wide distribution of property and gainful work. In response to Raphael’s critique, the lawyer presents a familiar rebuttal; namely, that there are plenty of opportunities for land ownership and employment through legal means, and only laziness and obstinacy prevent people from taking advantage of it. But Raphael persists in arguing that social forces and the laws play a role in benefiting the few and hindering the many from realizing their potential. Although thief no longer carries a penalty of death, his observations on the human suffering that comes with homelessness and poverty transcends More’s time and place:

One way or another, these wretched people—men, women, husbands, wives, orphans, widows, parents with little children and entire families . . .are forced to move out. They leave the only homes familiar to them, and can find no place to go. Since they must leave at once without waiting for a proper buyer, they sell for a pittance all their household goods, which would not bring much in any case. When that little money is gone (and it’s soon spent in wandering from place to place), what finally remains for them but to steal, and so be hanged—justly, no doubt—or to wander and beg (*Utopia*, 19-20)?

For Raphael the crime of thief should not be judged solely in terms of the culpability of offender, but rather we must consider the material conditions which may force the wounded veterans, the elderly, the displaced farmer and his family, the discarded retainers of the wealthy to steal in the first place. It is important that More (sans his Catholicism) has Raphael refute the widely accepted opinion that a person’s nature compels him or her to act in a certain way. In other words, an individual’s choice to steal is not really his, no matter what he may think—but, fundamentally, a mark of his fallen nature. But if this true, then it is no longer convention, i.e., one’s socio-economic conditions that influence individual agency, or decides what is just, but human nature. And it is this view of human nature—would it be amiss to label it a conservative view?—that More needs Raphael to challenge, knowing he must if *Utopia* is to be read as nothing more than an amusing pipedream. Consequently, he has Raphael point out that growth in crime in England and elsewhere suggests the solution to the problem extends beyond legal remedies, but instead calls for a radical transformation of society from the top down.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Returning to the debate on council, More’s Raphael Hythloday (speaker of non-sense) traces the disease of injustice and poverty in society directly to the ‘rot at the top’ of the class hierarchy. This can be seen in the manipulation of judges and courts for the benefit of the king’s interests. Court advisors, Raphael argues, aiming to win favor, will placate their patron’s desire for absolute power at home and abroad. This reality especially troubled More, who, having studied law and the writings of Augustine and Aquinas, shared with fellow Christian humanists a respect for civil law as a rung on the ladder of God’s laws. In particular, Raphael describes the deceptive tactics the king’s counselors will recommend for filling royal treasuries, including reinstating fines for breaking “some old moth-eaten laws” that, having the added benefit of looking credible—“can be made to wear the mask of justice” (*Utopia*, 33.) Additionally, the king will be advised to enact new laws, Raphael continues, that “forbid under particularly heavy fines many practices, especially as are contrary to the public interest,” and afterwards, in exchange for a payment, he can pardon violators from being prosecuted under his own laws. Despite claims of being a Christian commonwealth, Raphael finds in sixteenth-century England (and other Western European states) a complete rupture between God’s laws and the secular laws, where unjust rulers routinely feign concern with the public good to garner the favor of the people while, at the same time, gaining ‘double profit’ from those who fall victim to their trap.

Another more serious abuse of the legal system that Raphael refences (and one that remains a threat to this day), results when advisors propose that the king “work on judges so they will decide every case in the royal interest.” He reckons that judges will be frequently called to the palace where they are to debate questions of law for the sake of allowing the king and his counsels to gain insight into and control over their legal reasoning. Raphael’s account of political absolutism superseding the rule of law merits being fully quoted:

However unjust (the king’s) claims, one or another of the judges, whether from love of contradiction, or desire to seem original, or simply to serve his own interest, will be able to find some loopholes to introduce chicanery. If the judges give differing opinions, the clearest matter in the world can be made cloudy and truth itself brought into question. The king is given a convenient handle to interpret the law in his favor, and everyone will acquiesce from shame or fear. Thus the judgement can be boldly handed down in court; nor can there be any lack of pretext for someone ruling in the prince’s favor. Either equity is on the king’s side, or the letter of the law makes for him, or a twisted interpretation of a document, or the factor which in the end outweighs all laws for scrupulous judges, the indisputable prerogative of the prince (*Utopia*, 33).

Under the guise of royal prerogative, More was aware that ‘equity’ and ‘the letter of the law’ were little more than arbitrary standards of judgement that serve the crown. This surrender to royal interest ‘leads with remarkable speed in Raphael account, to outright tyranny, to the assumption that all subjects own even their material possessions to royal generosity.’[[25]](#endnote-25) Constitutional limits to royal governing power in More’s England had become a subject of debate. He has Raphael, therefore, expressing attitudes that were circulating at the time, and anticipating subsequent political struggles over constitutional supremacy that, in terms of its fundamental principles, will continue into the 21st century.

Raphael’s depiction of sixteenth-century Europe and England reinforces Thrasymachus’ claim that doing injustice is more profitable than justice, and a wily prince can outmaneuver his most virtuous opponents.[[26]](#endnote-26) Of course, this leaves unresolved the political dilemma raised at the start of the discussion in More’s garden. To bring philosophical wisdom into public life requires participating in the amoral world of palace politics, but can one, *realistically*, expect to do so without sacrificing one’s moral autonomy? Although he does not deny that most people—especially rulers and their courtiers—are motivated by brazen self-interest, More refuses to accept Raphael’s arguments regarding the futility of offering advice to those in power. For More “there is another philosophy, better suited for the role of a citizen, that takes its cue, adapts itself to the drama in hand and acts its part neatly and appropriate” (*Utopia*, 36). We must adapt to political reality, he advises, and take “an indirect approach” to counseling princes; “you must strive and struggle as best you can to handle everything tactfully—and thus what you cannot turn to good, you may at least make as less bad as possible” (*Utopia*, 37). Short of throwing in the proverbial towel, More’s ‘indirect approach’ presupposes that pursuing a policy of ‘less injustice’ will be more effective than trying to achieve perfect justice. In this instance, he clearly speaks not as the utopian, but as the compromising pragmatist (or politician), clear-eyed about human limitations and social contingencies. “For it is,” he reminds Raphael, “impossible to make everything good unless all men are good, and that I don’t expect to see for quite a few years” (*Utopia*, 37)—or if ever? At the same time, More’s advice to adapt oneself to political reality suggests the gulf between morality and politics is not so wide as to jettison all hope. While not ignoring social and political truths, he (along with Raphael) retains a faith in an ethical truth that not only infuses the physical or temporal world but is superior to it.

Yet contrary to More’s willingness to ‘work within the political system’ in hopes of achieving a ‘modest’ good, Raphael, the radical idealist, refuses to accommodate what he sees as the inescapable reach of political corruption in a dysfunctional world. The only result of adapting oneself to the present reality, he replies, “will be that while I try to cure the madness of others, I’ll be raving along with them myself” (*Utopia*, 37). From Raphael’s perspective, the pragmatic reformer fails to recognize the force of social pressure and political ambition. “People who have made up their minds to rush headlong down the opposite road,” he reminds More, “are never pleased with the man who calls them back and points out the dangers of their course” (*Utopia,* 38). On the effectiveness of offering advice to such people, it is not More, but, ironically, Raphael—the utopian voyager, who comes across as ‘an unblinkered political realist’ and pessimist. Unlike More, Raphael finds it far more difficult—and, at times, *nearly* impossible, given society as it is presently organized—to combine hope with truth. Hence the crux of Raphael’s political thought: if wisdom and power are ever to be united, the whole structure of society—especially with regards to money and the institution of private property— needs to be transformed. What philosophers can do in the meantime, he surmises, is inform the rest of us (or whoever will listen) about the lives and customs of those in the utopian commonwealth. “I lived there more than five years (in Utopia) and would never have left,” Raphael confesses, “if it had not been to make that new world known to others” (41).

In sum, More gives his fictional character—some might argue his alter-ego, Raphael Hythloday, with the dual-role of social critic and visionary, one who focuses his ‘an unflattering eye’ on human greed and social injustice, while, at the same time, not losing sight of the alternative—eutopia, the good society. The discussion between More and the Portuguese explorer-philosopher, is fictional but the political and social problems they debate are not. Indeed, Hythloday’s angry voice of protest against economic inequality, sullying the rule of law, manipulating citizens to serve one’s own political ends still resonates with readers today. In his recent book on *Thomas More’s* *Utopia, Arguing for Social Justice* (2017), Lawrence Wilde finds the present-day reader can glean from More’s text, and specifically Raphael Hythloday’s indictment, “two clear warnings and a challenge:”

The warnings are, first, that the untrammeled pursuit of private wealth will have baleful social consequences, and second, that unaccountable rule is likely to end in tyranny. The challenge is to work towards the creation of a society that brings social justice through minimising inequality and placing political and economic power in the hand of the whole citizenry.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Above all, More’s opening dialogue reveals a utopian author who shares our feelings of doubt and hopes for something better. As a political thinker, More wants to be honest with himself and us about the prospects of realizing an ideal society in this world. In the exchange between the narrator More and Raphael, the author More invites the reader to consider her own position and take sides between ‘a society where there is widespread happiness and one in which the few display their wealth and power;’ in this way, More’s Book I (like Plato’s *Republic)* serves to upend our resignation in ‘things as they are’ by provoking a ‘utopian’ desire to “think critically about the possibilities of an alternative society and a better way of living.”[[28]](#endnote-28) Arguably, the enduring quality of More’s *Utopia* is not the vision of the perfect state of the commonwealth; rather, it is the human spirit struggling to maintain hope itself before the often-overwhelming realities of life, here and now.

**III.**

Aside from the value of imagining a truly just society, classic utopias, including Plato’s *Republic* and More’s *Utopia*, provide a formidable diagnosis of social ills that prompt their audience to ponder the persistent nature of human problems and social conundrums. With some justification, the utopian political thinker can be accused of deliberately ‘spreading darkness’ to make the ideal commonwealths appear more attractive; on the other hand, their account of the human predicament, e.g., the gap between philosophy and politics, creates—but does not resolve, a tension in their dichotomous view of nature. It is also tension central to the natural law tradition in political theory. The utopians, who take their lead from Plato and More, are eternally frustrated with those who claim that there is no solid basis for ethical truths, or, who, like Thrasymachus, acknowledge physical or natural truths, but not ethical ones. They are equally troubled by those who can find no meaning or purpose in nature (apart from social convention) and remain relentless opponents of those who acknowledge only one kind of natural imperative, such as human greed or the hunger for power. Neither Plato’s Socrates nor More’s Raphael will accept this view of nature (although More’s literary self comes close to doing so.) For Plato and More nature is *the* standard by which to judge conventional notions of justice, good government, or a fair economic system, etc. But the utopian is wise enough to incorporate two ‘natures’ in his (or her) analysis of society—one often associated with realism, the other with idealism. It is this tension between these two natures—the one Plato’s Thrasymachus and Raphael (of Book I) articulate and the other which is attributed to Socrates and Raphael (of Book II)—that the reader is never allowed to jettison, no more than either Plato or More could. As a result of not resolving this tension, the utopian theorist provides a nuanced analysis that does not necessarily promote the false and misguided hope of a smooth and easy transition to the ideal city-state. Instead, Plato and More leave readers with *the* predicament that will forever plague the builders of the ideal commonwealth; namely, the problem of moving from ‘is’ to ‘ought,’ especially when ‘is’ (the reality) represents all that is bad and ‘ought’ (the ideal) all that is good.

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1. Lewis Mumford, *Story of Utopia* (Massachusetts: Smith, 1959), 291. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Mumford, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Mumford, 297. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This question seemingly preoccupied Mumford throughout his long career as a writer and public intellectual. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Lewis Mumford, “Utopia, the City and the Machine.” *Daedalus* 94 (1965): 271-292, 278 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Krishan Kuman, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 423. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. L. Wirth and E. Shils (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1936) 262-263. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Lyman Tower Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited.” *Utopian Studies* 5(1994): 1-37, 26 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. In his *Open Society and Its Enemies* (1966), Karl Popper attacked the notion of achieving a perfect society as a dangerous pipedream. Rather than drafting blueprints for ‘restructuring society as a whole,’ he called for adopting a “piecemeal engineering” approach to social problems, focusing on what is feasible, limited in scope, and achieved through a democratic method of “a reasonable compromise,” (1966, 159). One recent commentator has suggested, ironically, that the continued viability of utopian thought can be found in its shift towards ‘micro-level,’ slow, pragmatic —dare one say— piecemeal social change. See Fátima Vieira (2010), “The concept of utopia,” in Gregory Claeys (ed.) *Cambridge Companion To Utopian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3-27, 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Judith Shklar, *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith*. Princeton (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 272. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Among the contemporary scholars who present a defense for utopia, see Jendrysik 2020; Kumar 1987; Sargent 2010; Storey 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Methodological issues concerning the purpose of political theory’ and, relatedly, ‘how to do it’ stem from the lamentable fact that conceptual confusion surrounds almost all the terms of the debate; see Thaler, “Hope Abjuring Hope: On the Place of Utopia in Realist Political Theory.” *Political Theory* 46 (2018): 671-697. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Michael Oakeshott, “Introduction.” In *Leviathan by Thomas Hobbes*, edited by Michael Oakeshott, vii-lxvi. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957, vii-lxvi, x. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. I prefer C.D.C Reeve’s translation of Plato’s *Republic* (Hackett Publishing, 2004). References will be to this edition and will appear in brackets in the text (unless otherwise noted below.) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Plato’s skill in depicting the verbal sparring in Book I makes it easy to forget that Thrasymachus is his creation. While scholars agree that Thrasymachus was a real person, a sophist, little is known about him. Consequently, we may never know if the historical Thrasymachus held the views attributed to him in the *Republic*, or whether Plato is merely using him as a foil. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by Richard Sterling and William Scott (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. According to several scholars, Renaissance political theory (including More’s) draws largely on classical thought assimilating Roman and Greek works. The most obvious influence is that of the works of Plato and Plutarch, St. Aquinas, and St Augustine, (the latter’s work More had delivered public lectures on) and, most notably, his friend, the Dutch humanist, Erasmus, who shared More’s admiration for Greek philosophy. More probably derived, Logan observes, “the systematic approach to the analysis of social problems and formulation of solutions directly from Plato and Aristotle,” *The Meaning of More’s Utopia*, p. 94. For background on More and the northern humanists, see Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For an analysis of the etymology of utopia and other related concepts, see Fátima Vierira, (2010), 3-27. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. More’s *Utopia* consists of two books written at different times. The second book, in which Hythloday describes the Utopian commonwealth, was written during More’s stay in the Netherlands, in 1515, while he was serving as a member of the embassy to Flanders It was there that he met Peter Giles, the friend and host of Erasmus, both of whom helped with getting More’s book written in Latin printed in Louvain end of 1516. Deciphering the significance of the order in which More wrote *Utopia* has itself been a source of debate. For a more detailed overview of the various scholarly interpretations of More’s *Utopia*, see George Logan, *The Meaning of More’s Utopia*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. All references will be to G.M. Logan and R.M. Adams (eds.), *Thomas More: Utopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989/2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Wootton, D., “Friendship Portrayed: A New Account of Utopia,” *History Workshop Journal* 45 (1998): 29-47. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. See Wootton, D., “Introduction,” Thomas More’s Utopia With Erasmus’s The Sileni of Alcibiades, ed. and trans. David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 1-34, 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. With reference to Marx and Engels analysis, John Story identifies More’s *Utopia* as “the founding text of radical utopianism, “which offers a form of resistance to dominate constructions of reality and our complicity, conscious or unconscious, with them;” see his “The Happy Place That Exists Nowhere,” *Critical Survey* 32, no. 3 (Autumn 2020): 33-44, 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. As for what constitute ‘more suitable forms of punishment’ for crime, Raphael makes the first reference to a utopian society— “the Polyerites,” (coined from Greek terms meaning ‘the People of Much Nonsense), who practice a form of restorative. For the most part, their convicts are able to work and move freely in society; however, they are required to wear cloths of a uniform color with their hair cut off above their ears, and the tip of one ear cut off. Consistent with More’s English society, the individual’s appearance not only determined one’s class, but also was a badge of God’s grace or social disgrace. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Baker-Smith, 2000: 122. In addition, Baker-Smith reminds us that Raphael’s reference to ‘hypothetical’ strategies rulers will use to consolidate and expand their power over foreign rivals, in fact, were “those which did in reality shape French foreign policy from the reign of Louis XI (1461-83) when France began to emerge as the first great nation-state of modern Europe. . .,” *More’s Utopia*, 2000: 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli claimed that morality can get in the way of a prince ruling effectively. It was a position held by Italian humanists, which was of interest to More. However, Machiavelli’s works was not published until 1532, after the first publication of More’s *Utopia* in Louvain in 1516. See George Logan, “Introduction,” in *More: Utopia*, ed. George Logan and trans. Robert Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016/2020), xi-xxxii. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Lawrence Wilde, Thomas More’s Utopia: Arguing for Social Justice (London: Routledge, 2017), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Story, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)