

---

More on Utopia

Author(s): Brendan Bradshaw

Source: *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Mar., 1981), pp. 1-27

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2638902>

Accessed: 12/03/2009 20:49

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=cup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Cambridge University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Historical Journal*.

## MORE ON UTOPIA\*

BRENDAN BRADSHAW

*Queens' and Girton Colleges, Cambridge*

### I

J. H. Hexter's brilliant analysis of More's *Utopia* in the Introduction to the Yale edition of the text in 1965 was favoured by a resounding endorsement from Quentin Skinner in a no-less-brilliant analysis of the Yale edition in *Past and Present* in 1967.<sup>1</sup> Given the status of both scholars as interpreters of the political thought of the early modern period, Skinner's prediction that Hexter's analysis would 'cause a reorientation of [the] entire historiography' of the subject was bound to be something of a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>2</sup> Skinner, in any case, clearly considers the claim to have been justified in the event. In his recent masterly study of the history of political thought in the early modern period his treatment of *Utopia* is especially – and avowedly – indebted to Hexter's work.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the most stimulating challenge presented to Hexter's thesis – by Dermot Fenlon in the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* in 1975 – serves in its way to vindicate Skinner's prediction. Fenlon is concerned not to contradict Hexter's basic hypothesis but to stand it on its head.<sup>4</sup> Fenlon's thesis in turn was assimilated into the survey literature when it was adapted by G. R. Elton to hammer Christian humanism in his *Reform and Reformation* in 1977.<sup>5</sup>

It looks, therefore, as if the Yale edition succeeded not only in producing a definitive version of More's text but also in establishing a new framework for its interpretation by means of Hexter's introduction. In the circumstances it may now seem an embarrassment that the edition came furnished not with one but with two interpretations of the text. Hexter shared editorial

\* I am grateful to Professors G. R. Elton and Quentin Skinner of Cambridge, and to Dr Dermot Fenlon, now of the Bede College, Rome, for generous and helpful criticism of earlier versions of this study.

<sup>1</sup> *The complete works of St Thomas More*, iv, ed. Edward Surtz, S.J. and J. H. Hexter (New Haven and London, 1965: hereafter cited as *Yale Utopia*), xv–cxxiv. Quentin Skinner, 'More's Utopia', *Past and Present*, xxxviii (1967), 153–68.

<sup>2</sup> Skinner, 'More's Utopia', p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> Quentin Skinner, *The foundations of modern political thought* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1978), I, 223, n.1; 255, n.1.

<sup>4</sup> Dermot Fenlon, 'England and Europe: Utopia and its aftermath', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* xxv (1975), 115–35. For a discussion of Fenlon's interpretation see below pp. 5, 18, 20.

<sup>5</sup> G. R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation* (London, 1977), pp. 42–7. Cf. Elton, *Reform and renewal* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 4–5, 158.

responsibility with the Jesuit, Edward Surtz, and the latter provided an introduction of his own as well as an extensive textual commentary.<sup>6</sup> The work of the two editors was intended to be complementary, and from an organizational point of view that was indeed the case. But, as Skinner's critique brought brilliantly to light in 1967, the editors differed in interpretative method and provided diverging approaches to the interpretation of the text.<sup>7</sup> He left no doubt about which route he considered led into the heart of *Utopia*. The present writer is less convinced. I shall argue, in fact, that despite all the light which Hexter's analysis throws on the text it is founded on an unsustainable hypothesis. Conversely, despite the many irrelevancies with which Surtz's analysis is lumbered, his hypothesis is basically sound. It should be said, however, that the primary purpose of the present study is neither to refute Hexter nor to vindicate Surtz. It is rather to attempt the hazardous voyage to Utopia yet again, profiting from the experience of those earlier expeditions, from their positive achievements no less than from their mistakes.

The debate about the meaning of *Utopia* comes down essentially to the question of what is to be made of book II where the fictitious narrator, Raphael Hythloday, gives an account of the island of Utopia, which he claims to have discovered on his travels, and of the way of life of its inhabitants. The problem of interpretation is twofold: what does More here intend to describe and what is his purpose in describing it?<sup>8</sup> In relation to the first question the established framework of interpretation before Hexter wrote took Utopia more or less at face value. It was assumed to depict how reasonable human beings might organize their society relying on the powers of natural reason unenlightened by the divine revelation available to Christians in scripture. The debate about *Utopia*, then, related to the second question – More's purpose in depicting Utopian society. No dispute existed, of course, about its ironic and satirical function: the follies of Christian society castigated by More in book I stood out all the more when juxtaposed with the good sense of the Utopian life-style depicted in book II. But did More's purpose go beyond satire and irony? Here consensus broke down on the precise relationship which the author envisaged between Utopia and real life.

Borrowing from the vocabulary of literary analysis – after all, *Utopia* was written as a literary work – the traditional debate about *Utopia* could be said to hinge on whether the Utopian commonwealth was proposed by More as an idyll or as an ideal. The mainstream tradition took Utopia in the former sense. On this reading the concept of Utopia was nothing more than a literary conceit designed to heighten the reader's perception of the real world in the way already described, and in doing so to prick the conscience of Europe by

<sup>6</sup> Yale *Utopia*, pp. cxxv-clxxxi, 267–570.

<sup>7</sup> Skinner, 'More's Utopia'.

<sup>8</sup> The distinction I have in mind here would be described in scholastic terms as that between the *finis operis* and the *finis operantis*. For a recent demonstration of the relevance of the author's intentions and purposes to the interpretation of literary texts, see Quentin Skinner, 'Motives, intentions, and the interpretation of texts', *New Literary History*, III (1972), 393–408.

pointing out that the values by which it lived – self-interest, power, wealth – stood condemned even by the standards of virtuous pagans. This interpretation has the special advantage of preserving *Utopia* for Christian orthodoxy despite its apparent commendation of a way of life that involves the abolition of private property, radical social egalitarianism, divorce and euthanasia. On this account such radical features can be explained as elements of a fantasy created by More in an attempt to portray the social order that might obtain should society exit, *per impossibile*, in a state of perfect nature, i.e. lacking grace and divine revelation but in the firm control of reason. The alternative interpretation rejected the consignment of *Utopia* to the realm of fantasy in order to claim More's work for what might be called the Old Testament canon of the literature of social revolution. The imaginative *tour de force* of book II was taken to refer not to what might have been in a hypothetical world of perfect nature but what ought to be in the real one. Its purpose was to show how existing society must be organized in order to accord with the norms of social justice. As such it provided both a radical challenge to the existing order and a blueprint for revolutionary change. In a word, book II of *Utopia* presents not an idyll but an ideal.<sup>9</sup>

Against this historiographical background the interpretative framework established by Hexter appears both daring and plausible. This is based on a hypothesis about book II which enables *Utopia* to be read as the work of a man who was at the same time a deeply committed Christian *and* a social revolutionary. The key to the understanding of the text, he argues, is to set it in its ideological context. And he demonstrates in a manner altogether convincing that this is provided neither by medieval Catholic orthodoxy nor by the 'pre-history' of social revolution. The context in which *Utopia* must be set is that of Erasmian humanism. The two major preoccupations of *Utopia*, as Hexter shows, also constitute the two major preoccupations of Erasmian humanists in 1515–16: the sterility and formalism of contemporary religion with the consequent need for religious renewal; the injustices of the contemporary socio-political culture and the need for social and political reform.<sup>10</sup>

The Utopian commonwealth of book II, therefore, must be interpreted as a Christian humanist statement about religion and society. This perception leads Hexter to postulate the startling hypothesis that – the textual references notwithstanding – book II was intended to portray a Christian commonwealth,

<sup>9</sup> For a bibliographical note on these two traditions of interpretation see Skinner, *Foundations*, I, 257, n.1. To the works cited by Skinner add D. Baker-Smith, *Thomas More and Plato's voyage* (Cardiff, 1978). Approaching *Utopia* from a base in literary studies Professor Baker-Smith makes no reference to the current historiographical discussion. His treatment is also rather limited in scope: it constitutes an inaugural lecture delivered at Cardiff in 1978. Nevertheless, his central theme, indicated in his title, draws attention to an inadequately explored dimension of *Utopia's* intellectual provenance, about which more anon. Meanwhile, Professor Baker-Smith's work may be associated with the conservative tradition of interpretation which argues for an 'idyllic' rather than an 'ideal' understanding of book II, see Baker-Smith, *Plato's voyage*, pp. 14–17. I am grateful to Dr David Starkey of the London School of Economics for drawing this study to my attention and for providing me with a copy of it.

<sup>10</sup> Hexter, Introduction, Yale *Utopia*, pp. xlv–cv. Cf. Skinner, 'More's Utopia', pp. 153–4.

not a pagan one. More contrived the paradox of a Christian community existing beyond the ambit of the institutional Church in order to direct attention to what Christian humanists regarded as the real substance of christianity. Christianity for the individual consists in virtuous living, not in ritual observances. Hence the Utopians, despite their lack of Christian rituals, are true Christians, while the inhabitants of Europe, despite their observance of Christian rituals, are not. Similarly, the criteria for a Christian society are moral rather than institutional. Utopia, founded upon and living by social justice – the commonwealth – is a Christian society despite its lack of Christian institutions. The nations of Europe founded upon and living by egoism, power and wealth are not. In all of this, in its preoccupation with religion and society, in its criticism of contemporary christendom, in its notion of the essential content of christianity, *Utopia* is a typically Christian humanist text. However, Hexter proceeds to argue, *Utopia* is something more, and therein lies its uniqueness and the originality of its contribution to political thought. Seen in relation to the literature of Christian humanist reform it turns out to be – to use Skinner's neat summary of Hexter's argument – not merely a humanist critique of late medieval christianity but a critique of Christian humanism as well.

The portrait of the virtuous Christian commonwealth presented in book II of *Utopia*, Hexter suggests, exposes the inadequacy of the christian humanist concept of reform and the soft-centred quality of its ideology. The humanists analysed the ills of contemporary society in terms of the moral bankruptcy of its religious, social and political culture. However, their strategy for reform showed that they jibbed at the radical implications of their own analysis. They pinned their hopes on an inner transformation of mind and heart effected by the inculcation of correct moral values through exhortation and education. More's uniqueness lay in grasping the inadequacy of this formulation. The false values from which the injustices of late medieval society sprang were enshrined not only in men's hearts but in the very structures of their society that upheld the pre-eminence of power, wealth, lineage and degree. What sets *Utopia* apart is its concept of the commonwealth – the just society – not simply as a virtuous community but as a virtuous community founded upon a just social order. The perception that, beyond the need for a radical moral transformation within society – a change of mind and heart – there existed the need for a radical structural transformation also – a change of social and political institutions – makes *Utopia* unique in the *genre* of humanist reform literature. Conversely the priority accorded to structural reform as an instrument, a strategy, of social reform earns *Utopia* a place 'on the margins of modernity' as a work of political theory. The Utopian commonwealth is a triumph for rational planning and social engineering.

The historiographical significance of Hexter's interpretation was twofold, therefore. It raised the question of what More intended to describe in book II by postulating the island of Utopia as a Christian community. In this way Hexter provided a new interpretative framework for the discussion of the work. Secondly, his own exposition of the meaning of *Utopia* within that framework

gave a new twist to the old debate about More's polemical purpose. As he explains it, Utopia is not simply an imaginative reconstruction of society as it might have been in a state of perfect nature. It is rather More's conception of how a just society could be created, human nature being what it is. Communist and egalitarian Utopia is not a pagan idyll. It is a Christian ideal.<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the most stimulating challenge to this thesis, that provided by Fenlon's paper in 1975, and by the treatment of *Utopia* in the recent work of G. R. Elton, served incidentally to entrench the interpretative framework established by Hexter. Although it relates more to the spiritual rather than to the narrowly moral concerns of Christian humanism, Fenlon's argument is constructed within the broad framework of Hexter's interpretative scheme. More's preoccupations in *Utopia* emerge in the context of a humanist reforming ethos. Book II provides a humanist critique of late medieval christianity from the perspective of a model Christian commonwealth. But the ultimate significance of book II – as of the work as a whole – lies in its critique of humanism itself. The substantive difference between Hexter and Fenlon concerns this final crucial aspect. Both agree that More's criticism of humanism is by way of a clear-headed response to humanism's naive strategy of reform. However, Fenlon does not see More's response as an attempt to improve the humanist scheme by reformulating it along more rigorous and more radical lines. More's message is rather that the humanist programme is misdirected, literally bound for nowhere. When More wrote *Utopia*, according to Fenlon, he had come to believe that the humanist strategy was based upon an illusion: the assumption that the political powers of Europe and the institutions of secular government could be made the instrument of Christian renewal, of the creation of a truly Christian commonwealth. More pin-pointed this fallacy by directing attention in book I to the single-minded egoism of secular politics, and in book II to the single-minded altruism which secular politics would be required to display for the humanist scheme to work. The reader was thus enabled to perceive the chasm between. To emphasize the point More called the model commonwealth of book II 'Utopia', i.e. 'Nowhere', and he located it on a remote island: '... the humanists and their books were stranded in Utopia upon an island'.<sup>12</sup> By means of this ingenious reformulation, Hexter's thesis is made to turn somersault. Utopia is indeed the model of a Christian commonwealth, but a model which More wishes to expose as an illusion. Thus Fenlon succeeds in reviving within the new interpretative framework the old historiographical debate about whether More proposes the Utopian commonwealth as an idyll or as an ideal.

With that debate this study will ultimately engage. However, it will do so

<sup>11</sup> Hexter, 'Introduction', pp. c-cxxiv. Skinner, *Foundations*, I, 255–62.

<sup>12</sup> Fenlon, 'England and Europe', especially p. 127. Elton, loc. cit. (n.5). It should be said that for Dr Fenlon and Professor Elton Utopia seems to be endowed with a studied ambiguity. On the one hand it represents 'an urbanized extension of More's household, which together with the London Charterhouse, was the best model of a Christian society known to him', Fenlon, 'England and Europe', p. 122. On the other hand it is 'the best form of society imaginable without Christian revelation', *ibid.* p. 124.

by challenging in the first instance the interpretative framework proposed by Hexter in 1965. Necessarily, therefore, it brings under review the 'reorientation of [the] entire historiography' which Hexter's Introduction to the Yale edition brought about. In this connexion it should be pointed out that despite the scepticism that will frequently be voiced in what follows, this study stands indebted to Hexter's work in one fundamental respect. That is, his identification of the humanist ideology of reform as the ethos from which the Utopian polemic emerged. The interpretation of *Utopia* presented here suggests, in fact, that despite the correctness of his starting-point Hexter set off in the wrong direction. His mistake, it will appear, was twofold. He misconceived the nature of the humanist ideology of reform in its religious aspect, and that of its polemical stance in 1515-16 when *Utopia* was written. Considerable attention is here devoted to this topic since Hexter's mistake illustrates a more general confusion which the present study may go some way to correct. Secondly, he failed to take sufficient account of what must be regarded as basic data for the purpose of an exercise which attempts to recover the author's intentions, the meaning which he wished to convey to the reader. I refer to the guidance which More provided for the reader within the text itself. In fact the present study is largely an attempt to focus attention on that guidance and to elucidate its meaning by reference to the humanist ethos from which the Utopian polemic emerged.

## II

Such an interpretative method raises an immediate problem for Hexter's central hypothesis about what book II of *Utopia* describes. For the text purports to describe the Utopian community *prior* to its conversion to christianity. It is true that Hexter faces this difficulty head on by arguing that More here intended to present an ironic paradox: their way of life stamps the nominal pagans of Utopia as true Christians while the way of life of the nominal Christians of Europe brand them as the worst kind of pagans.<sup>13</sup> More's insistence on the paganism of the Utopians heightens the ironic effect since irony works by paradox. This explanation is open to criticism in the first instance on purely formal grounds. It is true that irony works by inference. To explain the point of the paradox is to blunt its ironic edge. On the other hand, irony does not work by confusion, least of all when its point is a polemical one. Thus, More, by portraying the Utopians as virtuous pagans without enabling the reader to perceive his ironic intent, was not heightening the effect of his paradox but, it would seem, rendering it inscrutable.

This brings us to the second leg of Hexter's argument and to the crucial question of the message which *Utopia* conveyed as a humanist polemic. If Hexter's exposition of the humanist ideology of reform is correct, contemporary readers would have needed no special assistance from the author to recognize who the Utopians really were and to grasp the point of More's paradox. One

<sup>13</sup> Hexter, 'Introduction', pp. lxxiv-lxxviii. Cf. Skinner, *Foundations*, I, 232-3.

of Christian humanism's central tenets – one with major implications for its programme of ecclesiastical, educational and social reform – was that true christianity consisted in virtuous living not in the ritualism which characterized the religion of the late-fifteenth-century Church. Viewed in the context of Christian humanist polemics, therefore, Hexter argues, the function of the Utopian commonwealth is clear. It enables More to state in a highly challenging form the Christian humanist position regarding the essential and the peripheral aspects of the Christian religion. Lying beyond the ambit of the institutional Church Utopia is, nevertheless, a truly Christian society because it is devoted to the one thing necessary, the cultivation of virtuous living. So-called christendom, on the other hand, is a thoroughly unchristian society because it neglects what is essential in the Christian religion, the life of virtue, and concentrates instead on inessential religious paraphernalia.

Superficially this view seems plausible. It seems less so, however, when its implications are considered. For if, on the one hand, the Utopian community was happily devoted to virtue and free from the ritualism of late-medieval christianity, on the other hand, it lacked scripture and the sacraments on which depended the Church's claim to be the unique source of revelation and of grace. If, therefore, Utopia represents More's model of true christianity it must be accepted that he did not consider scripture, the sacraments, the cult of Jesus himself, to be essential features of a truly Christian existence. Hexter and Skinner seem to accept this implication since they argue that the point of More's paradox – the authorial motive – was the assertion that virtue constituted the essence of the Christian life.<sup>14</sup> It looks as if some anomaly has crept in here, however, since Hexter's own exposition of the humanist ideology of reform shows that it was not only virtue-orientated but also emphatically christocentric and evangelical. Is it possible that the Erasmus who laboured to produce in the same year as *Utopia* his Greek New Testament – a work of scarcely less epochal significance – could have contemplated a model of truly Christian living which had no place in it for the New Testament or for the historical figure of Jesus Christ?

This consideration draws attention to the inadequacy of Hexter's exposition of the humanist formula for the reform of religion in 1515–16. The answer which Erasmus gave to the 'paramount question of what constitutes a true christian' was, according to Professor Hexter, 'not first and foremost to assent to a creed, or to participate in a particular routine of pious observances; it was to *do* as a Christian'.<sup>15</sup> Consequently to live virtuously was to be a true Christian even if one knew nothing of scripture or the historical Jesus for it was 'to have God in Christ at the bottom of [one's] heart'.<sup>16</sup> Despite its strong textual echoes this statement of the Erasmian position in 1515–16 is misleading for one reason: it fails to reflect the Platonist mould in which the humanist discussion of Christian renewal was cast. This means that while Erasmus and More and Christian humanists generally emphasized 'doing' as the ultimate test of true

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Hexter, 'Introduction', p. lxviii.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. lxxvi.



christianity they saw that possibility to be dependent upon a true knowledge of christianity. And the unique source of such knowledge was the life and teaching of Jesus revealed in scripture. In the humanist view, therefore, it was not the case that virtue somehow subsumes the christian revelation as if to say 'virtue is Christ'. Such a proposition postulates a relationship between deeds and knowledge to which the humanists, because of their Platonic epistemology, would have been quite averse. In fact, their proposition was rather that 'Christ is virtue', in the sense that his life and teaching reveal definitively what it is to be truly virtuous. It was in terms of this conception of the relationship between Christian revelation and virtue that the humanist discussion of Christian renewal took place. It was on this formula that the scheme of Erasmus's classic spiritual manual, the *Enchiridion militis christiani*, was built. And it was in this conviction that he undertook the Herculean labours that led to the publication of his Greek New Testament in 1516.<sup>17</sup> It follows that the virtuous pagan, even the most noble, as Erasmus explicitly states – and the most noble were surely the Utopians – could never be a true christian, lacking, as he did, the knowledge of divine revelation that alone would enable him to be one.<sup>18</sup> In the light of all of this it will be clear that when More depicted the Utopians as a community that lacked knowledge of the Christian gospel he could never have intended them to provide a model of a truly Christian commonwealth, nor could it have occurred to his humanist readers to suppose that he had.

Utopia, therefore, must be taken for what the text tells us that it is, a non-Christian community, organized in accordance with human values as perceived by the light of reason. If that is what More intended to describe what was his purpose in describing it? How, on this reading, can *Utopia* be related – as Hexter rightly insists that it must – to the concerns of Christian humanists in the opening decades of the sixteenth century?

A useful start can be made by reinstating the so-called Catholic interpretation which Hexter summarily dismissed in 1965 on the grounds that it 'smacks a little too strongly of the medieval schools'.<sup>19</sup> This was the view that the heathenism of the Utopians gave a double edge to More's satire on the vices of Christian Europe. As R. W. Chambers put it in 1935, 'The underlying thought of *Utopia* always is, "With nothing save reason to guide them, the Utopians

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the *Enchiridion* see below, pp. 10ff. For a statement of Erasmus's conviction of the fundamental and unique importance of a knowledge of the revealed teachings of Christ for christian living see his preface to his edition of the New Testament in 1516, the *Paraclesis*, ed. J. C. Olin, *Christian humanism and the Reformation* (London, 1965), pp. 92–106. An English version of the *Enchiridion* is provided in *The Enchiridion of Erasmus*, ed. Raymond Himelick (Bloomington, Indiana, 1963).

<sup>18</sup> For Erasmus's distinction between the noble pagan and the christian see *The education of a christian prince*, ed. L. K. Born (New York, 1936), p. 152. Having made that distinction Erasmus went on to insist that true christianity was not a matter merely of creed or of ritual but of virtue. Erasmus, therefore, excludes both the possibility that mere (pagan) virtue constitutes the essence of christianity or that creed and ritual does so, *ibid.* p. 153.

<sup>19</sup> Hexter, 'Introduction', p, lxxv.

*do this; and yet we Christian Englishmen, we Christian Europeans. . . !*'"<sup>20</sup> Scholastic though this approach may seem to Professor Hexter to be, the fact remains that precisely the same rhetorical ploy – appealing to the moral excellence of pagans to shame Christians into a livelier sense of their responsibilities – is exploited incessantly by Erasmus in his *Education of a Christian prince*.<sup>21</sup> Thus when the Morean paradox is taken to hinge upon the heathenism of the Utopians it functions as a rhetorical device in precisely the same way as the appeals to classical antiquity in the polemics of Erasmus, More's esteemed friend and collaborator at this period. It need hardly be said that a readership schooled on the works of Erasmus was already conditioned to read the Morean paradox in this way.

It seems clear, however, that the paradox was intended by More to operate at a level deeper than rhetoric. As Professor Hexter rightly pointed out, it posed some fundamental questions about the nature of christianity. What were the questions and, more important, what were the answers, to which More wished to lead his readers? As we have seen, Hexter's hypothesis, that Utopia represents a truly Christian commonwealth, asserts much more – or much less – about the nature of christianity than humanists would have wished. On the other hand, when Utopia is taken at face value, as a community of virtuous pagans, it raises precisely the issues about the Christian life which were at the heart of the humanist scheme.

The issue which Erasmus tried to get late medieval christendom to face by confronting it with the lore of classical antiquity hung upon a paradox which bears obvious affinities to the Utopian one. Although lacking the resources of divine revelation and externally mediated grace – the sacramental system, etc. – classical antiquity provided outstanding examples of thought and conduct in harmony with the spirit of christianity. Conversely, despite its possession of these resources, the thought and conduct of late medieval christendom was far from the spirit of christianity. To grasp the point of the Erasmian paradox it is necessary to bear in mind its compound character. It was by this means that Erasmus succeeded in reformulating a question which scholasticism had already posed and apparently answered. The scholastic answer was contained in the Thomist adage which stressed in opposition to Augustinian teaching the mutuality of the natural and supernatural dispensations: *gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit*. The supernatural order did not supplant the natural one but enabled it to achieve a perfection that surpassed its inherent possibilities. One implication of the formula was that non-Christians, without the guidance of revelation or the assistance of externally mediated grace, were capable of discerning by the light of reason their natural human perfection and of striving towards it. In this way the achievements of classical antiquity in the sphere of morality could be explained. However, the compounded paradox which Erasmus posed, by contrasting the vices of contem-

<sup>20</sup> R. W. Chambers, *Thomas More* (London, 1935), pp. 126–8.

<sup>21</sup> E.g., Born (ed.), *The education of a christian prince*, pp. 148, 152, 160, 165, 171–2.

porary christendom with the virtues of classical antiquity, inverted the problem which the Thomist formula had answered. At the same time it removed the discussion from the speculative sphere of ontology, with its categories of nature and grace, and posed it in terms of the existential relationship between religion and morality. In this way, the Erasmian paradox formed part of a satire upon contemporary religion which remorselessly exposed the inadequacy of the scholastic formula.<sup>22</sup>

That grace had failed to bring late medieval christendom to any kind of perfection whatever was the point from which Erasmus's critique of late medieval religion began. The Church's treasury of grace had never been so freely dispensed or so eagerly availed of by means of those 'supernatural works' on which he turned so jaundiced an eye. At the same time divine revelation had never been so minutely scrutinized by means of the scholastic dialectic upon which he looked no less coldly. The result of all of this supernatural industry was to produce, in Professor Hexter's phrase, 'louts at living'. In this way, the invidious comparison invited by Erasmus's flaunting of the moral rectitude of classical antiquity highlighted the ineffectualness of grace as dispensed by the late medieval Church. Nevertheless, to say it again, the conclusion to which Erasmus wished to lead his readers was not that the resources of grace and revelation were incidental to a truly Christian existence or that Christian perfection consisted in the cultivation of virtue alone. *Sola virtute* was not the response of Erasmian humanism to the moral bankruptcy of late-medieval religion – whatever the appeal of that formula to certain rationalist and progressive strands in post Enlightenment christianity. What then was the nature of its polemic against late medieval ritualism? No better way of elucidating this could be found than by examining the teaching of the *Enchiridion militis christiani*, which is generally accepted as Erasmus's classic statement on christian living, whose vogue began with the publication of its second edition two years after the appearance of *Utopia*.

The *Enchiridion*, as the preface explains, is Erasmus's treatise on Christian formation, on 'how to achieve a character acceptable to Christ'.<sup>23</sup> The key to the interpretation of the work as a whole is provided by chapter 3, where the thesis is set forth in summary form. Having warned the aspirant to Christian perfection in chapter 2 that the task involves an incessant struggle against evil, he proceeds in chapter 3 to discuss the special means – the weapons – with which the struggle must be conducted. These, he explains, can be reduced to two, prayer and knowledge.<sup>24</sup> The book is mainly concerned with the way in which prayer and knowledge relate in the formation of a Christian. In this regard Erasmus expresses two convictions which constitute the essence of his

<sup>22</sup> St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1, 2 ae, Q. 109, art. 1–4. For a somewhat different account of the relationship between scholastic theology and the Erasmian polemic see the Introduction by A. H. T. Levi to the Penguin translation of Erasmus's *Praise of folly* (Harmondsworth, 1971), pp. 16–32.

<sup>23</sup> Himelick (ed.), *Enchiridion*, p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. pp. 38–44, 47.

thesis. Firstly, he believes that prayer and knowledge must be wielded in conjunction; the one is indispensable to the other. Secondly, he believes that while prayer is the more powerful of the two, it depends for fruition on knowledge.<sup>25</sup> All of this assumes special significance in the light of the meaning which Erasmus attaches to his terms. It transpires that he employs them in a generic sense to categorize what seem to him to be the two fundamental aspects of the Christian life. Prayer describes the properly religious dimension of christian living, the dimension that pertains to 'communication with the Deity'. Emphasizing its cultic character, Erasmus sees it symbolized by Aaron, the archetype of the Judaic priesthood.<sup>26</sup> Knowledge, on the other hand, is represented by Moses, the giver of the law. That is because Erasmus, in the Platonic tradition, regards knowledge in moral rather than in purely intellectual terms: the object of knowledge is virtue. Knowledge, therefore, categorizes the moral dimension of the christian life.<sup>27</sup>

In this light it is possible to see how the thesis presented in the *Enchiridion* relates to the polemics of the Erasmian paradox. In a world in which religion and morality seemed to have become divorced, Erasmus asserts an integral relationship between the two. Further, in a world frantically attempting to achieve sanctification by religious works he asserts the need to ground religion in morality for sanctifying effect. To be truly sanctifying, he argues, religion must proceed from within, from the mind and heart. To secure this interiorization is precisely the function of knowledge, of moral purposefulness. Conversely, it was precisely the failure to ground religion in morality that explained the formal and mechanistic quality of the devotional life of the late-medieval Church as well as the legalism and sterile intellectualism of scholastic theology. Conducted with 'unwashed hands', without a purification of mind and heart, religious practice and religious reflexion remain external, superficial, unholy. Expressed in terms of the scholastic formula, the point of the Erasmian paradox is that grace will perfect nature *only* if nature has disposed itself, by moral endeavour, to receive grace.

It is the polemical thrust of Erasmus's teaching which has led to the modern *cliché* about the 'unsacramental' nature of his religious position, which, in Professor Hexter's exposition of it, amounts to an assertion of *sola virtute*.<sup>28</sup> Erasmus was concerned to restore moral endeavour to the centre of the

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. pp. 46-58; see especially p. 47.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 47.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. pp. 48-50, 55-7, 132. On the Platonic concept of knowledge see W. K. C. Guthrie, *A history of Greek philosophy* (Cambridge, 1975), IV, 241-65.

<sup>28</sup> For a recent exposition of Erasmianism and, in particular, of the *Enchiridion*, which finds Erasmus's perspective 'emphatically un-sacramental', see J. K. McConica, *English humanists and Reformation politics* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 13-43, especially pp. 19-23. A more nuanced view is provided by Roland H. Bainton. Nevertheless, his exposition of the *Enchiridion* concludes that 'the thrust [of Erasmus's discussion], despite all disclaimers, made for rendering the outward apparatus of religion superfluous'; Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (New York, 1969), p. 67. Whilst not arguing explicitly against this position John B. Payne was able to extract from Erasmus's writings a generally orthodox theology of the sacraments; Payne, *Erasmus: his theology of the sacraments* (W. E. Bratcher, 1970).

christian life in a situation in which, as he perceived it, the role of religious endeavour had been overstressed and misunderstood. That is not to say that he reduced christianity to a matter of morality. On the contrary, his teaching in the *Enchiridion* was that the christian must journey from bondage to freedom under the leadership not only of Moses, the symbol of morality, but also of Aaron, the symbol of religious cult, who, Erasmus explains significantly, has charge of the holy sacraments. Indeed he held that even the naive popular devotions to saints, images and relics had a positive contribution to make in the formation of a Christian.<sup>29</sup> If, therefore, Erasmus stressed the moral dimension of the Christian life his purpose was not to eliminate its religious or cultic aspect but to enable cult to be exercised with truly sanctifying effect.<sup>30</sup>

In this light it is possible to see how *Utopia* functioned as a humanist polemic concerned with the reform of religion. The constraints of the form which he employed provided More with a different perspective on the problem from that of Erasmus. Whereas the latter was straightforwardly concerned with the perfection of the individual as a christian, More's treatment of the subject was set in the context of a discussion of the perfection of the community as a political entity. However, once the different framework of the discussion is allowed for, the correspondence between the argument of *Utopia* and that of the *Enchiridion* on the subject of christian perfection needs little elucidation. The categories of prayer and knowledge by means of which Erasmus conducts his analysis are replaced by those of reason and revelation. But the burden of the polemic remains the same: the integral relationship between morality and religion.

The crucial episode in this respect is the account of what happened when the Utopians who live in accordance with reason come in contact with the teaching of Christ. In Professor Hexter's account the response of the Utopians at this point is simply one of happy recognition that they are already Christian, possessing as they do the one necessary qualification – virtue.<sup>31</sup> But that cannot

<sup>29</sup> Himelick (ed.), *Enchiridion*, pp. 47, 99–100, 111–12.

<sup>30</sup> On this see especially *ibid.* pp. 109–10. The alleged dualism of the *Enchiridion*, with which the foregoing exposition takes issue, is often related to the alleged dualism of Platonic philosophy from which the philosophical framework of the *Enchiridion* derives. Thus, the supposedly dualistic structure of the Platonic universe, in which sensible reality – the visible material world – is set over against intelligible reality – the unseen, conceptualized world of the mind – is paralleled with the supposedly dualistic structure of Erasmian religion: the external religion of cult and the internalized religion of virtue. Such a formulation not only misconceives the conceptual structure of the *Enchiridion*: it misconceives the structure of Platonism also. The source of the confusion seems to be a failure to distinguish between Plato's epistemology and his ontology. His disparagement of external reality and of sense experience occurs at the former level. He is not concerned to reject material reality but rather to ensure a proper knowledge of it. He is not concerned to reject sense experience but rather to delimit its boundaries as a source of knowledge. On the other hand, the fundamental postulate of Plato's ontology, far from being dualistic, affirms the harmonious and unitive structure of the universe. In Plato's view external and internal reality, the material and the spiritual, are functionally related in the fulfilment of this unitive design. This is precisely the perspective of Erasmus in the *Enchiridion*. He is not concerned to repudiate cultic religion but to repudiate misunderstandings about it and to show how it relates to the inner life of virtue in the fulfilment of God's design for human sanctification, W. K. Guthrie, *A history of Greek philosophy* (Cambridge, 1978), v, 441–5.

<sup>31</sup> Hexter, 'Introduction', p. lxxvii.

be the message which More wished to convey. What he describes is a process of conversion: evangelization, producing intellectual assent and followed by sacramental initiation.<sup>32</sup> If christianity had no more to offer the Utopians than they already possessed, why not rest content with Utopianism – and claim Christ as a true Utopian? Like Erasmus in the *Enchiridion*, the thrust of More's polemic led him to concentrate on the affinity between Utopian reason and Christian revelation. But that he did not regard the unevangelized Utopians as perfect Christians is obvious from the account of their conversion. In this respect one incidental feature of the conversion account is revealing, particularly so in the light of the common misconception of the humanist position. That is the concern which Hythloday displays to make the full sacramental system of the Church available to the Utopians after their conversion and the eagerness which the Utopians display to avail themselves of it.<sup>33</sup> The purpose of *Utopia* as a religious polemic is not, therefore, to reduce christianity to a matter of morality. Nor is it concerned to demonstrate the congruence of reason with revelation considered in objective terms as systems of intellectual knowledge. That was the point of St Thomas. What *Utopia* considers is the relationship between the two from the subjective point of view, i.e. in terms of their mutual action in enabling the individual to perceive the truth. Herein lies the significance of the conversion episode and the key to the Utopian paradox. Just as morality is a precondition of spirituality in the practice of religion, so it is a precondition of revelation in the understanding of it. More makes the point in a positive and in a negative way. On the one hand the Utopians show themselves remarkably open to the teaching of Christ. Duly allowing for the 'mysterious inspiration of God' – thus guarding himself against a charge of Pelagianism – More explains this openness in terms of the affinity between a way of life lived in fidelity to reason and the christian way revealed in the New Testament.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, the affinity which the Utopians perceive between the gospel message and their own rational idealism emphasizes by contrast the incongruity between the religious idealism of the gospel and the sterile cerebralism of late medieval theology.

This, then, was the polemic of Christian humanism against the mechanistic and legalistic religious practice of late-medieval christendom and against the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of its theology. Its purpose was not to promote a doctrine of *sola virtute* or to push creed and cult to the periphery of the Christian life. Its purpose was not to destroy but to renew: to renew Christian cult and Christian theology by reformulating the relationship between morality and religion. No doubt the religious polemic of christian humanism as presented here will seem less radical than recent writers have conceived it to be. On the other hand, it places Erasmus and More at a considerable distance from the scholastics on the theology of nature and grace. *Gratia non tollit naturam sed perfecit*. To that proposition *Utopia* and the *Enchiridion* respond that progress towards perfection in the order of nature is a condition, not a

<sup>32</sup> Yale *Utopia*, pp. 218–19.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 219.

<sup>34</sup> Loc. cit.

consequence, of progress towards it in the order of grace. Further, to neglect the means of perfection in the order of nature – rational moral endeavour – is to render ineffectual the means of perfection in the order of grace. The distinctiveness of the humanist position is emphasized when it is set in relation to the teaching of that contemporary Augustinian theologian who was also to denounce the futile religious works of the late medieval church and the bankruptcy of its theology, but who offered a very different critique of scholasticism. The opposition of Erasmus and More to the *sola fide* doctrine of Martin Luther is not to be reduced to a matter of personality traits – supineness in the one, aggressive traditionalism in the other. The source of their opposition is to be found in the humanist conception of the relationship between morality and religion propounded in the *Enchiridion* and in *Utopia*.

### III

The theme of *Utopia* is not, of course, ecclesiastical reform as such but the reform of civil society. It is in that context that the polemic for the renewal of religion is conducted. The problems that agitate the dialogists in book I, the problems that book II is designed to solve, are considered in relation to the civil rather than to the ecclesiastical organization of society. Accordingly, the moral norm to which appeal is made is that of social justice. More specifically, the discussion is dominated by the notion which for the humanists, following scholastic and classical commentators, constituted the norm of justice in the sphere of civil government, the commonwealth. To the interpretation of *Utopia* specifically as a treatise on the commonwealth it is now proposed belatedly to turn.

Our concern here is not with Professor Hexter's brilliant exposition of the originality of *Utopia* in its approach to social reform by means of social engineering. However, two comments suggest themselves in that regard. Firstly, Professor Hexter seems to underplay the fact that here *Utopia* did not so much invent the concept of 'social environmentalism' as revive it after a lapse of some eighteen hundred years: Aristotle's attack upon the original version, Plato's *Republic*, having apparently killed the notion stone dead.<sup>35</sup> As we shall see, that earlier battle of the gods has an important place in the intellectual pre-history of *Utopia*.<sup>36</sup> Secondly, to point out the obvious, that aspect of Hexter's exposition is in no way related to the hypothesis that book II of *Utopia* describes a Christian commonwealth. It is significant, indeed, that the features which Professor Hexter finds most remarkable about the Utopian commonwealth, the features which set it apart from the general run of humanist political treatises and which place it on the 'margins of modernity' derive not from its supposed christianity but from its rationality. What enabled More to achieve this unremittingly rational approach if not his adherence to the concept of a society organized by the light of reason alone?

<sup>35</sup> Hexter, 'Introduction', pp. cv-cxxiv. For Aristotle's attack on the *Republic* see *Politics*, bk II, 1260b-1266b, and below, n. 43.

<sup>36</sup> See below, pp. 16-17.

On the other hand, where Hexter's hypothesis about Utopia as a model Christian commonwealth does intrude it continues to be a source of confusion. In the first place, it seems to have produced an element of double-think on his own part. On the one hand he presents Utopia to us as the embodiment of the highest aspirations of the Christian revival of the renaissance period. It is a polity designed to establish the kingdom of Christ on earth, to create a truly Christian social order aimed at extirpating the roots of sin and built upon the gospel's golden rule of charity, love of God and love of all men for his sake.<sup>37</sup> When, however, he comes to assess the significance of the Utopian ethos in the light of later intellectual history the analogy he draws relates the Utopians to the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century: 'the equation *reason equals nature equals virtue*, the deism precariously perched on rational foundations of doubtful solidity, the feeble and slightly apologetic hedonism wavering between the logical need for a this-worldly base and the psychological need for other-worldly sanctions'.<sup>38</sup> If this represents the Utopian philosophy – and it seems to come close enough to the mark – it is not easy to see how it can be reconciled with an aspiration towards the establishment of the *regnum Christi* as described earlier.

However, the most serious objection to Hexter's hypothesis is that it not only misrepresents the nature of More's case with regard to religion, as we have seen, but that it misrepresents it with regard to social justice also. Here the matter at issue is the central feature of the Utopian commonwealth, its communism. In this regard Professor Hexter's anxiety to demonstrate the christianity of Utopia has resulted in a failure to relate the debate about common ownership to its precise context in the history of Christian moral philosophy. This is important because a proper understanding of the argument mounted in *Utopia* depends on an understanding of the position which it sought to overthrow.

Professor Hexter sees the context of moral thought in which Utopian communism is set as the 'theory which reached Christianity by way of Stoicism through the Church Fathers of late antiquity'.<sup>39</sup> This theory vested the radical ownership of the world's goods universally in all mankind. However, it precluded the logical corollary, a communist social system, by invoking the doctrine of the Fall. Communism was possible to man only in the state of primeval innocence. With the corruption of human nature through sin, and man's consequent vulnerability to greed and pride, private ownership became a necessary feature of the human condition. Like the curtailment of human freedom by means of political authority, the private possession of property was both a punishment for sin and a remedy for it. Relating *Utopia* to that moral tradition Professor Hexter suggests that, as Marx did to Hegel, More turned the theory upside down. *Utopia* argues that private property is not a remedy for sin but a cause of it. Conversely, common ownership attacks at source the sins of greed and pride to which private possessions give rise.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Hexter, 'Introduction', pp. cii, civ.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. cxvi.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. pp. cxi, cxiii.

<sup>40</sup> Loc. cit.



Despite the apparent neatness of the fit the patristic argument does not seem to be the one with which the exposition of communism in *Utopia* is primarily concerned. The text itself suggests another context which also seems more plausible *prima facie*. The fact is that the argument about communism in *Utopia* is not conducted within the theological frame of reference employed by the Fathers. Hythloday's antagonist – More himself – does not defend private property by appealing to a divine dispensation ordained as a safeguard against, and a remedy for, sin. Instead, the defence is mounted at the rational level in terms which situate it in an intellectual tradition more immediate to the early sixteenth-century humanists. The tradition in question is the scholastic one which derived from St Thomas's adaptation of the philosophy of Aristotle. With the assistance of Aristotle St Thomas was able to formulate an explanation of private property in more positive terms than the Fathers. He removed its origins from the realm of sin and as a divinely ordained prophylactic to that of reason, human experience and positive law. He accepted a radical right of common ownership founded upon natural law. But he taught that this did not preclude the practical organization of the material resources of society on the basis of private ownership; further, that reason, vindicated by experience, indicated the necessity of such a course on three grounds – economic incentive, efficient production and social harmony. Thus, scholasticism derived from St Thomas a theoretical justification for private property as an ordinance of positive law, devised by the wit of man for the common good, and grounded in reason and experience.<sup>41</sup>

That this was the tradition of thought with which Hythloday engaged in *Utopia* is clear. As mentioned earlier, More himself set up the discussion in those terms. In countering Hythloday's introductory speech on behalf of communal ownership More rehearsed two of the Thomistic arguments: the necessity for an economic incentive, and for a means of defining 'mine and thine' in the interests of social harmony. In place of the third, the organizational advantages of private ownership, he exploited a structural argument that was to loom large in the course of the century, and which ultimately derived from Aristotle's advocacy of a political elite of property-owners, namely that political order requires social degree – which in turn assumes degrees of wealth.<sup>42</sup> At the same time Hythloday made the intellectual tradition within which he stood explicit by aligning himself with Plato from the outset.<sup>43</sup> In this way he set his debate

<sup>41</sup> *Aquinas: selected political writings*, ed. A. P. D'Entreves (Oxford, 1959), pp. xxxi-xxxii, 166-75.

<sup>42</sup> *Yale Utopia*, p. 107. Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. vii, 1329a.

<sup>43</sup> *Yale Utopia*, pp. 101, 105. Hexter detaches *Utopia* from the Platonic tradition by arguing that a proper communist system is not found in the *Republic* at all. Common ownership is there confined to the Guardian class as a means of segregating them from 'the lumpish mass', 'Introduction', p. cx. The situation is more complex. As Aristotle pointed out, it was not the case that Plato specifically confined common ownership to the Guardians. Rather he neglected to specify whether it was to apply to the other classes as well. In fact, Aristotle's criticism of the *Republic* proceeded on the assumption that Plato envisaged a fully fledged communist system, *Politics*, bk. ii, 1261a, 1264a. Furthermore, Plato's own cursory summary of the *Republic* in the *Laws* speaks of a system in which common ownership 'is put into practice as widely as possible throughout the entire state', *Laws*, book 5, 739. Therefore, More was in good company in supposing that Plato advocated communism as the ideal system of socio-political organization.

with scholasticism on the issue of communal ownership in the context of the earlier debate between Plato and Aristotle on the same subject. Set in that context, the strategy of his argument becomes clear. His ploy was, in fact, to appropriate the Aristotelian argument to rout the scholastics. In the *Politics* Aristotle defended the *status quo* against Plato's communist system by an appeal to reason and experience.<sup>44</sup> It was precisely on the same basis that Hythloday proposed to reinstate the radical argument. In book I he sought to demonstrate, by appealing to the experience of the European nations, that a social system based on private wealth is not conducive to social justice, the norm of which is the common wealth. In book II he sought to demonstrate by recourse to reason that a system of communal ownership is so conducive.

Once again, therefore, the polemic of *Utopia* is seen to depend on accepting book II at face value as the account of a purely rational society not of a truly Christian one. The rational defence of common ownership in this way also served another function within the structure of the Utopian polemic. Strangely, Professor Hexter's exposition fails to relate Utopian communism to the moral teaching of the New Testament. Indeed, he is dismissive of any such relationship beyond a vague inspirational influence.<sup>45</sup> Apart from any consideration of his own hypothesis this seems odd indeed, given the ethos of Christian humanism from which *Utopia* emerged and the explicit references in the text itself. In his view, therefore, *Utopia* has no significance for the steady tradition of interpretation from the Fathers onwards which relegated the New Testament commendation of common ownership to the category of a 'counsel of perfection'. According to this interpretation common ownership was not presented in the New Testament as a moral norm operative in the ordinary conduct of human affairs. On the contrary, its function, like that of celibacy, was to set those who practised it apart as an 'eschatological witness', i.e. a sign of the transience of earthly values and of the reality of the transcendent ones in which man's ultimate fulfilment lay. In fact, *Utopia* posed a challenge to this entrenched position precisely by arguing from reason and experience. If reason taught that common ownership was the system of social organization most conducive to social justice, to the common wealth, then *a fortiori* the teaching of the New Testament in the matter belonged not to the sphere of Christian asceticism but to Christian morality. That is to say, the primitive Christian community depicted in *Acts*, who 'held all things in common', represented not a model for a spiritual elite but the system of social organization appropriate to the ordinary Christian community. Thus, as noted in the previous section, the argument moves in book II of *Utopia* from reason to revelation. Having undergone the purificatory process of living in fidelity to reason, the Utopians perceive the true import of the New Testament teaching. And thus Hythloday, having invoked Plato in his introductory speech in book I on behalf of communal ownership, can in his peroration in book II invoke also the authority of Christ.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, bk II, 1260b-1264b.

<sup>45</sup> Hexter, 'Introduction', pp. cx-cxi.

<sup>46</sup> Yale *Utopia*, pp. 101, 105, 243. Above, p. 13.

Professor Hexter argues persuasively that the achievement of *Utopia* in linking an egalitarian social gospel to the notion of reform by social engineering places the work at the source of modern secular radicalism. It is no less just to claim that *Utopia*'s achievement in linking an egalitarian social gospel with the moral teaching of the New Testament places it at the source of modern Christian socialism.

#### IV

If *Utopia* lies at the source of these traditions is More to be regarded as their patriarch? That is one way of posing the problem about More's ultimate purpose in writing *Utopia* with which the final sections of this study will be concerned. As we saw at the outset, the debate on that issue has centred on the question of whether the Utopian commonwealth is to be regarded as idealistic or idyllic, a question which, in turn, in the post-Hexterian historiography has been formulated in terms of the nature of More's critique of humanism. By actualizing the humanist vision of a true commonwealth in the communist society of Utopia was More endeavouring, as Professor Skinner has it, to bring the humanists to accept the radical implications of their own ideology; to persuade them, that the task of achieving the just society entailed not simply educating the ruling caste in virtue but abolishing a socio-political structure based on degree and propped up by wealth; that for More, therefore, the radical structural transformation described in book II of *Utopia* provided 'the solution – the only possible solution – to the social evils already outlined in book I'. Alternatively, by actualizing the humanist vision in the beautiful isle of Nowhere, was More endeavouring, as Dr Fenlon has it, to bring the humanists to a realization that the enterprise of renewing society by reforming the state was an illusory one; that, therefore, the true commonwealth of book II provided an impossible solution in view of the dynamics of European politics – egoism, wealth, power – laid bare in book I?<sup>47</sup>

It will be argued here that More's ultimate purposes in relation to *Utopia* are revealed in the same way as his immediate intentions, by the guidance which he provides for the reader in the text itself. The relevant guidance, in the present instance, is provided by the very title of the work and by the manner in which Hythloday, the narrator of book II, is presented in the introductory part of the text. By these means More indicates both a philosophical tradition and a prototype in terms of which *Utopia* must be understood. The philosophical tradition is the Platonic one and the prototype is the original 'ideal commonwealth', Plato's *Republic*. Hythloday, the text stresses, is not an explorer of places but of political forms and ideas, and his ship is Platonic philosophy.<sup>48</sup> Like Plato he believes that he has discovered 'the best form of a commonwealth', the ideal *Res Publica*. All of this received additional emphasis in the early editions through the prefatory contributions of Peter Giles in conversation with

<sup>47</sup> Skinner, *Foundations*, I, 255–62. Above, pp. 3–5.

<sup>48</sup> Yale *Utopia*, pp. 48–51. For an especially fine elaboration of More's use of the metaphor of exploration in relation to Hythloday see Baker-Smith, *Plato's voyage*, pp. 4–5.

whom, as More acknowledges, the Utopian commonwealth took shape. In his commendatory letter to Jerome Busleiden and his pseudonymous verse in praise of Utopia which appeared in the early editions, Giles claims that Utopia not merely emulated Plato's *Republic* but excelled it.<sup>49</sup> Against this background More's presentation of Utopia as 'the best form of a commonwealth' acquires a precise philosophical connotation. What this is must be elucidated by reference to Plato's *Republic*.

Plato explains within the dialogue itself how he intends the *Republic* to function as a philosophical ideal. At the outset he makes it clear that the philosophical city he is about to construct belongs to the real world, not to the world of fantasy. He does this by agreeing, in response to objections by his interlocutors, to abandon the project of building in the idyllic conditions he had first proposed and to establish his commonwealth instead in the conditions of the actual world, a world that possessed the amenities of civilization but which, unlike the world of the idyll, was imperfect in itself: a world of wars, of toil, of trade, a world in which people grew old and ill.<sup>50</sup> Yet, as the construction of the philosophical city proceeds Plato is forced to agree that the scale of perfection on which he is building in theory makes his project unlikely of implementation in practice. Nevertheless he insists on the practical utility of the exercise. This is summed up in the famous passage which concludes book IX, the last section of the *Republic* proper, in which Plato refers to his brainchild as 'a pattern laid up in heaven where he who wishes can see it and establish it in his own heart'.<sup>51</sup> It is clear from the discussion that precedes, a discussion that has developed over three chapters, that we are here in the realm of the Platonic Form or Idea, the theory fundamental to Plato's epistemology. According to this theory the phenomena which we apprehend through sense experience in the historical world, the world of space and time, are partial and imperfect representations of their paradigms or ideal forms which exist in the higher reality of the world of ideas which can be apprehended only at the level of intelligible experience.<sup>52</sup> The *Republic* is, therefore, an attempt to describe the paradigm of the commonwealth, a paradigm to which all temporal commonwealths relate, as the imperfect to the perfect, and which no particular commonwealth existing in historical reality can successfully reproduce.

Bearing in mind that for Plato the *res publica* – the commonwealth – was a moral and not a formal political concept, the practical utility of the exercise was twofold. To establish the paradigm of the commonwealth was to establish the criteria by which the moral quality of existing political communities must be assessed. It was also to provide the ideal of a just society to which all existing political communities must aspire and which their structures must seek to enshrine. Thus in the *Laws*, when Plato faced the task of providing a

<sup>49</sup> Yale *Utopia*, pp. 20–1.

<sup>50</sup> Plato, *Republic*, bk. II, 372–4. Guthrie, *History of Greek philosophy*, IV, 446–9.

<sup>51</sup> Plato, *Republic*, bk V, 471–4, bk VI, 498, bk IX, 592; Guthrie, loc. cit. pp. 483–6.

<sup>52</sup> Guthrie, *ibid.* pp. 338–65, 503–21.

constitution for a proposed new state, he began by recalling the perfect model of the *Republic* and enunciated the principle that the task of the constitution-maker was to frame a set of laws and institutions designed to establish a commonwealth that would approximate as nearly to the paradigm as existing conditions would allow.<sup>53</sup>

Set in this philosophical context neither the thesis of Skinner nor of Fenlon seems adequate. It is true, as the latter argues, that Utopia is Nowhere. That is not to say, however, that it belongs to a fantasy world of idyllic perfection, remote from and indifferent to the world of historical reality. Undoubtedly, as a paradigm, as 'the best form of a commonwealth', it can have no existence in the historical world, the world of sense experience. It belongs in the realm of ideas. Nevertheless, More like Plato constructs his philosophical city in the midst of 'real life': in the world of wars, of toil, of business, of illness and old age. The name *Utopia*, therefore, serves to associate the work with a philosophical *genre*, the Platonic paradigm, not with a literary one, the idyll. It follows that the purpose of More in contrasting the ideal commonwealth of book II with the world of jungle politics depicted in book I was not, *pace* Fenlon, to assert the futility of the ideal in the light of the reality. On the contrary, the utility of book II lay precisely in providing a contrast. It provided a standard by which to judge and a model by which to reform the political practice depicted in book I.

On the other hand, it follows also that the purpose of the contrast for More was not, *pace* Skinner, to assert the futility of any other means short of the ideal by which to reform the reality. Utopia was 'the best form of a commonwealth'. As such its function was not to stipulate the essential preconditions for reform but to indicate what reform might ideally achieve. Book II, therefore, did not represent 'the only possible solution... for the social evils depicted in book I'. It represented the best possible solution for them.<sup>54</sup> However, on the way to Utopia Hythloday encountered other commonwealths which were in some degree imperfect but which, nevertheless, contained 'not a little on which to model the reform of our own cities, nations, peoples and kingdoms'. Thus, the constitution of the Polylerites provided a model of a just criminal system; that of the Achorians a means of safeguarding against the baneful consequences of dynastic ambition; that of the Macerians – significantly, 'a people not very far from Utopia' – a way to curb royal avarice.<sup>55</sup> Like Plato in *The Laws*, Hythloday in book I of *Utopia* shows a readiness to commend the virtues of second best which Professor Skinner fails to take into account when analysing the notion of Utopian reform. Such an analysis must indeed provide for the

<sup>53</sup> Plato, *Laws*, bk v, 739.

<sup>54</sup> Erasmus made precisely this point about the *Republic* in his prefatory letter to the 2nd edition of the *Enchiridion*, for which see *Christian humanism and the Reformation*, ed. John C. Olin (London, 1965), p. 122. Again, Castiglione presents his courtier as a Platonic ideal, and he justified the exercise in similar terms to those used by Plato, *The book of the courtier*, ed. George Bull (Harmondsworth, 1976, orig. 1967), pp. 35–6. It is clear that this was the common humanist understanding of the function of the 'ideal type'.

<sup>55</sup> Yale *Utopia*, pp. 54–5, 74–5, 88–9, 96–7.

radical thrust which the Utopian concept of reform acquires from the absolute moral criteria it brings to bear, from the perfection on which it insists as an ideal, and from the strategy of social engineering which it employs. Nevertheless, true to the Platonic mould in which it was formulated the Utopian concept of reform combines its moral idealism and its radical thrust with a calculated pragmatism which is no less essential to the concept. For it is this readiness to take account of the necessary imperfection of the human condition while urging the possibility of progress that ultimately distinguishes Utopia as an ideal and not an idyll.

## V

It would seem from the foregoing that More was committed to the concept of reform for which *Utopia* stands. However, adherence to the interpretative method employed in this study suggests one final difficulty. It is necessary to consider the significance of the fact that More placed himself in opposition to the advocate of Utopia, Raphael Hythloday, on the two issues which serve to frame the dialogue as a whole, i.e. the 'problem of counsel' and Utopian communism. It is necessary to consider, therefore, whether *Utopia* offers a critique of Utopianism within the text itself.

Professor Skinner dismisses this possibility by appealing once again to Morean irony.<sup>56</sup> Ironically, he does so in order to protect *Utopia's* critique of humanism. He point out that Hythloday's steadfast repudiation of the role of princely counsellor as well as his steadfast vindication of Utopian communism set *Utopia* outside the *mainstream* of humanist political literature. To take More's opposition to Hythloday on these issues seriously would seem to reduce him and his work to humanist conventionality.

Leaving consideration of the question of communism until later, it may be said at any rate that to rescue More on the subject of princely counselling in this way is hardly satisfactory. Firstly, the appeal to irony has no textual warrant, which in itself suggests that More intended his observations to be taken literally. Secondly, the ironic interpretation rescues him from Scylla only to forfeit him to Charybdis. For while More was supposedly denouncing royal service in the lofty moral tones of Raphael Hythloday, he was in practice ensconcing himself in office under Henry VIII – a turn in More's career which Professor Hexter does not hesitate to treat as the fall of a prophet.<sup>57</sup> In fact, however, by accepting More's criticism of Hythloday at face value, the text is found to yield an interpretation which both rescues More from inconsistency and *Utopia* from conventionality.

Professor Skinner's formidable command of the texts of renaissance political literature enables him to show the uniqueness of Hythloday's stand in the context of the humanist discussion of princely counselling.<sup>58</sup> However, having situated Hythloday's argument ideologically, Skinner's contextual analysis

<sup>56</sup> Skinner, *Foundations*, I, 218, 259.

<sup>57</sup> Hexter, 'Introduction', pp. lxxxiv-xcii, civ-cv.

<sup>58</sup> Skinner, *Foundations*, I, 213-21.

surprisingly fails to situate it philosophically. Surprisingly, because the text itself does so explicitly. Like the notion of Utopia itself, the Utopian debate on the problem of counsel finds its philosophical referent in Plato's *Republic*. A comparison of the two reveals that if Hythloday's stand is unique in the context of the humanist discussion, it is not unprecedented. It is, in fact, a restatement of the classical Platonic argument. When More sought to invoke Plato on behalf of the notion of princely counselling Hythloday was quick to point out that his philosophical mentor's commendation of that role was strictly conditional upon the existence of a consensus between the philosopher-counsellor and the ruler.<sup>59</sup>

Plato's argument was firstly that in any other circumstance, involvement would prove futile. Unless government shared the moral values and the rational approach of the philosopher it would not, because it could not, apply his advice. To offer it would do the commonwealth no good. Secondly, it would do the philosopher harm. It would divert him to no purpose from intellectual pursuits, and it would be bound to compromise his moral integrity. In order to find common ground with those in high places who did not share his outlook he would be obliged to conduct himself as a politician rather than as a philosopher, which would mean deviating from the strict path of reason (i.e. truth) into 'mere' sophistry and 'empty' rhetoric. This, then, was the dilemma of the Platonic philosopher. Morally and intellectually he was uniquely equipped to participate in government but he was precluded from doing so while government was dominated by the false values and the cosmetic methods of politics. For Plato the resolution of that dilemma would be achieved only when philosophers became rulers or rulers became philosophers.<sup>60</sup> The public role of the philosopher meanwhile was to strive for moral and intellectual change by propagating knowledge of the true philosophy – hence *The Republic*. Against this background Hythloday's stance on the problem of counsel needs no elucidation. He perfectly embodies the Platonic position: the intellectual committed to the cause of social justice who nevertheless refused to place his expertise at the service of government because he can see no room for morality and rationality where government is directed to political ends; self-interest, power and wealth. As he pointed out, the public duty of the intellectual in these circumstances is to strive for a change in mentality by propagating his ideas – hence *Utopia*.<sup>61</sup>

More's criticism of this stance must be seen in relation to the conventional humanist criticism of it. Here the soft-centred nature of the humanist ideology is revealed. The conventional humanist response to the problem of counsel

<sup>59</sup> Yale, *Utopia*, pp. 86–7.

<sup>60</sup> Plato, *Republic*, bk vi, 497–502. The discussion in the *Republic* represents an early statement of Plato's repudiation of rhetoric and political activity against Isocrates and the Sophists. His position was to be put even more forcefully in the *Gorgias* and finally reiterated in more considered tones in the *Phaedrus*; Guthrie, *History of Greek philosophy*, iv, 412–17.

<sup>61</sup> Yale *Utopia*, pp. 87, 107. In his treatment of this episode Baker-Smith does not seem to appreciate the relevance of the debate about philosophy, rhetoric and politics in the *Republic*; Baker-Smith, *Plato's voyage*, pp. 16–17.

entailed a repudiation of Plato's scepticism in favour of a naive confidence in the power of a reconstituted alliance between reason and eloquence to bring the political beast to heel – thereby resolving the intellectual's dilemma by refusing to acknowledge its existence. While humanist discussions of the question often stressed the corrupting power of politics they did so only to magnify the reformative power of counsel, i.e. philosophy mediated through eloquence.<sup>62</sup> Castiglione maintained that by means of wise counsel vicious rulers would be brought to virtue, virtuous ones would be protected from flatterers. Thomas Starkey urged that instead of presuming with Plato that the times were unpropitious for entering government the intellectual ought to presume them to be opportune, and this would, indeed, prove to be the case.<sup>63</sup>

The novelty of More's position lay in confronting the Platonic dilemma which conventional humanism refused to face and in resolving it in favour of political involvement. More's criticism of the Platonic stance is graphically conveyed by his use of the metaphor of the ship of state upon which Plato had also drawn. What good can the skilled navigator do, asked Plato, if the crew will not acknowledge the need for his expertise but struggle to gain control of the helm themselves in order to pillage the cargo?<sup>64</sup> In contrast, More used the metaphor in a way that emphasized the intellectual's moral responsibilities which Plato had obscured by posing the problem in utilitarian terms. 'You must not abandon the ship in a storm', he declared, 'because you cannot control the winds'.<sup>65</sup> The moral obligation of the intellectual towards the commonwealth was, in fact, the essence of More's case against Hythloday. Despite the personal inconvenience, despite the apparent futility, 'nothing more pertained to the duty of a good man than to serve the commonwealth'.<sup>66</sup> Thus, More argued, Hythloday (Plato) claimed a freedom of choice regarding

<sup>62</sup> The cultivation of eloquence, as of good letters, was, of course, a major feature of the humanist revival of rhetoric. The deeply felt conviction about the mutuality of eloquence and wisdom derived from Cicero. He had attempted to harmonize rhetoric and philosophy following their division into separate and competing disciplines as a result of the controversy between Socrates–Plato and the Sophists; Cicero, *De Oratore*, especially bk III, 52–73; Jerrold E. Seigel, *Rhetoric and philosophy in Renaissance humanism* (Princeton, 1968), passim: attention might be drawn, incidentally, here to the implications of this consideration for recent attempts to identify Hythloday as Erasmus. In his commitment to eloquence and good letters, and in his conviction as to their public utility – as instruments of public reform by persuasive rather than coercive means – Erasmus was nothing if not a Ciceronian. The anti-rhetorical stance of Hythloday is hardly one with which he would have sympathized. As to his attitude towards royal service in the precise historical circumstances of 1515–16, the suggestion that More sensed Erasmus's disapproval of his decision to enter service is based on the necessarily problematic evidence of silence. Against it, the positive evidence is of Erasmus's expressed delight at the prospect of humanists flooding into the princely councils of Europe, and of his hope, in consequence, for the dawning of the longed for golden age. And, after all, he became a royal councillor himself to the young Charles V, *The epistles of Erasmus*, ed. F. M. Nicholls (3 vols., London, 1901–18), II, 412–21; III, 45–7, 379–86, 421–3.

<sup>63</sup> *The book of the courtier*, ed. Bull, pp. 264–5. Thomas Starkey, *A dialogue between Reginald Pole and Thomas Lupset*, ed. K. M. Burton (London, 1948), p. 38. Starkey survived just long enough to register his disillusionment; Brendan Bradshaw, 'The Tudor Commonwealth: reform and revision', *Historical Journal*, xxii (1979), 467–8.

<sup>64</sup> Plato, *Republic*, bk VI, 488.

<sup>65</sup> Yale *Utopia*, pp. 98–9.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 56–7, 86–7.



public service which, morally speaking, the intellectual did not possess. His second criticism related to the inadequacy of Plato's conception of the intellectual's role. Given unfavourable conditions it was as much his business to endeavour to keep the ship afloat as it was, in other circumstances, to speed it towards its destination. Even if conditions were not right for the implementation of Utopian schemes, the intellectual could still perform an important public service by contriving to minimize the consequences of irreformable abuses: 'that which you cannot turn to good, so to order it that it be not very bad'.<sup>67</sup> Thus, the duty of the intellectual to public service and the function assigned to him in that regard forced him to risk the hazards of political involvement. More's third criticism of the Platonic stance shows how fully he accepted the implications of his argument. Plato's fundamental objection to politics, as we saw, sprang from his disdain for the techniques of politics – sophistry and rhetoric – which were concerned with cosmetics, with illusion, instead of the truth to which rational philosophy resolutely adhered. In, perhaps, the only passage in his debate with Hythloday which conveys a real sense of irritation More inveighs against this attitude. He scorns the use of philosophical arguments on politicians. He insists instead on a 'more politic' method. And it is clear from his description of it – 'a philosophy that recognizes and adapts itself to the occasion' – that he has in mind the methods of sophistry and rhetoric which Plato spurned. Once again he justifies his argument by appealing to the overriding claims of the commonwealth. For, he urges, it is only by respecting the constraints of politics and working within them that the intellectual can hope to achieve anything for the commonwealth by means of his political involvement.<sup>68</sup>

The issue in the debate between More and Hythloday, therefore, concerns the possibility of pragmatic politics for the Utopian reformer. While More rejects conventional humanist optimism about the capacity of the intellectual to transform the moral wasteland of politics into an environment propitious to radical social reform, he also rejects the alternative proposed by the classic radical intellectual, Plato, to opt out of politics. Commitment to radical social transformation in the long term does not relieve the intellectual of the responsibility of striving to ameliorate the situation in the short term by engaging in pragmatic politics. It follows that when More entered royal service against Hythloday's advice in 1516 he was not, as Professor Hexter has it, succumbing to temptation. Rather, he was resisting it.<sup>69</sup>

In the light of the foregoing Professor Skinner's dismissal of More's second criticism of Hythloday seems less persuasive than might otherwise have been. If More's criticism in the first case turns out to be serious after all one finds oneself less attuned to the note of 'desperate irony' which Professor Skinner

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. pp. 100–101.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. pp. 96–101.

<sup>69</sup> In this light it is possible to agree with Professor Elton that More entered public service willingly, though this does not imply, as Professor Elton tends to argue, that he did so with enthusiasm. G. R. Elton, 'Thomas More Councillor', *Studies in Tudor and Stuart government and politics* (2 vols, Cambridge, 1974), 1, 129–54.

detects in the second. On the other hand, to take More seriously would seem to involve him in a frontal assault upon the notion of Utopian reform since the object of his criticism in this case is common ownership on which the entire Utopian edifice is reared.

Professor Skinner's case is based on the form which More's objection to common ownership finally takes. Reflecting on Hythloday's description of Utopia in one of the concluding passages of book II More notes that a communist system 'utterly overthrows all the nobility, magnificence, splendour and majesty which are, in the estimation of the common people, the true glories and ornaments of the commonwealth'.<sup>70</sup> Now, since *Utopia* as a whole is devoted to exposing the illusory nature of these so-called glories, Professor Skinner argues that More's objection is not intended as an objection at all but as a way of ironically endorsing the Utopian system which discards such illusions.<sup>71</sup> The difficulty with this explanation is that it ignores the rest of the passage in which the observation about communism is made. More's remark occurs in the course of a long reflexion in which he indicates reservations about quite a number of features of the Utopian system: the method of waging war, ceremonial, religion, institutions. If the objection to Utopian communism is ironic then all the other objections must be ironic also. But there is no indication of this in the text. It seems more reasonable to interpret the passage as a whole, therefore, as an indication of More's serious reservations about the ideal system which Hythloday has just outlined. On that basis it is possible to place quite a different construction on More's criticism of communism, one associated with his earlier endorsement of pragmatic politics.

In this connexion the political perspective from which More offers his final comment on Utopian communism is worthy of note. It is highlighted by contrasting that criticism with the case against communism propounded by him when Hythloday first commended it in book I. By the end of book II two of More's three objections have disappeared, the Thomistic ones concerning the need of an economic incentive and of a means of apportioning use in the interests of social harmony. His criticism now rests entirely on the jeopardy of removing the prop of political order: total equality would eliminate 'the authority of magistrates and respect for their office'.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, by the end of book II More seems satisfied that Hythloday has overthrown the scholastic case. Nevertheless, private property is the prop of the existing political structure, and the practical man of affairs – the role in which More casts himself in the dialogue – must consider the implications of the theoretical argument in the light of existing circumstances. If, in the existing state of things, political order is maintained by social deference, the feasibility of removing the basis of social deference must be questioned. From this point of view the fact that the 'common estimation' was based on illusion is irrelevant. To put it another way: Utopian communism seems to assume that society at large will

<sup>70</sup> Yale, *Utopia*, pp. 244–5.

<sup>71</sup> Skinner, *Foundations*, I, 259. Cf. Hexter, 'Introduction', pp. I–liv.

<sup>72</sup> Yale, *Utopia*, pp. 106–7, 244–5. Above, p. 16.

respond to radical reform with the political maturity of Hythloday himself and his few humanist colleagues. This is an assumption that the pragmatic politician must question.<sup>73</sup> Thus, despite More's delight in Hythloday's bursting of the bubble of chivalry it does not follow that his reservations about its disintegration were purely ironic.

However, the really important question is not what these final remarks on Utopian communism mean for More's view of private property but what the concluding reflexion in which they occur means for the interpretation of *Utopia* as a whole. If Professor Skinner is correct the work ends with a resounding endorsement of Hythloday's views. In that case it corresponds nicely to its Platonic prototype. *Utopia*, like *The Republic*, reaches a definitive conclusion regarding the nature of the ideal commonwealth. It is quite clear, however, from the way *Utopia* ends that, unlike *The Republic*, the dialogue has not concluded: it has simply broken off. Having registered his mental reservations about Hythloday's ideal commonwealth, More closes the conversation by remarking on the need for further reflexion and discussion on the matter in hand. The conclusion is in keeping with the nature of the Utopian dialogue as a whole. Unlike *The Republic*, the interlocutors do not exist simply to raise spurious objections to be crushed by the inexorable logic of Hythloday's argument.<sup>74</sup> The debate of book I like that of book II breaks off without resolution.

The open-ended quality of the Utopian dialogue draws attention to the real irony of More's final critical reflexion and to an aspect of Hythloday's polemic which tends to be ignored. It is often overlooked that Hythloday's peroration in praise of the content of Utopian reform at the end of book II is matched by a peroration in praise of the mentality of Utopian reform at the end of book I. 'This trait', he declares, 'is the chief reason why, though we are inferior to them neither in brains nor in resources, their commonwealth is more wisely governed and more happily flourishing than ours'.<sup>75</sup> The trait on which Hythloday lavished such praise was the manner in which the Utopians responded to new ideas. It was a response that combined critical judgement with openness to change. The eagerness with which the Utopians picked the brains of Hythloday and his companions was one manifestation of this critical open-mindedness, as was the manner in which they had earlier availed themselves of the knowledge brought to them by some Roman and Egyptian

<sup>73</sup> A precisely parallel case occurs in Thomas Starkey's *Dialogue between Reginald Pole and Thomas Lupset*, written some fifteen years after *Utopia*. A long discussion about the best form of government concludes that a system of elective monarchy is most appropriate to a community 'governed and ruled by civil order and reasonable life, according to the excellent dignity of the nature of man'. On the other hand, it is also concluded that in existing circumstances in England, and considering the turmoil that a change would be likely to provoke, retention of the existing system of hereditary monarchy is a more practicable proposition. Nevertheless, Cardinal Pole makes the point explicitly that to defend the *status quo* as the lesser of two evils is not to maintain that it is good in itself; Thomas Starkey, *Dialogue*, pp. 99–105.

<sup>74</sup> The same point is made, and attention drawn to its Ciceronian antecedents, in Baker-Smith, *Plato's voyage*, p. 12.

<sup>75</sup> Yale, *Utopia*, pp. 108–9.

travellers thrown upon their shores by chance.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, Hythloday himself perfectly embodied this attitude in his qualified approval of the political arrangements which he encountered in the course of his philosophical voyage to Utopia. That we are here concerned with a major polemic of the work is clear from the way in which Hythloday emphasizes the closed and hidebound mentality which he observed everywhere in the west, as well as by the fact that Peter Giles, More's historical collaborator, drew attention to it in his prefatory verse that appeared in the early editions of *Utopia*.<sup>77</sup>

The message thus conveyed is clear. Reform in Utopia was not just a 'once for all' exercise conducted by King Utopus. Rather it was a continuous process made possible by the readiness of the Utopians to respond critically and yet receptively to new ideas. The irony of More's concluding critical reflexion on Utopia is that it shows that he had learned the lesson well enough to apply it to the teachings of the master himself. However, in view of the role which More plays throughout the dialogue – that of the practically minded man of affairs – the message has still a deeper implication for those concerned with the reform of the commonwealth. It is that the possibility of constructive social and political progress resides neither in the moral idealism of the intellectual alone nor in the sceptical pragmatism of the politician, but in a constructive and continuing dialogue between the two.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. pp. 108–9, 180–1.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. pp. 18–19, 54–5, 58–9.

<sup>78</sup> See Dennis H. Wrong, *Skeptical sociology*, for much the same thesis argued from a very different standpoint, namely that steady social progress demands a continuing exploration at the theoretical level of 'the limits of the possible', balanced by a scepticism that comprehends the 'tragedy that is inherent in human aspirations and our inability to realize ideals'.