

## Introduction

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Five hundred years after its first publication, Thomas More's *Utopia* continues to raise intellectual controversy both as a book and as a concept. Originally written as a traveller's report about a far-away island, the book gave a new name to a classic genre of political fiction and challenged future moral and political thinking with its notion of an ideal society. Alluding to the newly discovered lands that lured explorers and captivated the imagination of readers around Europe in 1516, More placed his 'Nowhereland' on the other side of the ocean. Acquiring wide fame and notoriety not as a fantasy place, but as a real example to be followed, the island of Utopia was to become a model for future political constellations, investing the concepts of 'utopia' and 'utopianism' with the temporal dimension of the belief in a dreamworld to come.

This issue of *ANTW* will explore both the original book and its historical aftermath. *Utopia* is one of the rare works of Renaissance literature still widely read today, yet it is also a book that even specialists have difficulty to interpret. As so often, many of the articles in this volume emphasize the uncertainties and ambiguities in More's text. Should we see the book's description of a political alternative to Renaissance European society as a serious recipe for a golden future, or are there further layers of interpretation to be uncovered, and other motivations hidden in More's project? Past and present scholars have tried to relate the political ideas put forward in *Utopia* in a consistent way to the complicated biography of the Man for All Seasons. Some have chosen for a literal interpretation, and see the book's recommendations as serious suggestions for altering society's rules and social arrangements, including, for instance, the introduction of community labour and communist law. Others, however, have noted that *Utopia* is in fact a dialogue between friends, which would offer More lots of opportunity for experiment, and his readers a certain flexibility of interpretation.

Wayne A. Rebhorn, for instance, argued that the dialogue form offered More a welcome chance for dissimulation:

By writing a dialogue, More could hide behind his characters, claiming that this or that idea was not his, but merely belonged to one of them (...).<sup>1</sup>

Thus, he was able to avoid the 'risk of reprisal by authorities, both secular and religious, who might feel that what he said was subversive.' Rebhorn adds that the name of Utopia itself, which means 'Noplace', as well as the name given to its main spokesman, Raphael Hythlodæus, or Hythloday, meaning 'speaker of nonsense', offered More even more elbow room, and allowed him to put 'further distance between himself and his ideas'.<sup>2</sup>

*Utopia's* radical ideas would in this case still be More's, but one could also go a step further and claim that, as in the case of Plato's *Republic*, which was More's main example,<sup>3</sup> the dialogue form in fact gave a provisional character to the book's recommendations themselves. With respect to Plato, it has been said that the 'main lines of his philosophy' might well be considered as 'thought experiments that Plato took seriously but expressed playfully in fictional dialogues instead of asserting as doctrines'.<sup>4</sup> May More's *Utopia* be seen in a similar light? J.H. Hexter, one of the editors of the standard 1965 edition of *Utopia* by Yale University Press, has suggested that, whilst 'the Dialogue of Counsel' (the passage in the first part of *Utopia* in which the question is raised whether a philosopher should accept a political office and enter into public service) is a genuine dialogue, 'the Discourse on Utopia' presented in the second part is a 'discursive' text. Only in the first part does More really talk 'to himself, as it were,' and he does so in order to settle the problem 'most immediately before him',<sup>5</sup> namely whether he should accept the offer of entering the Court of Henry VIII. More would indeed soon decide to do so, and he became a 'councillor attendant' upon the king in the spring of 1518.<sup>6</sup> It is such decisions that are

1 Rebhorn (2005: xxviii).

2 Rebhorn (2005: xxviii).

3 Plato's book is referred to right at the start of *Utopia* in the verse that plays on the *Utopia / Eutopia*, 'No-Place / Good-Place'- theme, as well as in Peter Giles' letter to Jerome Busleyden only a few lines later, and in the main text of *Utopia* itself. More (1965: 20/21, 86/87 and 100/101). For other references to Plato, see More (1965: 102/103 and 104/105).

4 Press (1999: 46).

5 Hexter (1965: xxxiii-xxxvii; quotation from xxxvii). See, on the distinction between demonstrative and deliberative genres, also Erik De Bom's remarks, on p. 375, below.

6 Ackroyd (1998: 187).

best dealt with in a dialogue, according to Hexter, since this is the format in which one can freely offer arguments for and against a certain position, and it is indeed in the first part of *Utopia* that More prominently stages himself – ‘I, Morus – next to *Utopia*’s main character, the exotic philosopher-traveller Raphael Hythlodæus.

As for the second part, one may follow another of Hexter’s ideas and compare Plato’s and More’s recommendations one by one. Doing so, one is most likely to conclude that More apparently liked certain things in Plato, such as the abolition of private ownership, and rejected others, such as Plato’s abolition of the nuclear family.<sup>7</sup> Yet it is doubtful whether More ever envisaged giving a systematic commentary on Plato’s political views. Even in the first part of *Utopia*, where we find the main reference to the *Republic*, More in fact lets Raphael, not Morus, speak out on behalf of Plato’s idealism. The way, moreover, in which Raphael sets apart Platonism and Christianity as two equally idealistic traditions that may have no effect on ‘those who go headlong by the opposite road’ since both proliferate unwelcome truths, makes the passage even more ambiguous.<sup>8</sup>

Yet there is another way of reading *Utopia* that may explain More’s references to Plato, a way of reading *Utopia* only recently put forward by Giulia Sissa, one of the editors of the present volume. Sissa claims that *Utopia* should not be read as a statement of More’s political views. Nor does More align himself to Plato. The references to Plato in the first part of the book, for instance, do not present the Greek philosopher as an example Morus would like to follow, but as ‘your’ – that is, *Hythlodæus*’ – ‘favourite author’. According to Morus, Plato’s recommendation that ‘philosophers become kings or kings turn to philosophy’ should make Hythlodæus, a fan of Plato, less opposed to the idea of entering into public office, and do what More himself was on the point of doing in 1516. Hythlodæus, however, the philosopher with no attachments, will not hear of it.

Whom is More addressing here? Giulia Sissa has argued that More is addressing his friend Erasmus. Furthermore, the whole character of Raphael Hythlodæus, according to Sissa, ‘is a friendly parody of the author of the *Moriae Encomium*’ – that is to say, of Erasmus, the author of *The Praise of Folly* (1511).<sup>9</sup> *Utopia* has often been seen as More’s literary reply to Erasmus’s book, but never before were the moral and political views propounded by Raphael Hythlodæus in his story about the island of Utopia

7 Hexter (1965: xli-liv and clvi-clx). See also the index, More (1965, 617).

8 More (1965: 100/101); G.C. Richards’s translation.

9 Sissa (2012: 133).

attributed to Erasmus instead of More. Like *Utopia*, Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* is itself a text that is both exceptional for its ongoing popularity five centuries after its first publication *and* difficult to interpret. With Lady Folly herself taking the floor and singing the praise of folly, there was a deep ambiguity to begin with as to the seriousness of what Erasmus's book advocated. Yet if we take Hythloday to represent Erasmus, many aspects of *Utopia* immediately become clear. If, in 'the Dialogue of Counsel', the figure of Morus distances himself from Plato, he also distances himself from Hythloday's impractical Platonico-Christian idealism. Why not work for Princes, as More would do? There is every reason that More was not talking to himself here, but to his Dutch friend, who preferred to keep a distance from the practical matters of politics. Erasmus was perfectly willing to offer philosophical advice to kings and princes himself, but he would do so only from the side line, and, like Raphael, refused to subtract from either Plato's idealism, Christ's doctrines, or his own. Erasmus did not care whether the views he proposed were deemed unwelcome or impractical. Like Hythloday, he would not compromise. In the very same year that *Utopia* was published, whilst More was preparing for a new political position, Erasmus published his Platonico-Christian views on politics in *The Education of a Christian Prince*. In *Utopia*, More gets back at his idealist friend.

Do the discussions and disagreements between More and Erasmus form the background to the rest of the book as well, including the description of the ideal state of Utopia? This might certainly explain the uneasy acknowledgement of humanist self-doubt with which More referred to his own book when, on 3 September 1516, he sent Erasmus his final text in order for it to be published in Flanders: 'I am sending you my Nowhere, which is nowhere well written (...).'<sup>10</sup> But there is no reason to suspect that Erasmus himself was in any way embarrassed. Erasmus had left London only a few weeks before, and he must have been fully aware of the text and of More's plans with it.<sup>11</sup> He also knew how the second part of the book, with its description of the fantasy island of Utopia, had originally been conceived in Flanders in the summer of 1515, when More had spent some time in Antwerp with Pieter Gillis, or Peter Giles (1486-1533), a friend of Erasmus – and now More's friend, too. Giles was to figure prominently in *Utopia* as

<sup>10</sup> More (1961: 73).

<sup>11</sup> As J.H. Hexter has argued, More had nothing much to explain to Erasmus, since only a few weeks earlier both friends will certainly have talked, in London, about how to proceed towards publication once More had drawn up a final version of the text. Cf. Hexter (1965).

one of the eye-witnesses who, besides More and More's pupil John Clement, had heard the story of the far-away island straight from the mouth of the exotic philosopher-traveller Raphael Hythlodæus, or Raphael Chatter-talk.

In the autumn of 1516, Erasmus and Giles quickly saw *Utopia* through the press, so that half way December, More was already eagerly awaiting the arrival, in London, of the book in its first edition by Thierry Martens of Louvain.<sup>12</sup> Erasmus waited with publicly giving his judgement for some time. As he put it himself, he did not wish to let his 'very close friendship' with More come between himself and a justified verdict on the book. Only when, on his own initiative, a new edition of *Utopia* appeared with Froben in Basle, a year later, did Erasmus share in the widespread praise for More's genius.

## The book

Is Erasmus himself *Utopia's* main protagonist? Two contributions to the present volume will develop the Sissa Thesis in various ways. First, Giulia Sissa herself will offer an abundance of new arguments in favour of the thesis she first presented in 2012. Where the reader will have to search for the positive evidence for seeing Hythlodæus as an impersonation of Erasmus in her previous work,<sup>13</sup> the present article focuses more particularly on the question of the abolition of private property in *Utopia*, as well as on the fact that the combination of virtue and pleasure is an Erasmian theme wholly alien to More. Starting out from the tension in *Utopia's* combination of Platonic and Epicurean ideals, and Erasmus' advocacy of the Platonic Utopia of *Kallipolis*, Sissa works towards an assessment of Thomas More's own political views. It appears that Erasmus, not More, was the communist. Whereas Erasmus read the Adage 'All is common among friends' according to the collectivist interpretations Pythagoras and Plato had given it (and Aristotle, Epicurus and Cicero had criticised), Thomas More, in both parts of *Utopia*, opts for the Aristotelian view, dismissing Hythlodæus' position as absurd. In other works, More shows himself to be even less of a follower of

12 Only a fortnight after sending the final text to Flanders, while Peter Giles and Erasmus were preparing the first edition for the press, More was asking Erasmus to seek recommendations from men well-versed in politics. Within a month and a half, he expressed his delight with the people Erasmus had gathered. For details about the correspondence between Erasmus and More regarding *Utopia* in the autumn of 1516, see Hexter (1965).

13 Sissa (2012).

Hythloday. While Erasmus interpreted pleasure along Platonic lines as a divine reward for virtue, More, in the *Dialogue of Comfort*, produced what Sissa calls a 'relentless panegyric of pain'. Thomas More, in fact, argued time and again that we should be grateful for our sufferings and tribulations, since they bring us closer to God. Apart from this, More further attested to the absurdity of Hythloday's viewpoints in other works besides *Utopia*, by showing himself to be diametrically opposed, both on social and on religious grounds, to the idea that personal wealth should be abolished.

The conclusion that the historical More was neither a classical Platonist or a classical Epicurean, nor a Platonist or an Epicurean in the Erasmian sense of the word, and that he developed his moral and political views not on the basis of philosophical views, but on the religious values of suffering, and the desire either to leave this world or to prepare himself for it, is a view that also emerges from Han van Ruler's comparison of the dissimilar ways in which Erasmus and More put to use their religious convictions. Arguing that Hythloday's praise for the moral philosophy of the Utopians, though formally giving support to a Platonic and Epicurean stance, does not show any signs of the kind of arguments Erasmus himself would have given to defend these positions, Van Ruler suggests that even when playfully presenting Erasmus as Hythloday, More shows no real interest in Erasmus's moral philosophy. One of the most crucial aspects of Erasmus's moral theory is its relation to mind-body dualism, which prompted Erasmus to use a philosophical line of argument according to which the human body is of neutral value to morality at most. This, again, is a theme wholly lacking in More. Van Ruler draws a comparison between More's and Erasmus's writings on Christ's suffering as an illustration of the way in which Erasmus might make use of Biblical testimonies to make a moral point on the basis of his anthropological views, whilst More shows an interest in spiritual meaning rather than in morality, and employs the duality of flesh and spirit only to emphasize the idea that Holy Writ is full of hidden meaning. Paradoxically, Erasmus's indifference to the physical part of man was motivated by moral and social aims, whilst More's interest in man's physical side was inspired by the body's presumed spiritual significance. Seen in this light, *Utopia* presents us with views that seem ultimately to belong to neither author, but rather to express the way in which More read, or at least was able to tease, Erasmus.

Did Thomas More not endorse any of the positions *Utopia* takes up? Defending the two humanists against charges of inconsistency as well as against present-day bias to the things Renaissance men may have held dear, Van Ruler does not rule out the possibility that More may at least

have sympathised with some of the effects he imagined might be intended in Erasmus's call for a cultural transformation in the direction of reason. If so, More's parody may have been charitable, yet both Sissa's and Van Ruler's contributions reinforce the idea that *Utopia* offered a subject-matter in many ways unconventional, not to say wholly alien, to Thomas More himself.

Thomas More *himself* has to be taken very seriously. And yet, this exceptionally coherent personality belongs to the environment of intimate friendships, intellectual exchanges, and on-going conversations. On the one hand, Van Ruler's and Sissa's contributions corroborate the scholarly imperative to place *Utopia* in the context of Erasmian humanism. On the other, they do justice to the difference between Morus and Erasmus. Over the years, all major scholars have systematically read the dialogue on the best state of a commonwealth precisely in the shadow of Erasmus' ideas and works. This contextualization works only too well. It proves much more rewarding than to try to reconcile Utopian features with Thomas More's own values. Hence various interpretations that rely on the supposed existence of irony, ambivalence, contradiction, or a change of heart on the part of Thomas More. Recent studies, however, such as those of Marie-Claire Phélippeau, Gerard Wegemer and Travis Curtright place *Utopia* not only in this Erasmian context, but also in that of Thomas More's other writings. As Travis Curtright writes, 'the pendulum of More studies returns to less eristic analyses of his work.'<sup>14</sup>

Centuries of interpretation have nevertheless built on the idea that *Utopia* in one way or another contains More's political philosophy. Nor are readers to be blamed if they cannot trust the name by which someone presents himself as the author of a book. Consequently, the book and its author, *Utopia* and Thomas More, acquired an array of different faces over the years – and indeed, in a way, another Thomas More was born in 1516. For despite the Sissa Thesis, there is no sense in denying the existence of a Thomas More who is the author of a fiction called *Utopia*, and who, for over a period of five hundred years, has been read, hailed, and criticized, for what he made others believe he believed, even if he did not believe himself in the ideal society it presented. To honour this more traditional More and his legacy, the present volume has collected a number of essays that, besides the book itself and the personal history involved in its making, discuss issues of relevance to the traditional Thomas More by examining *Utopia*'s early reception and by weighing arguments for and against the

14 Curtright (2012: 10). See also Wegemer (1990: 288-306) and Phélippeau (2016).

utopian way of thinking that More – not Erasmus – created, with his book on the ideal society and with the contribution he thereby made to the history of political theory.

## Original reception

Questions of realism, idealism, practical steering, and the nature of man, are also addressed in the contributions to this volume that do not concentrate primarily on a comparison between Erasmus and More. Next to the two initial studies of *Utopia* itself, the reader will find two historical essays on the early reception of More's book. Covering both sides of the Channel More had crossed to meet Peter Giles – and, presumably, Raphael Hythloday's archetype – in Antwerp, Erik De Bom concentrates on *Utopia's* early reception within sixteenth-century political theory in the Netherlands, whilst Guido Giglioni offers a comparison between More's classic and *A Discourse of the Commonweal of This Realm of England*, a lesser known dialogue by Thomas Smith (1513-1577), who, like More, was an Englishman in high public office with a literary interest in philosophical and economic theory.

In his article on the reception of *Utopia* in the Netherlands, Erik De Bom addresses the question in what way More's draft for an ideal society differs from contemporary alternatives by Erasmus and Machiavelli. Arguing that More did not share Erasmus's optimism about the perfectibility of man, but still believed society might be changed in positive ways by changing the way in which society was organised, De Bom characterizes *Utopia's* political theory as a reaction to the misguided idea of trying to change citizens or princes. *Utopia* proposes to change the institutional set up of society instead. A certain sense of realism thus drew More towards the idea of forcing citizens to comply with moral standards. As De Bom shows, however, *Utopia* had relatively little impact on early-modern philosophical debate in the Low Countries. It was rather Machiavelli's type of realism that set the new standard and posed a challenge to new contributions in political theory. As De Bom explains, Justus Lipsius (1547-1606) would follow Machiavelli in his realism, whilst at the same time adding arguments taken from historical sources to underline the positive value of checks and restrictions on what a prince might do. Leonardus Lessius (1554-1623), by contrast, developed a further type of political realism by combining ethical concerns with legal rules in a manner reminiscent of the Flemish lawyer Nicolaes Everaerts (c. 1462-1532), another acquaintance



of Erasmus, whose *Topica* had appeared in the same year, and with the same publisher, as More's *Utopia*.

Whereas, in Erik De Bom's article, *Utopia* accordingly figures as a book that drew attention away from the perfectibility of man towards the idea of changes to be made to society, a new type of idealism in *Utopia* comes to the fore in Guido Giglioni's contribution, an idealism which, rather than being concerned with mental conditions, is focused on the material conditions of life. Comparing More's work with that of Thomas Smith, Giglioni stresses the way in which the issue of agricultural production led More to endorse a positive belief in the ability to ensure a society without want.

In Giglioni's reading, *Utopia*, with its extensive discussion of enclosures, hunger, the need to steal, and the hangings that result from this, bears More's personal stamp especially in its way of arguing for taking away 'the fear of want' by utopian economic measures. Indeed, according to Giglioni, '*Utopia* is first and foremost about hunger.'

Through its systematic deployment of physical labour, Utopia's laws were designed to offer economic solutions and to rescue its inhabitants from being trapped in a Faustian grip between greed and fear. As Julien Kloeg proposes in this volume with respect to the equal distribution of goods in Utopia, 'there are similarities' here, 'to the modern welfare state.' More's emphasis on the corporeal side of human well-being, as well as his preoccupations with agricultural and economic questions, may accordingly be read as evidence of a rather down-to-earth, or even 'materialist', type of idealism in More. At the same time, Giglioni's comparison of More and Smith may serve to indicate to what extent More held on to an uncompromising enforcement of moral codes and collectivist consequences. Smith, by contrast, accepted the idea that there might be socially constructive effects to a yearning for profit, thus, as Giglioni writes, presenting the 'self-acquisitive nature of man' as a 'positive trait'. Giglioni's article shows that even in its sixteenth-century setting, the debate on political utopianism might foreshadow modern debates on the negative and positive evaluations of human appetites, and on the necessity either to curb these or to set them free. Countless debates in economics and politics have since added to More's and Smith's discussion of the relative weight of collectivist and individualist approaches to the organisation of society, and it is in the context of such political debates that the legacy of *Utopia* is arguably most often referred to.

Complementing the four historical studies in the first part, the articles in the second part of this volume will debate the pros and cons of visionary political thinking as such, and thereby offer a variety of views on utopian-

ism rather than on *Utopia*. Instead of continuing the discussion between communism and free trade, between capitalism and the planned economy, these four contributions will bring together two critical as well as two constructive essays on the concept of an ideal world. The two critical essays will cast doubt on the idea of a utopia, the first from a theoretical standpoint and the second in the form of a critique on current applications of the utopian view in questions of health care. Lastly, two favourable appreciations of utopian thinking will address its ongoing value in political thought, as well as the fruitful manner in which More's way of presenting his ideal society links up with epistemologically effective ways of applying thought experiments to reality.

### Philosophical criticism

In the wake of twentieth-century political experiments no longer trusted and in the light of famous literary warnings against totalitarian control, the notion of a political Paradise has come to worry us today. Thomas More does not figure in Karl Popper's famous condemnation of totalitarianism, but *Utopia* would be an obvious candidate to be added to Popper's list of intellectualist expectations that may lead to authoritarian rule. More might thus easily be counted amongst the enemies of the free society, but it is not the intention of the two critical essays here presented to read *Utopia* simply as a follow-up to Plato or as a preamble of Soviet politics. Rather, both contributions question the possibility that one might meaningfully design a future state of affairs in which human beings are relieved from some of their most troublesome needs and aspirations.

If *Utopia* is the expression of a desire to overcome aspects of human existence that keep us in a state of emotional instability and wavering happiness, utopian thinking, according to the philosophical criticisms here voiced by the two Louvain philosophers Arnold Burms and Herman De Dijn, is mistaken in its way of imagining ideals that do not in fact fit the human condition.

Burms notices that utopianism has no regard for two basic human needs: the need to make sense of things we cannot control and the need to attract the positive attention of others. With respect to the first, Burms points at the examples of honouring the dead and of punishing criminal behaviour. Honouring the dead is something human beings are deeply committed to, but it is an obligation that cannot be understood in terms of rational justifications. With respect to the example of punishment,

Burms introduces the concept of 'symbolic restoration' and argues that blame and punishment are expressions of a 'deeply ingrained attitude' that does not correspond to any utilitarian goal. The second basic human need, the need to attract the attention of others and to get their recognition, has the typical characteristic that it can never be fulfilled if it is not accompanied by the belief that there is indeed a true ground for the recognition itself, or if it is not accompanied with a recognition of the symbolic significance of specific social roles in the public sphere. Forms of utilitarian thinking, according to Burms, habitually disregard such elementary truths. Human beings do not simply wish to be helped by seeing others fulfil all sorts of conditions. Rather, they have 'the desire to be appreciated and to be engaged in significant activities.' The utopian dilemma that results from this is especially transparent in transhumanist ideals, Burms argues, since although these futuristic visions of post-human existence carry the promise that they will ameliorate things for us, they actually introduce the problematic desire to become something we are not. Although utopian thinking may be useful in so far as it expresses a desire for self-transcendence, the notion to become self-creators can only make us 'aliens to ourselves'.

Whereas Burms criticizes the utopian dream from the viewpoint that it ignores deeply embedded human desires, Herman De Dijn criticizes recent developments in society that are nevertheless aimed at an effectuation of the utopian dream, and warns against the loss of moral sensitivities that may result from this. Drawing a sharp contrast between the conventional practice of providing aid to someone in physical distress and the fundamental inability to relieve the unfulfilled desires for happiness or recognition in others, De Dijn sets the stage for a critique of the current tendency to medicalize and therapeutize spheres of human experience and behaviour that, although they were previously not considered to be part of medical science, are nowadays delegated to the domain of health care. The interest in securing both the health and the happiness of individuals has in fact given a new meaning to the concept of health itself and has set new standards for human goals in life, both of which are based on the notion of 'the quality of life'. De Dijn critically discusses these developments, along with the accompanying changes in the relationship between (medical) professionals and those searching for help. Dispensing with the traditional 'paternalistic' interpretation of the respective roles of caretaker and patient, and giving way to transhumanist ways of thinking, both the new views on health and the altered relationship between consultant and client are set into an ideological perspective of self-empowerment and

customer demand, and it is here that, according to De Dijn, a new utopianism comes to the fore.

De Dijn sees the kind of ‘managerial rationality’ apparent in contemporary health care as a form of ‘soft utilitarianism’. Contrary to the old, totalitarian, forms of political utopianism, this new type of utopian thinking is fully adapted to liberal-democratic ideals, but it is no less characterized by a mistaken desire for what De Dijn calls the ‘elimination of insecurity’, and a desire for complete control. More importantly, according to De Dijn, this new utopianism is marked by a total incapacity to understand or even to recognize evil, as the ideology of perfection leaves no place for ethical sensibilities and thus no room for moral boundaries or transgressions to be conceptualized. Whether this new utopianism is simply to be accepted as a fact of present-day life, De Dijn wishes to leave to the reader, but he does note that a certain malaise is actually being felt within certain sectors of health care today, and suggests that, against the despair inevitably brought about by the quest for utopian happiness, a case should be made for hope as the ‘truly “utopian” attitude’.

## Philosophical acclaim

Of the two favourable appreciations of utopian thinking that complete this volume, the first is a partly historical, partly philosophical, essay on the concept of ‘utopia’ in political thought; the second an appraisal of the logic of utopian thinking as a philosophical technique.

If *Utopia* did not figure in Karl Popper’s attack on Plato, Julien Kloeg’s article ‘Utopianism and its Discontents’ offers a fine selection of the most important works in political philosophy in which it does. Despite its bad historical reputation and the problematic fit of the concept of ‘utopia’ in such intellectual developments as the empirical turn in political thought prompted by David Easton (1917-2014) and the suspicion against ‘grand narratives’ in post-modernism, utopian types of thinking still survive today.

Kloeg first analyses the ambiguous relationship between Marxism and utopianism on the basis of Marx’s and Engels’s criticism of utopian socialism. This ambiguity persists in twentieth-century political philosophy. Kloeg examines the element of utopianism introduced in the work of John Rawls, and discusses its relevance in the light of twentieth-century denunciations of utopianism. Rawls’s contribution may be read as a restatement of the need for normativity besides scientific examination. Rawls himself, however, was attacked by Amartya Sen for having endorsed a

wholly contingent interpretation of justice. On the basis of Pablo Gilabert's reaction to Sen, Kloeg discusses to what extent the concept of utopia may still offer a useful tool within political philosophy today, on account of its effectiveness for identifying problems, its criticism of the status quo, and its motivational strength.

If More's intellectual strategy may still be expedient for political reasons despite the widespread intellectual and historical distrust of utopianism, it may even be crucial for epistemological reasons. As Tim De Mey argues in the final contribution to this volume, More's approach actually enables a fair assessment of different positions with respect to the political future. De Mey takes up the defence of More's integrity by suggesting a reading of *Utopia* that acknowledges its role as an evaluative thought experiment that leaves it to the readers to form their own opinion and decide between a variety of positions. Agreeing that the reader of *Utopia* has to make 'crucial interpretative decisions for himself', De Mey explains More's strategy as a functional deployment of an 'exacerbated ambiguity' that adds to its value as a thought experiment. Although this ambiguity works differently in the case of *Utopia* than it does in the case of counterfactual or conceptual thought-experiments, De Mey argues that More's similar way of magnifying the effects of social measures and political choices not only serves to verify Thomas More's intellectual integrity, but adds to the concept of 'utopia' on epistemological grounds.

## Ideas and skeletons

Whether or not it was Thomas More's intention to tease Erasmus, or to provide ideas and arguments, or even solutions, in political theory, is again a question the editors would like to invite the readers to form their own opinion upon, in the hope that the many options for reading *Utopia* and for evaluating the concept of utopianism presented in this volume will contribute in new ways to the broad spectrum of historical interpretations and philosophical views that Thomas More's book has provoked over the past five hundred years.

If *Utopia's* message may seem elusive, part of its elusiveness is the effect of a certain duplicity in Renaissance forms of expression, in which practical matters of morality and politics might lay hidden in high-minded notions of spiritual growth, just as purely idealist anticipations might be cast in the language of down-to-earth material progress. Indeed, pre-modern articulations may evoke modernist viewpoints as much as they may conceal

utterly pre-modern motivations – and this is so not only because our language differs from More's, but also because human expectancies and beliefs have developed greatly over the past five centuries. In order to meet the enigmas still hidden in *Utopia's* text as well as in More's motivations, and to acknowledge the problems we encounter in trying to decide on the right evaluation of utopianism, the editors have chosen to enliven the outward appearance of this volume with no less ambiguous an illustration.

There are many Renaissance depictions of St. Jerome in his study, but the painting by an anonymous Flemish artist in the style of Joos van Cleve which presumably dates back to the 1530s or 1540s and is now in the possession of the Rotterdam Boymans van Beuningen Museum, is especially suggestive of the topics presented in this volume. In this picture, we see St. Jerome, the exemplary scholar and Church Father who was, in many ways, Erasmus's model theologian, looking somewhat desperate, but still reasonably unconcerned, even faintly amused – indeed, the whole painting is rather amusing.

Depictions of the Church Father in his philosopher's cell were as common as the lion that traditionally accompanied St. Jerome. Other elements in Renaissance depictions of the learned Saint were equally standard, but it is not always easy to establish their intended meaning. Candles and skulls, for instance, have been interpreted in the case of Jerome as symbols of spiritual rebirth and divine illumination, yet such was the volatility of Renaissance symbolism that outside Jerome's cell, these skulls and candles (either burning or extinguished), along with other signs of temporality and finitude such as hourglasses and dead flowers, would soon acquire notoriety as still-life reminders of the medieval motif of *Memento Mori* within the Renaissance tradition of *Vanitas* paintings.

In the case of St. Jerome, these symbols of vanity may have functioned as figurative contrasts to the Church Father's religious aspirations, or to the eternal wisdom he was dealing with, but in the case of our anonymous painting, with its *HOMO BVLLA* ('Man is a bubble') inscription on the wall, there can be little doubt that the whole scene leans towards a *Vanitas* interpretation. The friendly face as well as the gesture of one of Erasmus's favourite Church Fathers in this picture may well serve to epitomize *Utopia's* purpose, if part of what More wished to communicate was to question the ephemeral and all-too-human idealism of his friend, but it may equally symbolize a form of irony with respect to the notion of 'utopia' as such. With its township in the background and St. Jerome pointing downwards to the skull, the picture in fact suggests a questioning of political hopes and expectations *tout court*.

It also forms an interesting counterpart to the map of Utopia in the woodcut that, probably at the request of Erasmus, Ambrosius Holbein (c. 1594-after 1519) made for the frontispiece of the 1518 Froben edition of More's book. It is this image that has developed into the standard illustration of *Utopia*. Pointing upwards to his political dreamland, Raphael Hythloday in the lower left hand corner of this picture illustrates an enthusiasm that is the exact opposite of the irony implied in the portrait of the Saint on the cover of this issue, and if St. Jerome's message of human bubble-status may serve as a rejoinder to Hythloday's utopian Babbletalk, both images are also a reminder of the way in which intellectual idealism had been associated only a few years earlier with pointed fingers up and down in Rafael's Italian namesake's picture of The School of Athens. Not only does Plato, the classic representative of reasoned utopianism, point upwards in Raphael's fresco just as Hythloday does in Ambrosius's woodcut – he is also confronted with a downward gesture that, just like St. Jerome's finger, served typically as a way of tempering intellectual arrogance.

And yet, if St. Jerome's gesture put a cautious question mark to human philosophical aspirations, its symbolism may provide an emblematic reference to *Utopia* in an even more literal sense. Irony has it that, with a dentist's eye to x-ray revelations of the anatomical features of the human cranium, Malcolm Bishop in 2005 revealed that Ambrosius had hidden a skull in his map of Utopia, just as his younger brother Hans (c. 1497-1553) had added a skull to the famous picture of The Ambassadors (1533) that is now in the possession of the London National Gallery.<sup>15</sup>

Offering a mirror-image of the picture of the island that had occurred in the original 1516 edition, Ambrosius skillfully added the pointing figure of Hythloday as the neck part to an inclined human skull, the teeth of which are camouflaged in the boat on the foreground, as much as the eye sockets are hidden in two mountainous areas on the island. Dentists and non-dentists alike who detect for themselves the image hidden in the 1518 woodcut will henceforth fail to be able to overlook the emblem of death concealed in the standard illustration of Utopia.

As Malcolm Bishop argued, the idea of hiding a skull may have been just another pun, possibly envisioned by Erasmus, upon More's name, since, in the eyes of the joker, *Memento Mori* ('Remember you must die') is exchangeable for 'Think of More'. Yet there may also have been other reasons to link More's *Utopia* to a *Memento Mori*-theme. In fact, all Erasmus's own moral and social idealism was impregnated with a religious motivation

<sup>15</sup> Bishop (2005).

that may remind us of the *vanitas*-type of symbolism traditionally linked to St. Jerome as much as it reminded Erasmus himself of a Platonic indifference to the world on the basis of which life itself was seen as a preparation for death.

It is quite possible that the problems of interpretation with regard to *Utopia*, as much as the tension between realism and idealism and the varying appreciations of utopianism itself, were all too clear even to our humanist masterminds themselves, who knew how to read Renaissance emblematic representations such as the anonymous Jerome, or Ambrosius' woodcut. In their way of combining the image of faraway vistas filled with heavenly expectance with the hidden, or even material, presence of tokens of disaster and death, both of these illustrations give expression to the hope invested in new trials, as much as they warn against the calamities that are to be expected from human hubris. As if to say that there are always two sides to a coin, both images associate human aspirations with the possibility of doom. And all of them, not only the Flemish St. Jerome and Holbein's woodcut, but also Thomas More's *Utopia* itself, no doubt did so with an ominous undertone as well as a meaningful wink.

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