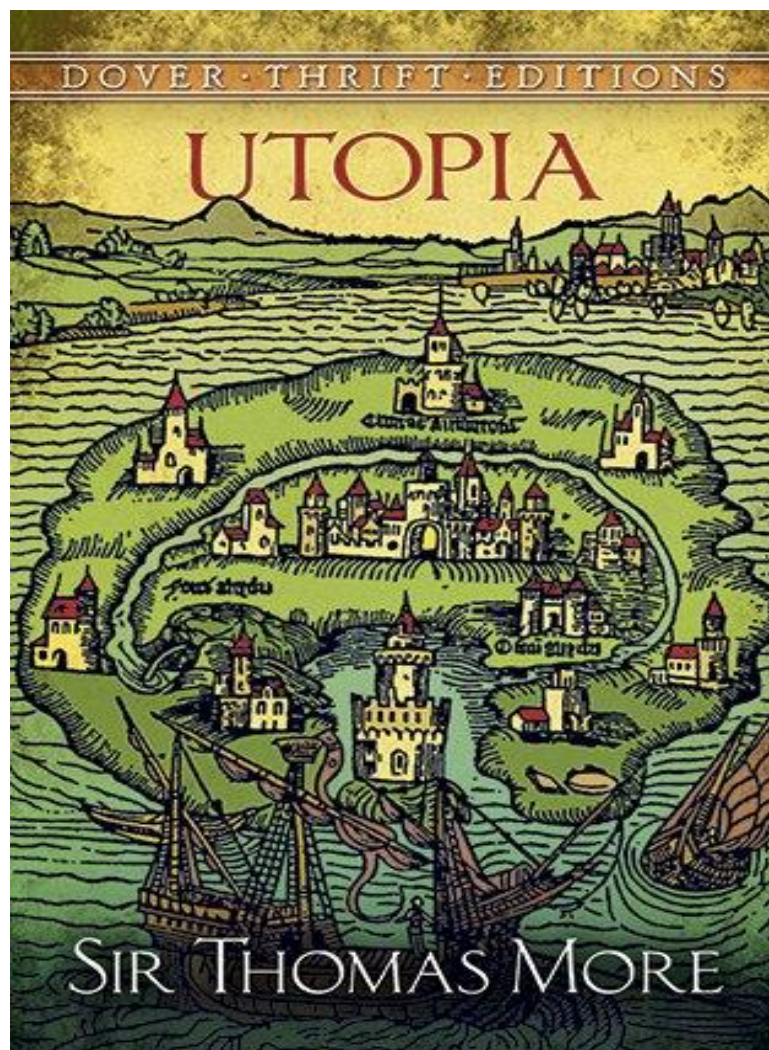


# ***UTOPIA AS COMMON GOOD***



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**T**he main axis that theoretically structures the political edifice of *Utopia* is common good, common wealth. It is the proposed new understanding of this axis that creates a sense of unease when certain people read the book. This apparently crazed perspective on the goodness of the city, adequately explained by a Portuguese philosopher, Raphael Hythloday, informs the whole substance of the discourse.

What is the meaning of this common wealth? It is important to understand that this is presented not as a new conception of common good, as if the notion already existed before *Utopia*, but as a radically new notion, a new mode of putting the world – *Utopia* is really the world, the real "new world" – into perspective, an ontological one. It is not *Utopia* that is to be considered unreal, but that which one commonly considers the "real world", truly unreal in its illogical mode of being. It is not a new ontological logic that More proposes to us, but simple logic, tout court.

The narrative about *Utopia* is a narrative about a logical world, something that never existed. One has to ponder if the greater reasons for wonder within this philosophical work are the things culturally most distant from our habitudes or the things most distant from our habitudes because they are logical, something that many of our cultural habitudes are not. Isn't it the menacing perspective of having to live in a logically structured community, instead of in a capricious one, that which is awkward and non-appealing?

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<sup>1</sup> Américo José Pinheira Pereira, Doctor in Philosophy, Portuguese Catholic University, 1996. Several items of scientific publications in the areas of Ontology, Ethics, Portuguese Thought, Epistemology, Philosophy of Religion, Ancient Philosophy and Political Philosophy, including nine books. Various Academic Administrative positions. Director of the Philosophy Department 2013-15. Senior research member and Board member of the Philosophy Centre of the Portuguese Catholic University. His main publications are: *Ética e Teologia. Declinações de uma relação* (2016); *Eros e Sophia. Estudos platónicos II* (2015); *A Crise do Bem. Reflexão sobre o Job e o sofrimento* (2014); LAVELLE, Louis, *Cadernos de Guerra. Na frente*, Francisco Piedade Vaz (transl.), Américo Pereira (coord.); "Guerra, uma redefinição", *Synesis*, vol. 6, nº 2, Jul/Dez 2014, pp. 1-20.

What one finds in Utopia is a new ontology of human-political-goodness, a new ontology of common good, of common wealth (we shall, from now on, use these two terms indistinctly), perhaps even a new metaphysics of the common wealth (seeking its transcendental principles, devoid of all human prejudice and malice).

Nevertheless, the notion is not a new one: the especially used and quoted Plato had already plunged his masterful intelligence in the matter, and Augustine had also pondered a radical doctrine on it.

What is the meaning of "common good"? A community not of "goods", but of "the good", because they are all, as forms of the one good, of common wealth, to be put to the service of all the persons involved, that is to say, of the ones who constitute the act of the great integrative "polis", for Utopia is a "polis" of "poleis", a city of cities, a community of communities, just like the present "global village" should be, but is not, prisoner as it is of old and dying cultural values of ethnocentric substance.

We use the term "polis" due to the inadequacy of the term "state". It is inadequate due to the very core of that which erects Utopia from within: what the strange Portuguese man is telling us, we, the readers, in the stead of Thomas More, is that there is no traditional "state" in Utopia and that the "state" was replaced with and by the "commonwealth" and that they are no synonymous terms or realities alike.

It is not very difficult to understand that they are, really, contradictory, for "state" is an abstract reality that, when tentatively imposed upon mundane reality tends to annihilate the latter enslaving it to the abstract form being imposed. Thus is not Utopia, for it is not an abstraction, though it may look like one to a careless onlooker, absent of attention towards the reality of the many details that constitute the report on the mode of being of the now unveiled "polis".

There are many institutions in *Utopia*, but none among them is really a "state". Utopia is its common wealth, that is to say that Utopia coincides with its common good. Utopia is a "commonwealth". There is no Utopia prior to its act as an act of

common wealth. Common good is not superposed upon an already existing Utopia. Utopia is not a "state", not even an "institution", but an act, a very complex act of political life, of human relations, totally considered, ontologically understood: it is not a modern sociological entity, made of external relations, but an entity that is, moment by moment, the integration of the acts of all the people who belong to it. This belonging is synonym to being an entity that is part of, a part that cannot be forgotten or allowed to betray.

This act, in its existence, while it exists, is the common wealth. This new political architecture is that which explains the integrative form of common political action in Utopia, action that involves all the persons, all the institutions, all the parametrization of political acts, from the most individual aspects to the most collective ones, from the way one behaves at the dinner table to the way one prays, to the making of war.

No action has any human or political sense unless it is deployed under the anthropo-cosmic dome of common wealth. After an attentive reading of the work, one easily understands that this wealth, this good, this real goodness that is common is not something to be possessed by many or even shared by many, but acted by all. This is a necessary condition for the existence of a real "polis", that which Utopia is.

This universal thing that is the wealth is no ordinary thing. It is not even a "thing" at all: it is, as we have already seen, an act. This universal act is the act of the "polis" itself as goodness.

The Polis-Utopia is not possessed – neither does it possess – it is not shared. Why not? Because there is no Utopia, prior to the common wealth, that can be possessed. When Utopia was founded by Utopus, its being as an act of common wealth began. At its first moment, there was nothing to be possessed or shared: all that was properly Utopian was yet to be created. In those times, only the process of creation was born. All the rest had to follow. This first wealth is not possessed or shared, but is that which permits all sharing, perhaps even all possession, if necessary.

The common wealth, however, is no possession, it is a creation. It is also not something to be shared like a finding can be, but something to be built.

It is only the activity of the universal act of construction of Utopia that can be shared, the movement, not the thing, because there is no "thing", just the movement of construction, of creation. This is the secret of Utopia. Thomas More knew that this is the secret of love: a motion towards good, goodness. That is why no possession makes any sense, for one cannot possess an act because of its indomitable fluidity.

Thomas More may invoke Plato, and well, but it is on the metaphysics of Heraclitus that his formal notion of the act of the "polis" stands. The "polis", Utopia, is an ever flowing never ending – one hopes – act, of immensely detailed movements, all united by the same one "logos", the finality embedded in all of that detail: common wealth. Common wealth is the logical "telos" of Utopia. But it is also its most minute flesh, its being as the means for itself, its act of poetic construction: a "polis" as an act of universal poetry, of symphonic voice.

Its absolute is as absolute as the "logos" of the movement in the metaphysics of Heraclitus. This is the reason why everything else is relative, this utter relativity being symbolized by the figure of money, the thing, which has no reality but the reality of the faith one has in it. Money, the symbol of derided futility for in itself void of ontological density other than that of a useless surrogate: for instance, nobody survives eating money.

In a world of famine, I can obtain from you the last kilogram of wheat paying you one gold ton. Nevertheless, we will both very soon perish. A ton of wheat would allow us both to wait for the next crop, the kilo of wheat allows me to live for some days; the ton of gold does not do anything for you when the matter at stake is the irreducible need for something to eat. This is the crudest human reality: to it only a continuous act of common wealth may answer with effectiveness: this effectiveness is no utopia, but the unique reality that can provide us both with the real goods that can allow us to survive, better even, live and live as human beings should live, that is, with human dignity. Nothing utopic exists in this.

The difference in the substance of things is what distinguishes wealth, real wealth – the wheat in our example – from the illusion of wealth – the gold in our example. Using the logic that erects this same example, one understands that gold is the maker of death, wheat the maker of life, therefore, gold is the utopic one, not wheat: but gold is the utopia as the city of the dead. The real utopia is the society that is similar to a cemetery, where the one's gold digs the other's grave, as a matter of "daily bread".

It is this ontological distinction that constitutes the heart of More's notion of wealth and common wealth. Gold can never be a common wealth because gold, in this ontological sense, is absolutely no wealth at all. One can easily understand now why gold is so debased in Utopia: it corresponds to no actual wealth; it is just a belief with no possible efficacy. The narrative the Portuguese philosopher elaborates is quite abundant with details of the real richness, goodness that constitutes the common wealth of Utopia. The people – the persons – each and every one are Utopia's best wealth. Its land, its water, its soil riches, its organization, its culture and civilization all are Utopia's wealth. They all take part in its common good. They all belong to this same and unique act that creates this "polis".

If the people are the main riches, no one can be alienated from the access to any other needed riches, except the ones who try to, somehow, prejudice or annihilate precisely the common richness.

All the relations between the person and the "polis" are liturgy relations, relations of service: life in Utopia is a permanent act of liturgy. It is either this or the exile. The latter happens in many forms, death being the most extreme one. The common good serves the person, the person serves the common good: the better they serve each other the better all becomes, all resulting, the system working perfectly, in a perfect common wealth.

It is this finality that deserves the name of "theoretical-utopia": it is theoretically possible, but the same narrative Thomas More presents us with shows that the real "polis" of Utopia is far from reaching such perfection.

What one has in Utopia is a really non-utopic culture, civilization, "polis". In this sense, Utopia is non-utopic, but "pre-" or "to be" utopian. It is no perfect "polis", far from it: it is just an approximate essay of perfection. What the odd Portuguese philosopher shows us is a, in his thesis, much better "city" than our own, than all of our non-Utopia cities. And that is all. No Utopia as such can we find in the text.

Though Utopians loathe violence, and never apply it, they do not deter themselves from the use of necessary, appropriate force – which is no synonym to violence – when the common wealth – Utopia itself – is in danger. The imperilment of Utopia justifies the most diamantine measures, including war, war that is to be, as long as possible, waged away – the farther possible – from the motherland, preferably with the use of mercenaries, to be fought swiftly, rapidly annihilating the enemy leader in order to spare all the others involved further suffering and death, as best as possible.

As a political apex, the Utopians practice a rule according to which, when victory is won, the persons belonging to the enemy who were not responsible for the war must be spared and helped; the ones responsible for war are to be punished, even put to death, so they do not promote another one and so that the example set may teach others the final destiny that waits those who are responsible for wars.

Maybe we can encounter More's echo in Churchill's principles evidently stated at the beginning of his World War II Memories:<sup>2</sup> "In war: resolution; In defeat: defiance; In victory: magnanimity; In peace: good will". But for defeat, the echo seems clear.

Knowing the price peoples have to pay for it, Utopia never provokes war. Thus, the Utopians just respond to provocation. Therefore, all of utopian war action is destined to protect Utopia from destruction or defilement. When at war, their action is warlike perfect, which means cold, effective quick measures to win it and, thus, end it. This is the price of war, only avoidable if war never breaks, that is to say if no one ever starts a war. This one is a true utopic thought.

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<sup>2</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, six volumes, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985.

Great harshness calls for great mercy. Utopia responds with grace and greatness: its common good is expanded to foreign peoples even as a result of war. After the war as well as when no war exists at all, they extend it through commerce and other pacific enterprises and activities, but their best moment is when, as a result of their victory, not only Utopia's common good increases, but the wealth, the common wealth of others increases too. This is an immense lesson, one lectured by someone as important as Thomas More, but one that had no great future.

Remember the situation after World War One, the Great War: the losing potencies in need of a salutary mercy received an overcharge of punishment that much helped to create revengeful movements such as the Nazi one. The "Utopian Lesson of Mercy", if applied after World War I, as figures such as Winston Spencer Churchill and Thomas Woodrow Wilson wanted, could have avoided the Second World War.

Another lesson, the one that consists on putting the culprits face to face with their actions and the consequences of those actions, making them assume their responsibility, could have, should have transformed the Tribunals of Nuremberg and Tokyo into an unique official Peace Tribunal capable of placing under trial all war criminals who appeared since the aftermath of the Second World War.

The real Utopia is a world without the kind of tragic and perennial stupidity that leads to wars. A fundamental thing is very clear: to try to annihilate common wealth is to enter an agonic state that will result in the death of the offender. The Utopians never forget that there is nothing beyond that which constitutes the possibility of their existence: the act of the "polis". Here, Thomas More touches one unquestionable truth: the "polis", the city is the ontological possibility of humanity. There is no other. Destroy the "polis", the common good, and you will destroy humanity. If this was true in More's time, not as Utopia, but as the fundamental ontological possibility for the reality of humanity, it is ultimately true nowadays, when the "island" of Utopia refers itself to the global Planet Earth.

The reflection Thomas More undertook is applicable to "Global Island Earth". Now is the only possible time for our common good, for the common wealth. There



is no other. The common good that erected the theoretical Utopia, the one in the book with the same name, with all its assumed defects, and with all its non-assumed defects, is, as universal desire and want for universal goodness, the same that can motivate us now. This is the possibility of a common, universal, salvation, or, instead, of universal certain doom.

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#### ABSTRACT

The narrative that presents the "polis" of "Utopia" does not build an image of a "place without place", but demonstrates that which could and should be – at least structurally – the form of a real community, the one that erects itself as an act of "common-wealth/common-good/common-goodness". The utopian societies, the ones that should have "no place" in human affairs, are the ones that exist historically. So it is really an inversion of "topoi" the one that Sir Thomas operates, making us remember that the reality of humanity is not a society of Hobbes like wolves, but a community of Augustine like good-doers, even if not perfect, even if never perfect.

#### KEY-WORDS

Thomas More, Utopia, Common good/Common wealth, *Polis*.

