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SOME REMARKS ON GOLD

The text : 'Mirantur item aurum suapte natura tam inutile, nunc ubique gentium aestimari tanti, ut homo ipse per quem, atque adeo in cuius usum id precij obtinuit, minoris multo quam aurum ipsum aestimetur, usque adeo ut plumbeus quispiam, & cui non plus ingenij sit quam stipiti....', (*Works*, Yale, IV, 156/18-22).

Gold, the Utopians believe, takes its value through the agency of man by way of the use which it has for man. They have devised a 'magnificent affront to gold.' They make of it chamber pots.

Imagine the implications which such a practice would have should the account in the Gospel of the gifts of the magi be enlarged to tell that of the gold the Child's family had fashioned base vessels. The thought of such an enlargement is shocking, even blasphemous. It is shocking to see dishonoured a part of the creation which God Himself is seen to honour in Holy Writ. For example, the Lord spake to Moses and commanded offerings of gold and a leaf of pure gold overlaid on the ark (*Ex.* 25.3, 11). Job saw that gold holds a place in the creation : 'Surely there is a vein for the silver, and a place for gold where they fine it' (*Job* 28.1). And he understood as surely the proper uses and limitations of gold. Wisdom, of which man knoweth not the price, cannot be gotten for gold (28. 15). When it is man's hope, gold is fraudulent (31. 24). But by gold man may try certain places and certain orders, and by gold man may be tried. Wisdom and God are seen to be above ordinary calculations by their superiority even to gold. Job's comfort, on the other hand, may be measured in part by golden earrings (42. 11). Even man's love for God may be calculated by gold : 'They gave after their ability unto the treasure of the work threescore and one thousand drams of gold,....' (*Ezra* 2. 69). Indeed, St. Paul figures the fit Christian as a vessel of gold the use of which is unto honour (*II Tim.* 2. 20-21). St. John figures by gold the Christian's eternal that land is good...' (*Gen.* 2.12). Man's misuse of gold is wicked - 'Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold' (*Ex.* 32. 31) - ; or, man's perversion brings upon him a pitiful loss of gold - 'Alas, alas, that great city, that was clothed in fine linen, and purple, and scarlet, and decked with gold, and precious stones, and pearls' (*Rev.* 18. 16). Where the Utopians assigned to the golden pot a base use, the children of Israel preserved a portion of manna in a pot of gold (*Ex.* 16.

33 and *Heb.* 9. 4). Gold takes its value from God, not man ; it is a sort of silent log. The Utopians mistake the nature of gold by making man and man's material uses the measure of the value of gold.

M. Julien-Pierre Koszul, in 'Another Money Problem' : "Vanishing gold" (*U.S. News & World Report*, December 4, 1967), opens some subtle points on the discipline of gold. He quotes George Bernard Shaw : 'You have to choose - as a voter - between trusting to the natural stability of gold and the natural stability of the honesty and intelligence of the members of the government'. That puts the predicament of the Utopians in a clear light. By dishonouring gold for the reason that it takes its value from men's whims, the Utopians have discarded the discipline of gold and have thrown themselves wholly upon the natural stability of men, at its best a whimsical stability. M. Koszul ends his essay by reciting a fable from La Fontaine, 'Les Grenouilles qui demandent un roi'. The frogs, of course, weary with their king who was a block of wood, prayed to Jupiter so insistently for a new king that he gave them for king a frog-eater, the stork. The subjects who escaped hastened to reclaim the block of wood.

Is it possible that St. Thomas More wants us to understand that the Utopians fall into the hands of their rulers by rejecting the discipline of God's limited supply of gold ? That they are thus in a more treacherous predicament than those whose gratifications, as well as the gratifications of their governors, are limited by the supply of gold ?



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Editor's comment, to show that Ward Allen's question is a question. In the preface to his *Treatise on the Passion*, More analyses the manifestations of the "pestilent sin of Pride"

"How proud be men of gold and silver, no part of ourself, but of the earth, and of nature no better than is the poor copper or tin, nor to man's use so profitable as is the poor metal that maketh us the ploughshare and horseshoon and horsenails !"

(*Works* p. 1272F)
