

THE PHILEBUS
AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLEASURE
IN THOMAS MORE'S UTOPIA

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Most scholars acknowledge without hesitation the pervasiveness of the influence of the philosophy of Plato upon Thomas More's *Utopia*, yet they have found it hard to define the source of the hedonism of the Utopians. Often they have felt it to be in contradiction to the generally Christian and Platonic tone of the philosophy of the rest of the book. Father Surtz, in fact, says that the Utopian philosophy of pleasure has been "A great stumbling block to the acceptance of the humanistic interpretation of the *Utopia*."¹ Consequently, students of the sources of the philosophy of the *Utopia* have interpreted the "stumbling block" of hedonism in various ways. Surtz explains it largely in terms of More's debt to Erasmus' interpretation of Epicurus.² Don Cameron Allen essentially agrees with Father Surtz that the Utopians' hedonistic philosophy derives from Erasmus' humanistic interpretation of the philosophy of Epicurus.³ Robert P. Adams also turns to More's relationship with Erasmus and the practices of the humanistic scholars to explain the hedonism of the *Utopia*. He, however, sees the primary debt to be to the Stoics rather than to Epicurus. According to Adams the philosophy of pleasure is dominated by the Stoic concept that reason will lead all sane men to seek the kind of humanitarian pleasure practiced by the Utopians.⁴

A few scholars have, however, acknowledged the possibility that the hedonism of the *Utopia* is another manifestation of the pervasive Platonic influence upon the book. In his "Notes" to the Yale Edition, Surtz acknowledges many examples of similarity between the thought in the *Utopia* and in the Platonic dialogues. Finally, however, the "Notes" support Surtz' earlier assertion that More is most indebted to the humanistic interpretation of Epicurus for his philosophy of pleasure.⁵ Similarly, the "Notes" to J. Churton Collins' edition of the *Utopia* acknowledge the possibility of Platonic as well as Epicurean influence upon Utopian hedonism.⁶ Only one scholar, Ernst Cassirer, has, however, pointed out the remarkable similarity between the philosophy of pleasure in the *Utopia* and Plato's

1. Edward L. Surtz, S. J., *The Praise of Wisdom* (Chicago : Loyola Univ. Press, 1957), p. 13.

2. Edward L. Surtz, S. J., "Epicurus in Utopia," *ELH*, 16 (June, 1949), 89-103.

3. Don Cameron Allen, "The Rehabilitation of Epicurus and His Theory of Pleasure in the Early Renaissance," *Studies in Philology*, 41 (January, 1944), 1-15.

4. Robert P. Adams, "Designs by More and Erasmus for a New Social Order," *Studies in Philology*, 42 (April, 1945), 131-145.

5. Thomas More, *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, ed. Edward L. Surtz, S. J. and Jack H. Hexter (New Haven and London : Yale Univ. Press, 1965), IV, 445-461.

6. J. Churton Collins, *Sir Thomas More's Utopia* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1904), pp. 212-214.

philosophy as it appears in the *Philebus*. In this dialogue, Plato describes the pleasures which are a part of the just life and distinguishes, like More, between true and spurious pleasures. Cassirer says that :

There can be no doubt that these discussions in the *Philebus* served More as a model, even in the details of the Utopian ethics. He by no means defends pleasure as such ; on the contrary, he is seeking a specific norm of pleasure which will assign to each particular kind its relative worth. In this pursuit he could also consider himself a Platonist in his ethics ; for he saw Plato again with Greek not Christian eyes.¹

A close examination of the correlation of thought and language in the *Philebus* and the *Utopia* substantiates Cassirer's statement.

The *Philebus* is a dialogue between Protarchus and Socrates in which each seeks to define the supreme good. Protarchus, who has taken over the position abandoned by Philebus, insists that "enjoyment and pleasure and gaiety and whatever accords with that sort of thing" are the best of human possessions.² Socrates contends that "wisdom and thought and memory and their kindred, right opinion and true reasonings, are better and more excellent than pleasure" and are the most "advantageous of all things" (203). As the discussion proceeds Socrates and Protarchus agree that the life of pleasure would not be desirable or possible without wisdom, nor could the life of wisdom exist without pleasure ; therefore, they conclude that a life which combines the two elements must always be superior to the life which excludes one or the other. However, they agree that this third, or combined life, cannot itself be the highest good because the highest good must be perfect in itself and not a mixture of several elements (236-239).

As Socrates continues to describe pleasure his definition becomes more like the definition which Thomas More finally offers in *Utopia*. Furthermore, Plato and More develop the structure of their arguments in much the same way in the *Utopia* and the *Philebus*, for both begin with the paradoxical assertion that pleasure may be the supreme good in life and then modify that statement so that what they first called "pleasure" comes to include both wisdom and reason. Finally, in both books the writers insist that pleasure which does not include these qualities does not produce enjoyment or true happiness.

Furthermore, in returning to the philosophical aspects of Socrates' description of the highest good one again sees a marked expansion of the parallel developing between the ideas of the two writers, More and Plato. Now Socrates adds that, although the combined life of the mind and pleasure is superior to a life which excludes either, wisdom holds a more important place in the combination than does pleasure, for pleasure and

1. Ernst Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, trans. James P. Pettegrove (Austin : Univ. of Texas Press, 1953), p. 110.

2. Plato, *The Statesman, The Philebus, Ion*, trans. Harold N. Fowler and W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge, Massachusetts : Harvard Univ. Press, 1925), p. 203. Subsequent references to *The Philebus* will be from this edition and will appear in the text.

pain admit of degrees in contrast to mind, wisdom, and knowledge which possess the quality of unity and are not given to fragmentation (241-261). Socrates further supports his contention that wisdom is more important than pleasure by proving that the individual mind and soul derives from the universal mind and soul which is the cause that orders and arranges life (267). And in the process of the arguments he points out that no "clever man" denies that the world is so ordered by a rational mind (261-269). Thus, Socrates' argument is developing a marked similarity to the philosophy in the *Utopia* which ranks the pleasures in a hierarchy with mental and spiritual happiness above the physical pleasures and insists that all rational people, or as Socrates' says, "clever men," realize that the world is ordered and governed by divine providence.¹

But Socrates is not satisfied merely to rank the pleasures men enjoy. He is anxious to show once and for all what constitutes the "most adorable life" or the life from which man can derive the most joy (379-381). In this, also, he is like the Utopians whose "principal and chief debate is in what thing or things, one or more, they are to hold that happiness consists" (161). Thus far Socrates and Protarchus have only agreed that the life composed of wisdom and pleasure is superior to a life which excludes either and that wisdom's part in producing the good life is greater than pleasure's. Now Socrates asks if something more is needed to define the highest good (181). He begins by asking whether the good life, which includes all kinds of knowledge, should likewise include all kinds of pleasure and answers his own questions with a passage which is highly reminiscent of the descriptions of true and false pleasure in *Utopia*. He says that the best life will not include the intense physical pleasures because they destroy not only the good life but life itself and adds :

But the true and pure pleasures, of which you spoke, you must consider almost our own by nature, and also those which are united with health and self-restraint, and furthermore all those which are handmaids of virtue in general and follow everywhere in its train as if it were a god, -- add these to the mixture ; but as for the pleasures which follow after folly and all baseness, it would be very senseless for anyone who desires to discover the most beautiful and most restful mixture or compound, and to try to learn which of its elements is good in man and the universe and what we should divine its nature to be, to mix these with mind (387).

Now, significantly Protarchus and Socrates agree that measure and proportion are necessary if one is to achieve an appropriate mixture of pleasure and wisdom. Socrates says that measure and proportion partake of the qualities of beauty and virtue and truth and adds that beauty, truth,

1. Thomas More, *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, ed. Edward L. Surtz, S. J. and Jack H. Hexter (New Haven and London : Yale Univ. Press, 1965), IV, 175-177, 221. Subsequent references to *The Utopia* will be from this edition and will appear in the text.

and measure are the elements necessary to the knowledge of the highest good. Again he and Protarchus agree that these elements are more akin to mind than to pleasure. They conclude, however, that the most important of these elements is measure, or moderation, which is necessary to govern all the others if they are not to be an incoherent "jumble" (393-397). Thus, like More, Plato concludes that the good life includes pleasure and wisdom, that mind is more necessary to the good life than sheer pleasure, and that if life is to be truly pleasant and good, it must be governed by what More calls reason and what Socrates calls measure or moderation. Furthermore, both writers insist that anyone in his right mind will admit that the world is ordered and governed by divine providence.

It has become obvious that the structural and philosophical development of the argument in the *Philebus* corresponds closely to the development of the philosophy of pleasure in the *Utopia*. The scope of this similarity coupled with the pervasiveness of the Platonic influence in the whole of the *Utopia* makes it unlikely that the similarity is coincidental. However, the striking similarity between the details of Socrates' description of the nature of pleasure itself and the Utopian concept of pleasure constitutes an even more convincing indication of More's indebtedness to the *Philebus*. Indeed, Socrates begins his discussion of the nature of pleasure by indicating several elements which will become increasingly important to his philosophy of pleasure and will reveal its remarkable similarity to More's. He first insists upon the mixed nature of such physical pleasures as drinking and eating, which are always accompanied by the pains of thirst and hunger which they replace. Then he adds that there are other superior kinds of pleasure, those of the soul, which are unmixed with pain. It is important to the comparison of the two works to note that at this point Socrates allies the pleasures of the soul with the qualities of memory and recollection.

Now assume within the soul itself the anticipation of these conditions [pleasant sensations], the sweet and cheering hope of pleasant things to come, the fearful and woful expectation of painful things to come (275).

Socrates' division between the mixed pleasures and the superior spiritual ones tallies with More's. Like More, too, he emphasizes the importance of memory to the realization of the spiritual pleasures. Of the Utopians Hythlodæus says :

To the soul they ascribe intelligence and the sweetness which is bred of contemplation of truth. To these two are joined the pleasant recollection of a well-spent life and the sure hope of happiness to come (173).

Both writers clearly state that the enjoyment of the spiritual and mental pleasures depends upon the quality of recollection in the soul. Furthermore, the belief of the Utopians in the spiritual pleasures of recollection shows in the way they put their convictions into practice :

But to deprive others of their pleasure to secure your own, this

is surely an injustice. On the contrary, to take away something from yourself and to give it to others is a duty of humanity and kindness which never takes away as much advantage as it brings back. It is compensated by the return of benefits as well as by the actual consciousness of the good deed. Remembrance of the love and good will of those whom you have benefited gives the mind a greater amount of pleasure than the bodily pleasure which you have forgone would have afforded. Finally - and religion easily brings this home to a mind which readily assents - God repays, in place of a brief and tiny pleasure, immense and never-ending gladness (165-167).

Here More expresses the two elements in Utopian philosophy which involve recollection : the foregoing of physical pleasure for the superior pleasures of the soul ; the foregoing of a present pleasure for a greater one in the future. Obviously, the Utopian notion that the superior pleasures depend upon the spiritual quality of recollection is reminiscent of the ideas concerning memory and recollection in the *Philebus*.

After establishing that the pleasures of the soul are plainly dependent upon the quality of recollection, Socrates goes on to define the nature and origin of desire (283). Like More, as we have seen, he begins with a dichotomy (291) : Pleasures, he says, are considered good or bad according to man's opinion. An inaccurate opinion will make him value a false pleasure (293-295) ; if he evaluates accurately, the pleasure is true. Thus, because of faulty judgment one may even come to consider pain to be pleasure or pleasure to be pain. Likewise, he may judge inferior pleasures to be superior and superior pleasures to be inferior. Indeed, the soul can come to the point where it completely confuses pain and pleasure and thinks one is the other. Thus a false pleasure is one which is held to be more or less valuable than it, in truth, is (299-301). In such cases, there is nothing wrong with the pleasure ; the fault lies with the opinion which holds an unpleasant thing to be pleasant. Therefore a false pleasure is not a pleasure at all but something that is mistakenly thought to be one (307).

The resemblance between More and Plato on this count is striking. And in both the *Utopia* and the *Philebus* the distinction between true and false pleasures is important to the development of a philosophy of pleasure and virtue. After More has firmly established the idea that the Utopians seek all pleasures which they think can cause no harm nor lead to greater pain, he goes to great length to describe false pleasures, which even the admirable Utopians have been known to indulge. His definition of false pleasure obviously depends, like Socrates', upon the contention that some people are ignorant of the nature of pleasure itself :

The reason is that they possess the minds of persons in whom they have once become deep-seated with a false idea of pleasure so that no room is left anywhere for true and genuine delights. In fact, very many are the things which, though of their own nature they contain no sweetness, nay, a good part of them very much bitterness, still

are, through the perverse attraction of evil desires, not only regarded as the highest pleasures but also counted among the chief reasons that make life worth living (167).

Hythlodæus' "false idea of pleasure" is synonymous with Socrates' "false opinion" of pleasure (295) : the difference is a matter of translation.

The *Utopia* gives specific examples of the kinds of things which men consider to be pleasurable because of "false opinion" and it explains why such opinions lack reality. Those who think they are superior to others because their coats are better are wrong on two counts ; the "better" coat keeps them no warmer and in no way makes them better people. Therefore the pleasure such people derive from faulty opinion is false, or unreal, pleasure. They think they enjoy pleasure when, in fact, they do not. Similarly the "pleasures" of foolish honors, meaningless nobility, superfluous wealth, and the ownership of gems and jewels are proved to be false : such worthless things make the owner no happier or better. Likewise dicing and hunting provide only an illusion of pleasure (169-171). Of all false pleasures More says :

Although the mob of mortals regards these and all similar pursuits -- and they are countless -- as pleasures, yet the Utopians positively hold them to have nothing to do with true pleasure since there is nothing sweet in them by nature (171).

The enjoyment does not arise from the nature of the thing itself but from their own perverse habit. The later failing makes them take what is bitter for sweet, just as pregnant women by their vitiated taste suppose pitch and tallow sweeter than honey. Yet it is impossible for any man's judgment, depraved either by disease or by habit, to change the nature of pleasure any more than that of anything else (173).

Thus, as Plato points out in the *Philebus*, while the essence of pleasure never alters, opinion about pleasure can be true or false :

SOC. And certainly pleasure often seems to come to us in connexion with false, not true, opinion.

PRO. Of course it does ; and in such a case, Socrates, we call the opinion false ; but nobody would ever call the actual pleasure false (295).

As we have seen, the idea of pleasure is the same in the *Philebus* and the *Utopia*. Both philosophies give the pleasures of the soul aided by recollection superiority over the pleasures of the body, and both insist that evil pleasures are the result of a faulty knowledge of the nature of pleasure. The two books reveal a further similarity in their analysis of purely physical pleasures, which Socrates says appear more or less intense in comparison to their opposites which always accompany them (311). For Socrates such pleasures are always intense because of the excitement of fluctuating pain and pleasure, but they are also inferior as pleasure, because they are mixed with pain. If the predominant feeling were

pleasure, then the happiest people would be those who were constantly in the process of alleviating the greatest needs and pains (321-325) :

For instance, the relief of the itch and the like by scratching, no other treatment being required. For in Heaven's name what shall we say the feeling is which we have in this case ? Is it pleasure or pain ? (325)

And it makes him say of himself, and others say of him, that he is pleased to death with these delights, and the more unrestrained and foolish he is, the more he always gives himself up to the pursuit of these pleasures ; he calls them the greatest of all things and counts that man the happiest who lives most entirely in the enjoyment of them (329).

Hythlodæus on this point merely echoes Socrates. In fact, the logic of the two arguments, as well as the wit and language used are so strikingly similar that More's debt to the *Philebus* becomes obvious. Although some aspects of the same argument appear in the *Republic*, the language and style in the *Utopia* are much more reminiscent of the *Philebus* than of the *Republic*.

Although the Utopians accept the satisfaction of physical desires as real pleasure, it is a lowly kind of pleasure that is valued mainly because it preserves health. More describes a person dominated by such desires with an irony and detail that resembles Socrates' speech :

If a person thinks that his felicity consists in this kind of pleasure, he must admit that he will be in the greatest happiness if his lot happens to be a life which is spent in perpetual hunger, thirst, itching, eating, drinking, scratching, and rubbing. Who does not see that such a life is not only disgusting but wretched ? These pleasures are surely the lowest of all as being most adulterated, for they never occur unless they are coupled with the pains which are their opposites (177).

Note that for the Utopians the mixed physical pleasures are real though limited (177), whereas Socrates places them among the false pleasures which appear to be pleasant but, in fact, are "merely surcease from pain" (343). Yet More and Plato acknowledge in a similar way the validity of such physical pleasures as are unmixed with pain. Socrates includes among such pleasures those arising from

odours and sounds, in short all those the want of which is unfelt and painless, whereas the satisfaction furnished by them is felt by the senses, pleasant, and unmixed with pain (343).

He also includes certain kinds of beauty in this class and says that they are not relative like the mixed pleasures, but

they are always absolutely beautiful by nature and have peculiar pleasures in no way subject to comparison with the pleasures of scratching (345).

The beauty of certain colours and sounds belong in this class of pleasures along with the sensation of smell. Although he holds the sense of smell to be less divine, he includes it too among the true or unmixed physical pleasures.

Finally and ironically, Socrates adds the pleasures of knowledge to the list of physical pleasures which are enjoyable because they are unmixed with pain. At this point in the *Philebus*, Socrates seems to be describing a pleasure which is intermediate between the pleasures of the body and the pleasures of the soul for the purpose of emphasizing again the all-important role which reason and moderation play in determining the nature of the true pleasures (345-347). This insistence upon the control of pleasure by reason is of course very close to the Utopian philosophy (163).

Likewise, the Utopians acknowledge a class of physical pleasures which are not mixed with pain; these clearly correspond to Plato's unmixed physical pleasures:

Now and then, however, pleasure arises, not in process of restoring anything that our members lack, nor in process of eliminating anything that causes distress, but from something that tickles and affects our senses with a secret but remarkable moving force and so draws them to itself. Such is that pleasure which is engendered by music (173).

Among these pleasant and harmless seasonings of life the Utopians include the appreciation of "beauty, strength, and nimbleness" and all "those pleasures entering by the ears, eyes, or nostrils" (177). The parallel between the two sets of examples we have quoted is obvious.

The Utopians, however, consider the pleasure of good health to be far superior even to the unmixed physical pleasures, whereas Socrates does not include health in his hierarchy of pleasures. This constitutes a significant divergence between the philosophies of pleasure as they appear in the *Philebus* and the *Utopia*. In *Utopia* health, a positive sensation which "gives delight of itself", is the "foundation and basis of all pleasures." The Utopians, in fact, strongly object to the idea that bodily health is a passive state which is not enjoyable because it cannot be sensed. For them it is a perceptible pleasure without which there can be no other pleasure (173-175). Consequently, it is the highest of all the physical pleasures.

More may be directly contradicting the *Philebus* when he writes of the Utopians:

They long ago rejected the position of those who held that a state of stable and tranquil health (for this question, too, has been actively discussed among them) was not to be counted as a pleasure because its presence, they said, could not be felt except through some motion from without (175).

Indeed, in both the *Philebus* (317) and the *Republic*,¹ Plato insists that there is a state of rest between pleasure and pain which cannot be

1. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (New York and London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941), pp. 309-310.

sensed because it involves no motion; therefore, for Plato, freedom from pain cannot be a pleasure. In other contexts, however, Plato does acknowledge the importance of good health to happiness. In the *Republic* he asserts that the healthy body is essential to the healthy soul.¹ Earlier in the book he describes the pleasure of health in a hierarchy which closely parallels the Utopian hierarchy of pleasures,² ranking the good in this order: harmless physical pleasures, health, spiritual goods. In the *Gorgias* too he repeats that without health there is no pleasure.³

Thus, although the Utopian philosophy of pleasure contradicts Socrates' contention that pleasure must be accompanied by motion, other ideas concerning the value of health in the *Utopia* can be traced to Plato's dialogues.

Apart from health, which is not treated as a pleasure in the *Philebus*, virtually every other important aspect of the philosophy of the highest good in that dialogue shows similarity to the philosophy of pleasure in the *Utopia*. Particularly striking are the similarities between their respective analyses of false opinion and false pleasure, and between the humorous description in both books of the kind of person who values too much the mixed physical pleasures.

1. Plato, *The Republic*, p. 319.

2. Plato, *The Republic*, p. 42.

3. Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. W.C. Helmbold (Indianapolis and New York: the Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1952), p. 79.

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Douglas Bush, *Moreana*, October 1965.

"THE ELABORATE SCOPE OF THE WORK AND THE NAMES OF ITS EDITORS GUARANTEE THAT THIS IS THE TEXT, TRANSLATION, INTERPRETATION, AND COMMENTARY ON WHICH FUTURE CRITICS AND HISTORIANS OF IDEAS MUST RELY; IT NOT ONLY SUPERSEDES BUT DWARFS ALL PREVIOUS EDITIONS."

Times Literary Supplement, August 4, 1966.

"IT IS AN IMMENSE WORK OF PAINSTAKING ERUDITION, AND WILL UNDOUBTEDLY BE THE STANDARD TEXT FOR THIS GENERATION".

Patricia Thomson, *Notes and Queries*, February 1966.

"In fact, there is no need for apologies. The notes, largely Father Surtz's work, are not a fault on the right side because they are not a fault at all. They cater for the needs of a variety of students with a variety of interests. Everyone will not consult every note with equal zeal, but, according to his research, will select from the mass."

Siquidem cum tuus censeat Plato respublicas ita demum futuras esse felices, si aut regnent philosophi, aut reges philosophentur, quam procul aberit felicitas, si philosophi regibus nec dignentur saltem suum impartiri consilium? (86/10f)

"Your favorite author, Plato, is of opinion that commonwealths will finally be happy only if either philosophers become kings or kings turn to philosophy. What a distant prospect of happiness there will be if philosophers will not condescend even to impart their counsel to kings!" (87/11f)

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Quis intentius mutationi rerum studet, quam cui minime placet praesens vitae status? Aut cui denique audacior impetus ad conturbanda omnia, spe alicunde lucrandi, quam cui iam nihil est quod possit perdere? (94/18f)

"Who is more eager for revolution than he who is discontented with his present state of life? Who is more reckless in the endeavor to upset everything, in the hope of getting profit from some source or other, than he who has nothing to lose?" (95/22f)

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Non ideo ... in tempestate navis destituenda est, quoniam ventos inhibere non possis. (98/27f)

"You must not abandon the ship in a storm because you cannot control the winds." (99/34-35)

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Quod in bonum nequis uertere, efficias saltem, ut sit quam minime malum. (100/1f)

"What you cannot turn to good you must as least make as little bad as you can." (101/1-2)

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Quorum peruersa consuetudine uel deprauaberis, uel ipse integer atque innocens, alienae malitiae, stultitiaeque praetexeris. (102/10f)

"By their evil companionship, either you will be seduced yourself or, keeping your integrity and innocence, you will be made a screen for the wickedness and folly of others." (103/11f)

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... quum illi sint rapaces, improbi atque inutiles, contra hi modesti uiri, ac simplices, & cotidiana industria, in publicum quam in semet benigniores. (104/13f)

"The rich are greedy, unscrupulous, and useless, while the poor are well-behaved, simple, and by their daily industry more beneficial to the commonwealth than to themselves." (105/15f)

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