

## AP Euro – Ch 12 Humanism: Sir Thomas More excerpts [Source: Renaissance Writers, Robert Freeman, 2013]

Thomas More (1478-1535) was born in London, England. He learned Latin at St. Anthony's School. At age 14, More went to Oxford, where he studied Greek. His father then sent More to London to study law. More distinguished himself in his studies and gave public lectures in theology and humanism, two reigning influences in his life. At that time, humanistic studies included grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy, requiring familiarity with all major Greek and Latin authors. More probably wrote *Utopia*—which in Greek means “no place”—in 1515. In it, he set out arguments against abuses of power and for tolerance of different religious creeds. However, the reforming tendencies expressed in the work left More at odds with Henry VIII. More refused to recognize the king's justification for his divorce and remarriage but, recognizing the king was set in his course, decided to retire. Unfortunately, he was too prominent to be able to disappear from public life. In declining an invitation to the king's wedding to Anne Boleyn, he took a step that ultimately led to his execution. In Book 1 of *Utopia*, More meets his friend Peter Gilles in Antwerp and is introduced to an explorer named Raphael Hythlodoy. More is immediately impressed by Hythlodoy's breadth of experience and learning, and urges that he offer his services as counsel to a prince or king. Hythlodoy responds that his ideas would be laughed out of court, and proceeds to demonstrate this. Asked by More where these ideas came to him, Hythlodoy identifies the island of Utopia which he describes in Book 2. More's impeccable moral character, his experience in high administrative office and in courts of law, and his extensive learning in the humanities combined to produce a work of unique and enduring value. The following extracts are taken from both books. Extracts from Book 2 start at the section on the Utopian six-hour working day.

### The Futility of Counseling Kings

More: I perceive, Raphael that you neither desire wealth nor greatness; and indeed I value and admire such a man. Yet I think what would well become so generous and philosophical a soul as yours would be to apply your time and thoughts to public affairs.

Hythloday: You are doubly mistaken, sir, both in your opinion of me, and in the judgment you make of the affairs of government. I do not have that capacity that you fancy I have. Even if I did, the public would not be one jot the better if I sacrificed my peace and quiet to serve it. This is because rather than apply themselves to the useful arts of peace, most princes prefer to apply themselves to military affairs. In these I neither have any knowledge nor do I much desire it. Princes are generally more set on acquiring new kingdoms, rightly or wrongly, than on governing well those they possess. And if they do seek any advice, it is only from the prince's personal favorites, from the flatterers and flatterers. Now if in such a court—made up of persons who envy all others and only admire themselves—a person should go so far as to propose anything that he had either read in history or observed in his travels, the rest of the court would think that their own reputation for wisdom would sink and that their own interest would suffer if they could not disparage it. I have met these proud, morose, people in many places, once even in England.

### Against the Death Penalty for Theft

Hythloday: One day when I was dining with him [John Morton] there happened to be at table an English layman knowledgeable in the laws of that country. He took occasion to commend highly the severity with which justice was executed upon thieves. These, he said, were hanged so fast that there were sometimes twenty on one gibbet. But he was amazed that with so few escaping punishment, there were still so many thieves about, robbing everywhere. 8 Renaissance Writers, © Robert Freeman 2013

Upon this, I was bold enough to speak freely that there was no reason at all to be surprised at this. Such a method of punishing thieves was neither just in itself nor good for the public. For no punishment, however severe, is able to restrain those from robbing who can find no other livelihood. In this, not only you in England, but a great part of the world, imitate bad schoolmasters who are ready to thrash their pupils rather than to teach them. It would be much better to provide every man some method of livelihood, and so preserve him from the fatal necessity of stealing and of dying for it. God has commanded us not to kill; so shall we kill so readily for a little money? We may argue that we may kill when the laws of the land allow it. Then upon the same grounds, laws may be made to allow rape, adultery and

perjury. God has taken from us the right of disposing either of our own or of other people's lives. If it is pretended that mutual consent between men can make laws to authorize manslaughter in cases where God has given us no example, this frees people from the obligation of the divine law and so makes murder a lawful action. What is this but to give a preference to human laws over the divine? It is for these reasons that I think putting thieves to death is not lawful.

### Alternative Forms of Punishment

Hythloday: As to the question of a more suitable form of punishment, I think it is much easier to find one than to invent anything that is worse. Why should we reject the method of punishment that was so long in use among the ancient Romans, who understood so well the arts of government? They condemned those found guilty of great crimes to work their whole lives in shackles in quarries or mines. But the method that I like best, I observed in my travels in Persia, among the Polyartes, who are a considerable and well-governed people. . . Those that are found guilty of theft among them are made to make restitution to the owner. If that which was stolen no longer exists, then the goods of the thieves are valued, and restitution is made out of them. The remainder of their goods are given to their wives and children, and they themselves are condemned to serve in the public works. However, they are neither imprisoned, nor chained, unless there happened to be some extraordinary circumstances in their crimes. They are fed out of public resources, although this is done differently in different places.

### Against War

More: You might, by the advice which it is in your power to give, do a great deal of good for mankind. This in itself is the chief goal that every good man ought to pursue; for your friend Plato thinks that nations will be happy when either philosophers become kings or kings become philosophers. It is no wonder if we are so far from that happiness while philosophers will not think it their duty to assist kings with their council.

Hythloday: Suppose I were with the King of France and called into his inner council. There, several counselors with his ear are proposing many schemes, as to how Milan may be kept, and Naples. How the Venetians, and after them the rest of Italy, might be subdued. And then how Flanders, Brabant, and all Burgundy, might be added to his empire. One proposes an alliance with the Venetians, to be kept as long as he finds it profitable. Another 9 Renaissance Writers, © Robert Freeman 2013 proposes hiring German mercenaries, another paying off the Swissers. Another proposes gaining an alliance with the Emperor with money, which is omnipotent with him. Another proposes a peace with the King of Aragon and, in order to cement it, the yielding up the King of Navarre's territories. Another thinks the Prince of Castile is to be brought over, by the hope of an alliance, or perhaps, bribes. . . Now, suppose I advised the king to let Italy alone, and stay at home, because the Kingdom of France is already larger than can be well governed by one man, and therefore he ought not to think of adding other kingdoms to it. . . that the king should improve his ancient kingdom all he could, and make it flourish as much as possible; that he should love his people, and be beloved of them; that he should live among them, govern them gently, and let other kingdoms alone, since that which had fallen to his share was big enough, if not too big for him. Pray how do you think would such a speech as this would be heard?

More: I admit I think it would not go over very well.

### Against Private Property

Hythloday: To make clear my real concern, I must openly admit that as long as private property exists, and while money is the standard of all other things, I cannot see how a nation can be governed either justly or with good results. It will not be governed justly because the best things will fall to the share of the worst men. And the results will be bad because everything will be divided among a few, the rest being left to be miserable. Therefore I reflect on the wise and good constitution of the Utopians, among whom all things are so well governed, and with so few laws; where virtue has its due reward, and yet there is such an equality that every man lives in plenty. When I balance all these things in my thoughts, I grow more favorable to Plato, and I am not surprised that he resolved not to draw up any laws for people who would not submit to a sharing of all things. Such a wise man could not but foresee that no nation could be made happy so long as there was private property. For when every man clutches to himself all that he can grab, by one title or another, it must needs follow that however rich a nation may be, a few dividing the wealth of it among themselves must



cause the rest fall into poverty. From this I am persuaded that till property is taken away there can be no equitable or just distribution of things. Nor can the world be happily governed. For as long as private property is maintained, the greatest and by far the best part of mankind will be still oppressed with a burden of cares and anxieties. Nor can the body politic be made to function well again, as long as private property remains.

More: On the contrary, it seems to me that men cannot live well where all things are common: how can there be any plenty where every man will excuse himself from labor? For as the hope of gain is not there to excite him, so the confidence that he has in other men's industry may make him slothful. If people come to be distressed with need and yet cannot sell off anything as their own, what can follow upon this but perpetual sedition and bloodshed, especially when the reverence and authority due to magistrates falls to the 10 Renaissance Writers, © Robert Freeman 2013 ground? After all, I cannot imagine how authority can be maintained among those that are equal to one another in all things.

### Why Other Nations are not so Productive

Hythloday: You might imagine that since there are only six hours appointed for work, Utopians may experience a scarcity of the necessities of life. But this is far from being true. This time is not only sufficient for supplying them with plenty of all things, either necessary or convenient, it is rather too much. You will easily see this, if you consider how a great portion of the population all other nations is idle. First, women who are half of mankind, generally do little. Even if some few women are diligent, their husbands are idle. Then consider the great number of idle priests. Add to these all rich men, chiefly those that have landed estates, who are called noblemen and gentlemen, together with their dependents, idle persons kept more for show than use. Add to these all those strong and lusty beggars who go about pretending some disease as excuse for their begging. With a full accounting, you will find that the number who carry out the labors of mankind is much less than you perhaps imagined. On the other hand, if those who work were employed only in such practical things as a natural life requires, there would be an abundance of useful products.

### Moral Philosophy—Happiness

Hythloday: As far as moral philosophy is concerned, they discuss the same things as we do. They investigate what it is proper to refer to as good, both for the body and the mind. They discuss whether any outward thing can be truly called good, or if that term belongs only to the properties of the soul. They inquire in a similar way into the nature of virtue and pleasure. However, their chief discussion is about the happiness of a man and what it consists of—whether found in some one thing, or in a great many. Yet they do not place happiness in all sorts of pleasures, but only in those that in themselves are good and honest. There is a group among them that places happiness in virtue itself; others think that our natures are conducted to happiness by exercise of virtue, as that is the chief good in man. They define virtue as living according to nature, and think that we are made by God for that end. They believe, then, that a man follows the dictates of nature when he pursues or avoids things according to the direction of reason.

### False Notions of Pleasure

Hythloday: There are many things that in themselves have nothing that is truly delightful. On the contrary, they have a good deal of bitterness in them. Yet from our perverse appetites, they are not only ranked among the pleasures, but are made even the greatest designs of life. Among those who pursue these sophisticated pleasures, they include those I mentioned, who think themselves really the better for having fine clothes. In this they are considered to be doubly mistaken, both in the opinion that they have of their clothes, and in that they have of themselves. Because, if you consider what clothes are used for, why should a fine thread be thought better than a coarse one? And yet these men, as if they possessed some real advantage rather than the personal fantasy they indulge in, look big, seem to fancy themselves to be more valuable, and imagine that a respect is due to them for the sake of a rich garment—a respect to which they would not have pretended if they had been more meanly clothed. They even take it as an affront if that respect is not paid them.

### Concern for the Public Good

Hythloday: In the next place, we should consider ourselves bound by the ties of good nature and humanity to do our utmost to help forward the happiness of all others. That is, there is no virtue more proper and peculiar to our nature than to ease the miseries of others, to free them from trouble and anxiety, and to furnish them with the essential comforts of life. And from this they infer that if a man ought to advance the welfare and comfort of the rest of mankind in this way, nature dictates that he should do all this for himself.

### Pleasure and Happiness

Hythloday: They regard it as pious to prefer the public good to one's private concerns; but they think it unjust for a man to seek for pleasure by snatching another man's pleasures. On the contrary, they think it a sign of a gentle and good soul for a man to dispense with his own advantage for the good of others. By this means a good man derives as much pleasure in one way as he parts with it in another. For he may expect similar treatment from others when he may come to need it. And if that should not occur, yet the sense of a good action, and the reflections that he makes on the love and gratitude of those whom he has so obliged, gives his mind more pleasure than the body could have found in what it gave up.

### Religious Tolerance

Hythloday: Those among them that have not received our religion, are not disturbed by it. They also do not ill-treat anyone who converts to it. In fact, all the time I was there, only one man was punished in regards to this matter. In spite of all that we could tell him to the contrary, when he was newly baptized he engaged in public disputes concerning the Christian religion with more zeal than discretion. He did this with so much heat, that he not only praised Christian worship over theirs, but also condemned all of their rites as profane. He harangued all that adhered to them as impious and sacrilegious persons, damned to everlasting hell fire. Upon his having frequently preached in this manner, he was seized and after trial he was condemned to banishment. This was not for having disparaged their religion, but for his inflaming the people to sedition.

### More's Concluding Remarks

More: When Raphael came to the end of his narrative many things occurred to me. What chiefly seemed strange was the foundation of things: their sharing all things without the use of money, which by common opinion would take away the true ornaments of a nation—all nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty. However, I remembered, that he had observed there were some who seemed to think they were bound in honor to protect their own ideas by finding something to deny in other men's inventions, when these differed from their own. Therefore, taking him by the hand, I led him in to supper and said I would find some other time to examine the subject more closely, and to discuss it in detail. And indeed I shall welcome an opportunity of doing so. In the meanwhile, though I must be confessed that he is both a very learned man and a person who has obtained a great knowledge of the world, I cannot perfectly agree to everything he has described. However, there are many things in the Commonwealth of Utopia that I rather wish, than hope, to see followed in our governments.