

Thomas more's slavery in utopia

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Slavery in Utopia

Since the beginnings of civilization, humans have searched for a just and effective way to penalize those that break the laws of society and to deter people from breaking them in the first place. In Sir Thomas More's Utopia, the Utopian society penalizes the most serious transgressions with enslavement. This form of penalty is viewed as more just and effective in punishing for crimes committed and deterring people from committing them in the first place.

The slaves of Utopia are enslaved for a just reason, they "are not people who have been capture in battle" (More 127) and the "children of slaves are not born into slavery" (More 127). In Utopia, "slaves are either people who have been condemned to slavery because of some dreadful crime they have committed in Utopia, or else people who have committed crimes in foreign cities and been condemned to death" (More 127). Granted, what exactly constitutes a 'dreadful crime' is not exactly defined by Raphael Hythloday—however, he does give a few examples. One crime for which a person would be enslaved is if "anyone who leaves their own territory for reasons of their own, and is caught traveling without the governor's passport...is brought back...and is severely punished. If they dare do it again, they are condemned to slavery" (More 108). Another situation is "those who fail to remain faithful to their spouses are punished with the strictest form of slavery" (More 130). There is a third form of 'slavery' in Utopia which amounts to indentured servitude. These are people that, of their own free will, submit themselves to unfree labor but are "decently treated, living lives almost as good as the

citizens themselves” (More 128). The people who are enslaved by Utopians are people who had a choice in whether they were to be enslaved or not, either they chose to commit a crime for which they were penalized by enslavement or they voluntarily submitted themselves to unfree labor.

Slavery is considered just in Utopia because it is very effective in penalizing and deterring crime. “ Generally seriously offenses are punished with slavery, for they think this deters potential offenders as effectively as would the death penalty, and society benefits more than it would if they were in a hurry to do away with the guilty. For if they live, the community benefits from their labor, and at the same time they are continuing reminder to others who might be tempted to follow in their footsteps” (More 131). Also, by enslaving those that “ have committed crimes in foreign cities and been condemned to death” (More 127) they save the criminal’s life from the death penalty. Moreover, by not killing a person through capital punishment, slaves are given a chance to redeem themselves for “ if their behavior suggests that they regret their evil deeds even more than they dislike their punishment, their servitude will be lightened or brought to an end” (More 131). The ability to change the magnitude of the punishment depending on the severity of the crime and its circumstances is not possible with the death penalty.

The tasks done by slaves in Utopia are those tasks which are labor-intensive, require little skill, and/or those that normal Utopians would find to be beneath them. Slaves are the most logical source of labor for the toughest, riskiest, and dirtiest work that needs to be done. Hythloday specifies a few

examples of these tasks, such as slaughtering and butchering meat because “[the Utopians] do not want their citizens to become hardened to the butchering of animals. For engaging in such activities, they believe, slowly destroys our capacity for compassion, which more than any other sentiment is the one that distinguishes human beings from other animals” (More 104). Another example of the task assigned to slaves is assisting travelers between cities where they “drive the oxen and takes care of [the travelers’] needs” (More 107). A final example is “in the assembly rooms all the especially dirty or heavy tasks are done by male slaves” (More 105). The Utopians assign this sort of work not only because it is morally hardening and labor intensive but also because “they are also concerned with ensuring that nothing dirty or filthy is brought into the city for fear that the stench of putrefaction will corrupt the air people breathe and spread diseases” (More 104). That being said, the Utopians treat their slaves justly.

As the severity of a slave’s slavery is determined by judging the entire situation—each slave is treated in a manner appropriate circumstances surrounding their enslavement. Those that are enslaved through indentured servitude are “decently treated, living lives almost as good as the citizens themselves except that they are expected to do a little bit of extra work, since they’re accustomed to it. They are free to leave if they choose, which they rarely do, despite the fact they receive a payment on their departure” (More 128). While slaves “who have been convicted of some disgraceful act are required to wear gold rings in their ears, gold rings on their fingers, gold chains around their necks, and even gold headbands” (More 111) so that everyone knows who they are and what they have done. For the slaves that

committed the worst crimes, Utopians have them “ work without respite and are always chained” (More 127). “ Utopians subject their own citizens to the harshest regime, as they believe they are more at fault, and deserving of greater punishment, for despite having received an absolutely first-rate moral education, it has still proved impossible to prevent them from turning to crime” (More 127-128) however even they are given a chance to lighten their servitude and/or bring it to the end.

In searching for a way to penalize wrong doing, the most important objectives are for the punishment to be just and for it to be rehabilitative in nature—to make right what was wronged. The Utopians believe that their system of slavery accomplishes those objectives. Crime is punished accordingly, a deterrent is set against other people committing the same crime, those who have been victimized by the crime are given reparations through the labor of the slaves for the community, and society as a whole has a chance to improve if a slave repents and is rehabilitated.