

An idealist on utopia: the perfection of perfection



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A man named Nonsenso begins any debate at a disadvantage. What kind of information or argument can be expected of such an individual? Can he articulate a rational idea, deduce a logical conclusion? Is the authority of his discourse to be trusted? Or is he simply a man with a name and a nature that are in perfect agreement? These are all questions which Thomas More leaves us to ask of Raphael Nonsenso, the garrulous sailor-philosopher who describes and extols Utopia in the book of the same name. From his memories of a five year stay on the island, Raphael conjures up a thorough description of the social and political practices constituting the Utopian way of life, which he unabashedly proclaims “ the happiest basis for a civilized community which will last for ever.” The details of his speech are astounding and the extent of his knowledge staggering; he vividly describes everything from their wardrobes to their war tactics. It is a dazzling recounting, replete with all the details of fact and unburdened by the vague generalities of the imagination. And yet, at the end of the speech, More confesses to harboring “ various objections.” He does not call Raphael a liar, for to do so would be to call him a genius, as any man who could create such an enormous (and spontaneous) fiction must be. Indeed, More acknowledges Raphael’s “ undoubted learning and experience” while still insisting that Utopia seemed “ in many cases perfectly ridiculous.” Could it really be nonsense, albeit clever nonsense, after all? The answer seems to be yes, at least in part. The first glimpse we get of Raphael is of a stranger and probably (More postulates) a sailor. Giles soon joins More, indicating Raphael as a friend and confirming that he is a sailor, but a rather extraordinary one at that. He is, according to Giles, “ really more like Ulysses or even Plato.” This is an ambiguous compliment at best. Ulysses, the great hero of Homer’s

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Odyssey, is not only a globe trotter but also a crafty rhetorician, a persuader, and, to some degree, a manipulator (the Greek word for these traits is *tekhnos*). Plato, of course, wrote his philosophy in dialogues, emphasizing rhetorical skill along with logic and reason. The reference to Plato also reminds the reader of that original Utopia, *The Republic*. Immediately, then, More (the author, not the character) associates Raphael with two great “talkers,” known not so much for being honest as for being convincing. He also associates Raphael with two Greeks. More calculates the comparison precisely just moments later Giles proclaims that Nonsenso “is quite a scholar” and that he knows “a tremendous lot of Greek...because he’s mainly interested in the philosophy.” Latin, however, has never really appealed to him. Although the piquancy of this description loses some of its power in translation, More here clearly seems to contrast the Latin of the European Christian world (and of Utopia itself) with the Greek of antique, pagan culture. Latin is a language of action, public affairs, current events; Greek, on the other hand, lends itself to speculation, to thought, to dreamy theorizing. Implicitly, then, More’s own political discourse supercedes Raphael’s, since it best accommodates the political climate of their day. His skepticism about the sometimes “perfectly ridiculous” Utopia is perfectly in keeping with this view. While these comparisons with figures from antiquity help, the primary way Raphael Nonsenso’s character comes to be revealed is through the contrast between him and Thomas More. Beyond their Greek and Latin preferences, Nonsenso and More each maintain a fundamentally different political philosophy, as we see when Giles urges Nonsenso to obtain a court position and put his wisdom and experience to good use. Nonsenso disdains the idea of holding such a post and eschews the prospect of living

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and working “ among people who are deeply prejudiced against everyone else’s ideas.” More chides him for his reluctance, telling him: “ you’ve got so much theoretical knowledge, and so much practical experience, that either of them alone would be enough to make you an ideal member of any privy council.” Raphael remains impervious to their praise, though. Rather than acquiescing, he tells an anecdote about a debate on capital punishment he held with a celebrated lawyer while on a sojourn to England. By the end of his story, he thinks he has proven that philosophy falls on deaf ears when related to politicians. Instead, he receives another rebuke from More: “ there is a more civilized form of philosophy which knows the dramatic context, so to speak, tries to fit in with it, and plays an appropriate part in the current performance.” The “ dramatic context” of this particular exchange is the pitting of the pragmatic More against the idealistic Nonsenso. While the thought of giving excellent advice to inferior minds exasperates Raphael, More finds that it is the philosopher’s responsibility to make himself understood, to adapt his wisdom to his audience’s level of comprehension. “ Frankly,” he confesses to Nonsenso, “ I don’t see the point of giving advice you know they’ll never accept. What possible good could it do? How can they be expected to take in a totally unfamiliar line of thought, which goes against all their deepest prejudice?” This deftly undercuts Nonsenso’s criticism of European society: how will they ever improve if the wisest among them will not deign to give his advice unless guaranteed that it will be understood and implemented perfectly? If European politicians were so savvy and enlightened, they probably wouldn’t have so many problems in the first place! There is no doubt that both More and Nonsenso dislike a great many of the customs and laws of European society, but while More

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expresses willingness to accept compromises on the road to perfection, Nonsenso demands the ideal or else no improvement at all. An idealist who despises European convention, Raphael is a rather suspect source of information on Utopia. His political agenda threatens to overtake his factual account, as it indeed does at certain points in his narration. It is not really nonsense that he is dispensing, but rather strategic elaborations, additional details, and particular embellishments. No wonder More cannot overcome his suspicion that the description is, in the end, somewhat of a “ grand absurdity.” The narrative begins reliably, which is to say it begins apolitically. Raphael first gives a magnificent account of the geographical and topographical intricacies of Utopia. He moves naturally into urban planning, agriculture, live stock, labor, food preparation and other little mundane practices that any traveler would dutifully note upon encountering a new civilization. Even Raphael’s description of the communist organization of the society, though alien to the European perspective, does not begin unbelievably. It is perfectly plausible that a nation would implement such a system in hopes of eliminating social inequalities, crime (a cause of concern on the English mind, according to Nonsenso), and all the other difficulties that plague a monarchical government. But then come the inconsistencies, primary among them the strange mix of cultivation and philistinism which Raphael (obliviously) attributes to the Utopians. While they have a passion for gardening and attend edifying lectures each day, they find precious metals and gems quite disgusting and base. Raphael assures More and Giles that “ these raw materials of money get no more respect from anyone than their intrinsic value deserves which is obviously far less than iron.” They wear plain clothing, eat plain food they are, in short, Spartan in their

ornamentation, lacking (apparently) in all the visual arts. Nature and beauty have become synonymous and exclusively linked terms. Now, from whence comes this distaste for colorful, beautiful things except their associations with luxury and expense in a non-communistic society? There is no reason why the Utopians could not and would not value gold, silver, jewels and fine fabrics for purely aesthetic, not monetary, reasons. It seems, in fact, that it is quite inhuman not to appreciate such beauty; no one, after all, sees the world in such strictly utilitarian terms. In this regard, the behavior Raphael assigns to the Utopians cannot be taken as anything but an invented repudiation of European valuation. They carry on like a communist minority in a merchant economy. Raphael is similarly untrustworthy (and inconsistent) when discoursing on social practices. Euthanasia, he says, is encouraged in certain cases, though not enforced. Before marriage, the bride and groom-to-be examine each other naked to determine if their partner is physically sufficient. They believe in a single god and the immortality of the soul, but they tolerate other religious creeds. These practices shock, but because of the flexibility of the Utopians, they do not outright offend. That is, until you realize that there is always a caveat. In the case of Euthanasia, Nonsenso proclaims that it is optional, but his reproduction of a bullying speech that a priest would give to the terminally ill makes this declaration seem highly dubious. What kind of person would find much zest in life after being told “ you’re just a nuisance to other people and a burden to yourself” ? One can imagine, likewise, the effects of being rejected as an unsuitable specimen for marriage. As for religion, Raphael undermines his original explanation of Utopian tolerance with the addition of rather significant clause: there is religious freedom “ except [if] you believe

anything so incompatible with human dignity as the doctrine that the soul dies with the body, and the universe functions aimlessly, without any controlling providence.” It seems there are two possible explanations for these contradictions: either Raphael fabricates these practices himself or his description of them is tainted by his hearty approval; either he lies altogether or tries to soften the harshness of the Utopians to garner the approval of the Europeans. In either case, this is certainly not an objective representation of Utopian life or an ideal society. The problem with the social dynamic in a so-called perfect society is clear: it reduces to nothing more than an impossible quest to eliminate defects, an enforced system of eugenics. Much in keeping with this, there is a very ruthless (and not wholly coherent) aspect to Raphael’s description of Utopian domestic and foreign policy. Internal relations among Utopians are untroubled by jealousy, anger, violence, and the like. They respect each other as individuals and as a community, existing in a state of unmenaced harmony. Utopia’s relationship with the outside world, though, appears to be in constant upheaval. Although Raphael says that “ they hardly ever go to war, except in self-defense,” their military prowess is formidable. They are not so pacifistic as Raphael first hints, for just a moment or two later he notes that “ the Utopians are just as anxious to find wicked men to exploit as good men to employ.” It is rather puzzling that such a gentle, unworldly people would take on the responsibility of acting as the military and moral scourge of the international community. And even more confusing is Raphael’s assurance that the Utopians “ possess vast foreign assets for...a great many countries owe them money.” Assets? Money? Debt? Are they communists or are they not? While Nonsenso has no trouble imagining a Utopian communist nation in <https://assignbuster.com/an-idealist-on-utopia-the-perfection-of-perfection/>

isolation, he clearly struggles to come up with a sense of how such a country could function in the context of other, non-Utopian peoples. He resorts here to the kind of belligerent, patriotic rhetoric that belongs to the Empirical nations of Europe. Nonsenso's inability to articulate a plausible Utopian foreign policy ultimately demonstrates that his true-life account is more likely a hodge-podge of facts and fictions. Nonsenso may have an active, idealizing imagination, but his account of Utopia still contains some valuable truths. More himself says: " I freely admit that there are many features of the Utopian Republic which I should like though I hardly expect to see adopted in Europe." In a rather sly way, More ends Utopia with this statement, which is really a kind of provocation, a challenge to European nations to outdo what was either incompletely executed by the Utopians or sloppily imagined by Nonsenso. For More, the goal is not to imitate Utopia but to move beyond its deceptive prescriptions and achieve real improvement.