

Value of human life in utopian society



Value of Human Life in Utopian Society Sir Thomas More's depiction of a supposedly perfect society in Utopia portrays a quasi-socialist community that has grown under ideal conditions into a successful and working country. It is a society that is drastically different from any society in history, both in the past or present. While the principals of the society may be very similar to those espoused by communist doctrine, in practice they have worked out successfully which we know was not the case in the communist regimes of our time. Compared to Europe of More's day Utopia must have sounded like paradise to the common man, the majority of whom lived in horrible surroundings and under crushing poverty. However, when compared to modern society Utopia's (almost) complete lack of self-expression and individuality seems barbaric and dull. One of the most interesting facets of Utopia is the bizarre value placed on human life. In Utopia there is a curious emphasis placed on the lives of their citizens as a collective and, to a certain extent, as individuals. In the book it is talked about how the Utopians place far higher value on the lives of one of their citizens than they would on a foreign king. Though when it is said in the book it sounds as though this is out of regard for the people of Utopia, yet in many ways it represents more the contempt that the Utopians show for people of other nations (at times) and the importance placed on them as a collective. This disdain for other nations is shown a few times throughout the book such as during their discussion about the Zapoletes the mercenaries that the Utopians hire to fight their wars. This is also evident when Raphael is talking about one of the methods the Utopians used for gaining land when they wanted to start a colony, in which if the Utopians judge that the native people are not using their land to its fullest potential than declaring war is justified. Despite this

attitude shown towards non-citizens, the Utopians showed a remarkable care for human life over material possessions towards their own citizens. This lack of emphasis on the importance of material possessions comes from the fact that all goods are communal in Utopia. There is no money in Utopian life and the Utopian government goes to such an extent to portray gold and money as useless and futile they use their gold and silver (which they only keep for the event of war in order to pay off mercenaries and the bounties they place on enemy diplomats) to do things such as construct chains for prisoners. Their attitude on material possession and human wealth is well described at the beginning of Book II when Hythloday says, " They [the Utopians] are surprised that gold, a useless commodity in itself, is everywhere valued so highly that man himself, who for his own purposes conferred this value on it, is far less valuable." (P. 65; Cambridge Edition) This lack of material value represents at the same time one of the most importantly positive aspects of More's Utopian society as well as one of its biggest flaws. Without personal property it allows for all citizens to live in equal standing this extends even to princes and other rulers in Utopian society who are portrayed more as fatherly figures than overbearing rulers, and it is important to note that they themselves did not feel at all above the people. However, this lack of personal property combined with the strict restriction of free thought and action make it so that the society seems to devour the individual and leave only the collective conscience. There are brief glimpses at ways in which Utopians are able to express their individuality but they are few and far between (i. e. the possibility of choosing ones own job, intellectual pursuits, etc.) This complete lack of regard for human beings as individuals creates the single greatest flaw of More's Utopia. Often in Utopia humans seem to be

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treated more as interchangeable parts of a machine than individual sentient beings. This is perhaps most poignantly shown when discussing trades and household makeups. When discussing trades Raphael says the Utopians generally follow what their fathers did, but they have the choice of choosing another profession, however in this case the person in question is forced to move to a family who specializes in that profession. Another place where we see this pawn-like use of humans is when Raphael is describing the communities. If households or cities become too full (i. e. that city no longer has the exact amount of adults as the other cities) they just ship people off to fill other cities or houses and to make colonies. Often it seems like human beings are shoved aside as mere resources for the communal machine that is Utopia. Overall, More's Utopian society places a strange view on humanity and the importance placed on the community. At first glance there is seemingly an extreme value placed on human life from their insistence on social equality to their refusal to put their own people at risk. However this emphasis is skewed by their disregard for people who are not their own citizens and even some of their own citizens (most notably mentally challenged individuals), as well as the almost pawn-like way in which they use people to fit certain roles in the society. The seemingly perfect Utopia may lack violence, theft, and greed but at a terrible price to the individual conscience of the people in question. Bibliography More, Sir Thomas. Utopia. Cambridge University Press, 2002.