

# The edge of equality: the problem of more's utopia



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Even in present day, people are still striving toward equality, whether through equal pay for equal work initiatives, the Black Lives Matter movement, or anti-immigration protests. The world of Utopia, the idea of which was conceived several hundred years ago, incorporates communistic ideals to work toward a “ perfect” place for all people, not just for the people at the top of the social hierarchy. These anti-capitalistic tendencies that allow everyone to flourish serve as a stark contrast to that time’s European world. The Utopian ways, along with other humanist ideas, eventually sparked the Renaissance Age in Europe, where the people begin to focus on education, logic, and science, rather than tying themselves down to the words of the Bible. Although the members of society in Utopia by Sir Thomas More preach equality and impartiality, it becomes obvious that a social order is a natural human necessity and the community could not exist without that reality.

The Utopian society attempts to eliminate the usual hierarchy by phasing out the materials that support classism, property and money, and by promoting conformity and uniformity. To avoid classism, which prevails through visible, material factors, such as designer clothing, “ people wear, and wear throughout their lives, the same style of clothing, except for the distinction between the sexes between married and unmarried persons” (45). The Utopians wore drab clothing with little style, making it so that all the people were dressed the same, which forced them to be equal, at least in that aspect. Another effort to engineer humanistic greed out of the population was made by eliminating private property. No citizen owned a house, instead, “ every ten years, they change house by lot” (42). The footnote on

this revealed that “ the purpose is, of course, to preclude anything like private property and attachment to it.” Again, this made it so that no one could stand out based on the size or decoration of their property. The Utopians even equalized labor by sharing the difficult burden of farming: “ The custom of alternating farm workers is the usual procedure, so that no one will have to do such hard work unwillingly for more than two years” (40). No one person is singled out and forced to do demanding labor because of their economic status, gender, or race. By using the rotational system, the Utopians spread the onerous jobs among everyone. These steps are taken to ensure, or at least seem to ensure, that there is no hierarchy.

However, the flaws of this system of elimination are quickly revealed and it becomes obvious that a ranking is needed to ensure order and lawfulness. Each subsection of society needs a ruler to enforce the laws. The households in the rural part of Utopia each have “ two slaves bound to the land. A master and mistress, serious and mature persons, in charge of each household. Over every thirty households is placed a single phylarch” (40). The “ phylarch,” which comes from Greek, means “ the rules of the tribe.” A clear ranking is established in the households, with slaves at the bottom, workers in the middle, and the masters and the phylarchs on top. Without someone in power, it is possible that an undesirable person may rise to power in that vacuum, which the Utopians might have had in mind when creating this system. The slaves are also put to work, usually for life, and they are “ either their own citizens, enslaved for some heinous offense, or else foreigners who were condemned to death in their own” (70). If only some members of a community are punished, the whole community is no

longer equal, regardless of if the punished persons deserved it. These criminals must be shamed and chastised, otherwise, there would be no way to teach a lesson to someone who went wrong, and chaos would quickly ensue. There needs to be a pecking order to each aspect of society for it to function effectively.

The highest officials of Utopian society, which include the priests, the holy people, and the senate, are the heads of society and have the most say in the way people live, showing that there is a hierarchy in Utopia. They even go as far as to have decisions in marriages. If a couple wanted to divorce, they needed approval of the senate, “ but such divorces are allowed only after the senators and their wives have carefully investigated the case” (73). Even if said couple had a desperate reason for separation, they could not separate of their own choosing, unless they had been carefully vetted by the authorities. The Utopians even separate the very devout members of society, who essentially serve just under the priests, into “ two sects. The first are celibates who abstain not only from sex but also from eating meat [...] the other kind are just as fond of hard work, but they prefer to marry [...] The Utopians regard the second sort as more sensible, but the first sort as holier” (88-89). They regard the celibates as holier, and “ respect and revere them” (89). These people are separated from the normal people of Utopia and have more power than them, but still less than that of the priest and of the senate. The priest is also treated almost as a deity, with “ no official in Utopia more honored than the priest. Even if one of them commits a crime, he is not brought into a court of law, but left to God and his own conscience” (90). These priests are held to no laws, and have power even in a person’s

choice to choose death in cases of extreme suffering. These rankings show that Utopia demands a ranking and the top people are necessary for order.

The Utopian society is far from perfect, and definitely not completely equal. Perhaps, however, any inequality that emerges from this system serves as a motivator for lower-tier citizens. But the limits to equality begin and end with the need for a moderator, a type of enforcement, in society. The communist-like practices that Utopia holds itself to seem ideal on paper, but they cannot be effective unless everybody can both conform and behave. However, it becomes obvious that some rogue citizens have difficulty controlling themselves. Thus, Utopia shows that a society that is truly equal cannot be obtained, and that limits to the equality through a hierarchy of power must be put in place.