

Sir Thomas More  
*Utopia*  
Selections from Book I

Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) was one of the greatest luminaries of the early English Renaissance. He was raised from the age of twelve in the household of John Morton, the Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor of England, and at fourteen entered the Inns of Court and trained to become a lawyer. He later met and became close friends with Desiderius Erasmus, the great Dutch Humanist. In fact, it was in More's house, on a visit, that Erasmus penned *The Praise of Folly*. After spending four years in a monastery, More left and married, remarrying after his first wife's death and raising a number of children. He spent the rest of his life in public service. After filling a number of posts, he became Lord Chancellor in 1529.

More's relations with the Protestant Reformation, which began in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his famous 95 Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany, were complicated. He knew the church was desperately in need of reform, but he was against the new religious tenets promulgated by Luther and others, which he considered heresies. As a minister and Chancellor, he had a number heretics burned at the stake, but when King Henry VIII declared himself head of the church in England in 1533—and Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy and the Treasons Act in 1534—he refused to take the oath of loyalty. He was imprisoned in the Tower of London, and in 1535 he was beheaded for treason. Four hundred years later, in 1935, he was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church.

*Utopia* was written in Latin in two parts, Book II in 1515, and Book I in 1516. The title is a pun on two Greek words meaning both "No Place" and "Good Place," and many of the names in the dialog are humorous; Hythloday, for example, means "speaker of nonsense." As to More's purpose in writing *Utopia*, and how it is to be understood, scholars are at odds. Some see the work as simply a light, clever work which More began writing while on a diplomatic mission in Flanders. It mixes reality and fantasy and is intended to delight, some of it, like the marriage custom of exhibiting the bride and groom naked to each other before their marriage, simply absurd. On the contrary, some take More's work more seriously and see it as a critique of sixteenth-century society, particularly the divide between the rich and the poor. Still others see it as an example of the genre of "Advice to Princes," such as Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), or the notorious *The Prince* (1532), by Niccolò Machiavelli. Finally, it can also be read (particularly Book II) as a supposed travel narrative. From the time of Columbus and the invention of the printing press in the previous century, such narratives had become extremely popular. They continued to be so well into the eighteenth century, spawning such works of fiction as Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Even today, travel is a recognized genre, and science fiction has moved the descriptions to distant worlds and times.

*Utopia* is a mixture of all these threads. More, being a highly educated Humanist and scholar, as well as a lawyer, government official, and heretic hunter, was, like many famous people before and since (to use Robert Bolt's title), "a man for all seasons."

Book I is a discussion between Peter Giles, Raphael Hythloday, and Thomas More. Because Raphael is well-versed in the customs and manners of many people, Peter asks him why he does not sign on as an advisor to Princes or Rulers, since his advice would be invaluable to them. Raphael argues that Princes are more interested in expanding their power and dominions than in governing well the people already in their kingdom. Further, a Prince has so many advisors and

hangers-on, all trying to advance themselves, that his recommendations would be ignored or slandered.

The discussion continues on to the subject of what we would call capital punishment. In England at the time, all sorts of crimes were punished by hanging, even theft. Raphael argues that such a harsh penalty was not only unjust but counter-productive to the interests of the king. Many criminals—such as veterans returning from various wars waged by the Prince, the retinue of wealthy households (who had no employable skills) turned out by their lords, and peasants kicked off their land by landlords so they could run more sheep for the wool trade—were reduced to stealing to survive. Raphael attacks all these abuses of the social system. Analogs to all these problems can be seen today.

Toward the end, Raphael addresses the root cause of all the evils he sees in England— private property. He says that none of the social problems he has discussed can ever be fully solved as long as it exists. Private property does not exist in Utopia, and therefore Book II is a description of the island, its people, and their laws and customs.

*Utopia* lent its name to a whole genre of subsequent works on perfect societies (and thus, by contrast, to the evils of the real societies from which they emerged). It is also the grandfather of more recent dystopias, such as Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984*. Of course, More himself was looking back to the progenitor of all such depictions, Plato's *Republic*. Translated by Gilbert Burnet (1643-1715).

The editor has modernized the text for contemporary students, altering punctuation and Americanizing the spelling. Additional information is provided in brackets, [like this.]

**Participants:** Raphael Hythloday, Peter Giles, Thomas More

“As he told us of many things that were amiss in those new-discovered countries, so he reckoned up not a few things from which patterns might be taken for correcting the errors of these nations among whom we live, an account of which may be given, as I have already promised, at some other time. At present, I intend only to relate those particulars that he told us of the manners and laws of the Utopians. However, I will begin with the occasion that led us to speak of that commonwealth.”

[On Advising Princes and Rulers]

“After Raphael had discoursed with great judgment on the many errors that were both among us and these nations, had treated of the wise institutions both here and there, and had spoken as distinctly of the customs and government of every nation through which he had past, as if he had spent his whole life in it, Peter, being struck with admiration, said: ‘I wonder, Raphael, how it comes that you enter into no king’s service, for I am sure there are none to whom you would not be very acceptable; for your learning and knowledge, both of men and things, is such, that you would not only entertain them very pleasantly, but be of great use to them, by the examples you could set before them, and the advice you could give them. And by this means you would both serve your own interest, and be of great use to all your friends.’”

“As for my friends,” he answered, “I need not be much concerned, having already done for them all that was incumbent on me, for when I was not only in good health, but fresh and young, I distributed that among my kindred and friends which other people do not part with till they are

old and sick. They then unwillingly give that which they can enjoy no longer themselves. I think my friends ought to rest content with this, and not expect that for their sakes I should enslave myself to any king whatsoever.”

“Soft and fair!” said Peter. “I do not mean that you should be a slave to any king, but only that you should assist them and be useful to them.”

“The change of the word,” said he, “does not alter the matter.”

“But term it as you will,” replied Peter, “I do not see any other way in which you can be so useful, both in private to your friends and to the public, and by which you can make your own condition happier.”

“Happier?” answered Raphael. “Is that to be accomplished in a way so abhorrent to my genius? Now I live as I will, to which I believe few courtiers can pretend, and there are so many that court the favor of great men that there will be no great loss if they are not troubled either with me or with others of my temper.”

Upon this, I said: “I perceive, Raphael, that you neither desire wealth nor greatness, and, indeed, I value and admire such a man much more than I do any of the great men in the world. Yet I think you should do what would well become so generous and philosophical a soul as yours. You should apply your time and thoughts to public affairs, even though you may happen to find it a little uneasy to yourself, and this you can never do with so much advantage as by being taken into the council of some great prince and putting him on noble and worthy actions, which I know you would do if you were in such a post, since the springs both of good and evil flow from the prince over a whole nation, as from a lasting fountain. So much learning as you have, even without experience in affairs, or so great an experience as you have had, without any other learning, would render you a very fit counsellor to any king whatsoever.”

“You are doubly mistaken,” said he, “Mr. More, both in your opinion of me and in the judgment you make of things: for as I have not that capacity that you fancy I have, so if I had it, the public would not be one jot the better when I had sacrificed my quiet to it. For most princes apply themselves more to affairs of war than to the useful arts of peace, and in these I neither have any knowledge, nor do I much desire it. Princes are generally more set on acquiring new kingdoms, right or wrong, than on governing well those they possess, and among the ministers of princes, there are none that are not so wise as to need no assistance, or at least, that do not think themselves so wise that they imagine they need any. And if they court any, it is only those for whom the prince has much personal favor, whom by their fawning and flatteries they endeavor to fix to their own interests, and, indeed, nature has so made us, that we all love to be flattered and to please ourselves with our own notions. As the saying is: the old crow loves his young, and the ape her cubs.

“Now if in such a court, made up of persons who envy all others and only admire themselves, a person should but propose anything that he had either read in history or observed in his travels, the rest would think that the reputation of their wisdom would sink, and that their interests would be much depressed if they could not disparage it. And, if all other things failed, then they would say, ‘These things pleased our ancestors, and it were well for us if we could match their wisdom!’ They would conclude with such an answer as a sufficient refutation of all that could be said, as if it were a great misfortune that any should be found wiser than his ancestors. But though they willingly disregard all the good things that were proposed by those of former ages, yet, if better things are proposed, they cover themselves obstinately with this excuse of reverence for past times. I have met with these proud, morose, and absurd judgments of things in many places, particularly once in England.”

“Were you ever there?” said I.

“Yes, I was,” answered he, “and stayed some months there, not long after the rebellion in the West was suppressed, with a great slaughter of the poor people that were engaged in it. I was then much obliged to that reverend prelate, John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury, Cardinal, and Chancellor of England. He was a man, Peter (for Mr. More knows well who he was), that was not less venerable for his wisdom and virtues than for the high character he bore: he was of a middle stature, not broken with age, and his looks begot reverence rather than fear. His conversation was easy, but serious and grave, and he sometimes took pleasure in trying the mettle of those that came as suitors to him upon business by speaking sharply, though decently, to them, so that he could discover their spirit and presence of mind. He was much delighted with them, if what they said was not impudent, since it bore a great resemblance to his own temper, and he looked on such persons as the fittest men for affairs. He spoke both gracefully and weightily. He was eminently skilled in the law, had a vast understanding, and a prodigious memory, and those excellent talents with which nature had furnished him were improved by study and experience. When I was in England, the King depended much on his counsels, and the Government seemed to be chiefly supported by him. From his youth he had been all along practiced in public affairs, and, having passed through many reverses of fortune, he had, with great cost, acquired a vast stock of wisdom, which is not soon lost when it is purchased so dear.

[On Capital Punishment]

“One day, when I [Raphael] was dining with Cardinal Morton, there happened to be at table one of the English lawyers, who took occasion to praise with high commendation the severe execution of justice upon thieves, ‘who,’ he said, ‘were then hanged so fast that there were sometimes twenty on one gibbet! But’ he said, ‘he could not wonder enough how it came to pass that, since so few escaped, there were yet so many thieves left, who were still robbing in all places.’

“Upon hearing this, I (who took the boldness to speak freely before the Cardinal) said: ‘There was no reason to wonder at the matter, since this way of punishing thieves was neither just in itself nor good for the public, for, as the severity was too great, so the remedy was not effectual, simple theft not being so great a crime that it ought to cost a man his life—no punishment, no matter how severe, being able to restrain those from robbing who can find out no other way of livelihood.

‘In this,’ I continued ‘not only you in England, but a great part of the world, imitate some ill masters, who are readier to chastise their scholars than to teach them. There are dreadful punishments enacted against thieves, but it would be much better to make such good provisions by which every man might be provided a way to make a living, and so be preserved from the fatal necessity of stealing and of dying for it.’

‘There has been care enough taken for that,’ he said. ‘There are many handicrafts, and there is husbandry, by which they may make a shift to live, unless they have a greater mind to follow ill courses.’

‘That will not serve your turn,’ said I, ‘for many lose their limbs in civil or foreign wars, as lately in the Cornish rebellion, and some time ago in your wars with France, who, being thus mutilated in the service of their king and country, can no more follow their old trades, and are too old to learn new ones. But since wars are only accidental things, and have intervals, let us consider those things that occur every day. There are a great number of noblemen among you who are themselves as idle as drones and who subsist on other men’s labor, that of their tenants, whom, to raise their revenues, they pare to the quick. This, indeed, is the only instance of their frugality, for in all other things they are prodigal, even to the beggaring of themselves. Besides this, they carry

about with them a great number of idle fellows who never learned any art by which they may gain their living, and these, as soon as either their lord dies, or they themselves fall sick, are turned out of doors, for your lords are readier to feed idle people than to take care of the sick, and often the heir is not able to keep together so great a family as his predecessor did.

‘Now, when the stomachs of those that are thus turned out of doors grow keen, they rob no less keenly, for what else can they do? When, by wandering about, they have worn out both their health and their clothes, and are tattered, and look ghastly, men of quality will not entertain them, and poor men dare not do it, knowing that one who has been bred up in idleness and pleasure—who was used to walking about with his sword and buckler, despising all the neighborhood with an insolent scorn as far below him—is not fit for the spade and mattock, nor will he serve a poor man for so small a hire and at so low a diet as he can afford to give him.’

To this he answered, ‘These sorts of men ought to be particularly cherished, for in them consists the force of the armies for which we have occasion, since their birth inspires them with a nobler sense of honor than is to be found among tradesmen or ploughmen.’

‘You may as well say,’ replied I, ‘that you must cherish thieves on the account of wars, for you will never lack the one as long as you have the other, and as robbers prove sometimes gallant soldiers, so soldiers often prove brave robbers, so near an alliance there is between those two sorts of life. But this bad custom, so common among you, of keeping many servants, is not peculiar to this nation. In France there is yet a more pestiferous sort of people, for the whole country is full of soldiers still kept up in time of peace (if such a state of a nation can be called a peace). These are kept in pay upon the same account that you plead for those idle retainers about noblemen, it being a maxim of those pretend statesmen that it is necessary for the public safety to have a good body of veteran soldiers ever in readiness. They think raw men are not to be depended on, and they sometimes seek occasions for making war just so they may train up their soldiers in the art of cutting throats, or, as Sallust observed, “for keeping their hands in use, that they may not grow dull by too long an intermission.” But France has learned to its cost how dangerous it is to feed such beasts. The fate of the Romans, Carthaginians, Syrians, and many other nations and cities, which were both overturned and quite ruined by those standing armies, should make others wiser, and the folly of this maxim of the French appears plainly even from this, that their trained soldiers often find your raw men prove too hard for them, of which I will not say much, lest you may think I flatter the English.

‘Every day’s experience shows that the mechanics in the towns or the laborers in the country are not afraid of fighting with those idle gentlemen if they are not disabled by some misfortune in their body or dispirited by extreme want; so you need not fear that those well-shaped and strong men (for it is only such that noblemen love to keep about them till they spoil them), who now grow feeble with ease and are softened with their effeminate manner of life, would be less fit for action if they were well-bred and well-employed. And it seems very unreasonable that, for the prospect of a war, which you need never have but when you please, you should maintain so many idle men, as will always disturb you in time of peace, which is ever to be more considered than war. But I do not think that this necessity of stealing arises only from hence; there is another cause of it, more peculiar to England.’

‘What is that?’ asked the Cardinal.

## [On the Enclosure Movement]

‘The increase of pasture,’ I said, ‘by which your sheep, which are naturally mild, and easily kept in order, may be said now to devour men and unpeople, not only villages, but towns, for wherever it is found that the sheep of any soil yield a softer and richer wool than ordinary, there the nobility and gentry, and even those holy men, the abbots, not content with the old rents which their farms yielded, nor thinking it enough that they, living at their ease, do no good to the public, resolve to do it harm instead of good. They stop the course of agriculture, destroying houses and towns, reserving only the churches, and enclose grounds that they may lodge their sheep in them. As if forests and parks had swallowed up too little of the land, those worthy countrymen turn the best inhabited places into solitudes. For when an insatiable wretch, who is a plague to his country, resolves to enclose many thousand acres of ground, the owners, as well as tenants, are turned out of their possessions by trick or by main force, or, being worn out by ill usage, they are forced to sell them. By which means those miserable people, both men and women, married and unmarried, old and young, with their poor but numerous families (since country business requires many hands), are all forced to change their abodes, not knowing where to go. And they must sell, almost for nothing, their household stuff, which could not bring them much money, even though they might stay for a buyer. When that little money is at an end (for it will soon be spent), what is left for them to do but either to steal, and so be hanged (God knows how justly!), or to go about and beg? And if they do this they are put in prison as idle vagabonds, while they would willingly work but can find no one that will hire them; for there is no more occasion for country labor, to which they have been bred, since there is no arable ground left. One shepherd can look after a flock, which will stock an extent of ground that would require many hands if it were to be ploughed and reaped. This, likewise, in many places raises the price of bread. The price of wool is also so risen that the poor people, who once used it to make cloth, are no longer able to buy it, and this, likewise, makes many of them idle.

‘And, since pastures have been increased by enclosure, God has punished the avarice of the owners by a rot among the sheep, which has destroyed vast numbers of them—to us it might have seemed more just had it fell on the owners themselves. But suppose the sheep should increase ever so much, their price is not likely to fall since, though they cannot be called a monopoly because they are not owned by any one person, yet they are in so few hands, and these are so rich, that as they are not pressed to sell them sooner than they have a mind to it, so they never do till they have raised the price as high as possible. And on the same account it is that cattle are so dear, because many villages being pulled down, and all country labor being much neglected, there are none who make it their business to breed them. The rich do not breed cattle as they do sheep, but buy them lean and at low prices, and, after they have fattened them on their grounds, sell them again at high rates. And I do not think that all the inconveniences this will produce are yet observed, for, as they sell the cattle dear, so, if they are consumed faster than the breeding countries from which they are brought can afford them, then the stock must decrease, and this must end in greater scarcity, and so, by these means, this your island, which seemed, as to this particular, the happiest in the world, will suffer much by the cursed avarice of a few persons.

‘Besides this, the rise in the price of bread makes people dismiss their servants, as many as they can, and what can those who are dismissed by them do but either beg or rob? And to this last choice a well-bred man is much sooner drawn than to the former.

‘Luxury likewise contributes to your poverty and misery. There is an excessive vanity in apparel, and great cost in diet, and that not only in noblemen’s families, but even among tradesmen,

among the farmers themselves, and among all ranks of persons. You have also many infamous houses, such as brothels, and taverns, and ale-houses. Add to these dice, cards, gambling tables, tennis, and quoits, in which money runs fast away, and those that are initiated into them must, in the conclusion, take themselves to robbing for a supply. Banish these plagues, and give orders that those who have depopulated so much soil either rebuild the villages they have pulled down, or let out their grounds to such as will do it. Restrain the rich from buying everything up, which is as bad almost as monopolies, and leave fewer occasions for idleness. Let agriculture be set up again, and the manufacture of the wool be regulated, that so there may be work found for those companies of idle people who have become thieves, or who now, being idle vagabonds or useless servants, will certainly become thieves. If you do not find a remedy for these evils, it is a vain thing to boast of your severity in punishing theft, which, though it may have the appearance of justice, yet in itself is neither just nor convenient, for if you suffer your people to be ill-educated, and their manners to be corrupted from their infancy, and then punish them for those crimes to which their first education disposed them, what else is to be concluded from this but that you first make thieves and then punish them?’

“While I was talking thus, the lawyer who was present had prepared an answer, and had resolved to recapitulate all I had said, according to the formality of a debate, in which things are generally repeated more faithfully than they are answered, as if the chief trial to be made were of men’s memories.

‘You have talked prettily, for a stranger,’ said he, ‘having heard of many things among us which you have not been able to consider well; but I will make the whole matter plain to you, and will first repeat in order all that you have said; then I will show how much your ignorance of our affairs has misled you; and will, in the last place, answer all your arguments. And, that I may begin where I promised, there were four things—’

[On Punishment for Theft]

‘Hold your peace!’ said the Cardinal; ‘this will take up too much time; therefore, we will, at present, ease you of the trouble of answering, and reserve it to our next meeting, which shall be to-morrow, if Raphael’s affairs and yours can admit of it. But, Raphael,’ said he to me, ‘I would gladly know upon what reason it is that you think theft ought not to be punished by death: would you give way to it? or do you propose any other punishment that will be more useful to the public? For, since death does not restrain theft, if men thought their lives would be safe, what fear or force could restrain ill men? On the contrary, they would look on the mitigation of the punishment as an invitation to commit more crimes.’

I answered, ‘It seems to me a very unjust thing to take away a man’s life for a little money, for nothing in the world can be of equal value with a man’s life. And if it be said, “it is not for the money that one suffers, but for his breaking the law,” I must say that extreme justice is for extreme injury. We ought not to approve of those terrible laws that make the smallest offences capital, nor of that opinion of the Stoics that makes all crimes equal, as if there were no difference to be made between killing a man and taking his purse, between which, if we examine things impartially, there is no likeness nor proportion. God has commanded us not to kill, and shall we kill so easily for a little money? But if one responds that by that law we are only forbid to kill any except when the laws of the land allow it, but then, by the same reasoning, laws may be made in some cases to allow adultery and perjury. For—God, having taken from us the right of disposing either of our own or of other people’s lives—if it is pretended that the mutual consent of men in

making laws can authorize man-slaughter in cases in which God has given us no example, that it 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 above the divine? And, if this is once admitted, by the same rule men may, in all other things, put what restrictions they please upon the laws of God. If, by the Mosaic law, though it was rough and severe, as being a yoke laid on an obstinate and servile nation, men were only fined, and not put to death for theft, we cannot imagine, that in the new law of mercy, in which God treats us with the tenderness of a father, He has given us a greater license to be cruel than He did to the Jews. It is for these reasons that I think putting thieves to death is not lawful, and it is plain and obvious that it is absurd and of ill consequence to the commonwealth that a thief and a murderer should be equally punished. For if a robber sees that his danger is the same if he is convicted of theft as if he were guilty of murder, this will naturally incite him to kill the person whom otherwise he would only have robbed, since, if the punishment is the same, there is more security, and less danger of discovery, if he who can identify the thief is killed. Thus terrifying thieves too much provokes them to cruelty.

‘As to the question of what more suitable punishment can be found, I think it much easier to discover that than to invent something that is better. Why should we doubt the way that was so long in use among the old Romans, for instance, who understood so well the arts of government? They condemned those they found guilty of great crimes to work their whole lives in quarries, or to dig in mines with chains about them. But the method that I like best was that which I observed in my travels in Persia, among the Polyerites, who are a considerable and well-governed people. They pay a yearly tribute to the King of Persia, but in all other respects they are a free nation, and governed by their own laws. They lie far from the sea and are environed with hills, and, being contented with the productions of their own country, which is very fruitful, they have little commerce with any other nation. And since they, according to the genius of their country, have no inclination to enlarge their borders, so their mountains and the tribute they pay to the Persians, secure them from all invasions. Thus they have no wars among them; they live more conveniently than with splendor, and may be rather called a happy nation than either eminent or famous, for I do not think that they are known so much as by name to any but their near neighbors. Those that are found guilty of theft among them are bound to make restitution to the owner, and not, as it is in other places, to the Prince, for they reckon that the prince has no more right to the stolen goods than the thief. But if that which was stolen is no more in being, then the goods of the thieves are estimated, and once restitution is made, the remainder is given to their wives and children.

‘Then they themselves are condemned to serve in the public works, but are neither imprisoned nor chained, unless there happens to be some extraordinary circumstance in their crimes. They go about loose and free, working for the public: if they are idle or backward to work, they are whipped, but if they work hard they are well used and treated without any mark of reproach. They are imprisoned at night, but they suffer no other uneasiness but this of constant labor. For, as they work for the public, so they are maintained out of the public stock, which is done differently in different places. In some places whatever is bestowed on them is raised by a charitable contribution, and, though this way may seem uncertain, yet so merciful are the inclinations of that people that they are plentifully supplied by it; in other places public revenues are set aside for them, or there is a constant tax or money raised for their maintenance. In some places they are set to no public work, but every private man that has occasion to hire workmen goes to the market-places and hires them for a little lower than he would pay a freeman. If they go lazily about their task, he may quicken them with the whip. By this means there is always some piece of work or other to be done by them, and besides their livelihood, they earn somewhat for themselves. They



all wear a peculiar habit, of one certain color, and their hair is cropped a little above their ears, and a piece of one of their ears is cut off. Their friends are allowed to give them meat, drink, or clothes, as long as they are of their proper color, but it is death, both to the giver and taker, if they give them money. Nor is it less penal for any freeman to take money from them upon any account whatsoever, and it is also death for any of these slaves (so they are called) to handle arms. Those of every division of the country are distinguished by a peculiar mark, which it is capital for them to lay aside, and they cannot go out of their district, or talk with a slave of another jurisdiction, and if they attempt to escape, it is no less penal than an actual escape itself. It is death for any other slave to be an accessory to it; and if a freeman engages in it he is condemned to slavery. Those that discover it, however, are rewarded—if freemen, in money, and if slave, with liberty, together with a pardon for being accessory to it. Thus it will be to their advantage to discover such a design rather than aiding in it.

‘These are their laws and rules in relation to robbery, and it is obvious that they are as advantageous as they are mild and gentle, since vice is not only destroyed and men preserved, but they are treated in such a manner as to make them see the necessity of being honest and of employing the rest of their lives in repairing the injuries they had formerly done to society. Nor is there any chance of their falling back into their old customs; and so little do travelers apprehend mischief from them that they generally make use of them for guides from one jurisdiction to another. For, since there is nothing left them by which they can rob or be the better for—since they are disarmed and the very having of money is an indication of crime—and as they are certainly punished if discovered, so they cannot hope to escape, for their habit being in all the parts of it different from what is commonly worn, they cannot fly away, unless they would go naked, and even then their cropped ear would betray them. The only danger to be feared from them is their conspiring against the government. But those of one district or neighborhood can do nothing to any purpose unless a general conspiracy were laid amongst all the slaves of the several jurisdictions, which cannot be done, since they cannot meet or talk together, nor will any venture on a design where the concealment would be so dangerous and the discovery so profitable. None are quite hopeless of recovering their freedom, since by their obedience and patience, and by giving good grounds to believe that they will change their manner of life in the future, they may expect at last to obtain their liberty, and some are every year restored to it upon the good character that is given of them.’

‘When I had related all this, I added that I did not see why such a method might not be followed with more advantage than could ever be expected from that severe justice which the lawyer magnified so much.

‘To this the lawyer answered: ‘It could never take place in England without endangering the whole nation.’ As he said this he shook his head, made some grimaces, and held his peace, while all the company seemed of his opinion.

‘But then the Cardinal said: ‘It is not easy to form a judgment of its success, since it is a method that has never yet had been tried, but if,’ he continued, ‘when sentence of death were passed upon a thief, the prince would reprieve him for a while, and make the experiment upon him, denying him the privilege of a sanctuary, and then, if it had a good effect upon him, it might take place. And if it did not succeed, the worst that could happen would be to execute the sentence on the condemned person at last. Thus I do not see,’ he added, ‘why it would be either unjust, inconvenient, or at all dangerous to admit of such a delay. In my opinion, vagrants ought to be treated in the same way, since, though we have made many laws, we have achieved little success in solving this problem.’

“When the Cardinal had done, they all commended the motion, though they had despised it when it came from me, but they more particularly commended what the Cardinal said about the vagrants, because it was his own observation.”

[On Advising Princes II]

“Raphael,” I said, “You have done me a great kindness in this relation since everything has been told by you so wisely and pleasantly you have made me imagine that I was in my own country, and grown young again, by recalling that good Cardinal to my thoughts, in whose family I was bred from my childhood, and though you are, upon other accounts, very dear to me, yet you are even dearer because you honor his memory so much. Yet, after all this, I still cannot change my opinion, for I think that if you could overcome that aversion which you have to the courts of princes, you might, by the advice which it is in your power, do a great deal of good to mankind, and this is the chief design that every good man ought to propose to himself in living. 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 counsels.”

“They are not so base-minded,” said he, “but that they would willingly do it; many of them have already done it by their books, if those that are in power would but hearken to their good advice. But Plato judged right, that except kings themselves became philosophers, they who from their childhood are corrupted with false notions would never fall in entirely with the counsels of philosophers, and this he himself found to be true in the person of Dionysius [II of Syracuse].

“Do you not think that if I were in a king’s court, proposing good laws to him, and endeavoring to root out all the cursed seeds of evil that I found in him, I should either be turned out of his court, or, at least, be laughed at for my pains? For instance, what could I do if I were in Paris, and the King of France called me into his cabinet council, where several wise men, in his hearing, were proposing many expedients, such as, by what arts and practices Milan may be kept, and Naples, that has so often slipped out of their hands, recovered. Or how the Venetians, and after them the rest of Italy, may be subdued, and then how Flanders, Brabant, and all Burgundy, and some other kingdoms which he has swallowed already in his designs, may be added to his empire? One proposes a league with the Venetians, to be kept as long as he finds his account in it, and that he ought to communicate counsels with them, and give them some share of the spoil till his success makes him need or fear them less, and then it will be easily taken out of their hands; another proposes hiring the Germans and securing the Swiss by pensions; another proposes giving money to the Emperor, which is omnipotent with him; another proposes a peace with the King of Aragon, and, in order to cement it, forcing the King of Navarre to give up his pretensions. Yet another thinks that the Prince of Castile is to be won over by the hope of an alliance, and that some of his courtiers are to be gained to the French faction by pensions.

“The hardest point of all is, what to do with England; a treaty of peace is to be set on foot, and, if their alliance is not to be depended on, yet it is to be made as firm as possible, and they are to be called friends, but suspected as enemies: therefore the Scots are to be kept in readiness to be let loose upon England on every occasion; and some banished nobleman is to be quietly supported (for by the League it cannot be done openly) who has a pretension to the crown, by which means that suspected prince may be kept in awe. Now when things are in so great a ferment, and so many gallant men are discussing how to carry on the war, if so ordinary a man as I should stand up and wish them to change all their counsels, such as to let Italy alone and stay at home, since the

kingdom of France was already greater than could be well governed by one man, and that, therefore, he ought not to think of adding others to it.

“If, after this, I should propose to them the resolutions of the Achorians, a people that lie on the south-east of Utopia, who long ago engaged in war in order to add to the dominions of their prince another kingdom, to which he had some pretensions by an ancient alliance and which they conquered. But they found that the trouble of keeping it was equal to that by which it was gained, and that the conquered people were always either in rebellion or exposed to foreign invasions. At the same time, they were obliged to be incessantly at war, either for or against them, and consequently could never disband their army. Further, in the meantime, they were oppressed with taxes, their money went out of the kingdom, their blood was spilt for the glory of their king without procuring the least advantage to the people—who received not the smallest benefit from it even in time of peace—and their manners were being corrupted by a long war, there were robbery and murders everywhere, and their laws fell into contempt. Thus their king, distracted with the care of two kingdoms, was the less able to apply his mind to the interests of either.

“When they saw this, and that there would be no end to these evils, they made a humble address to their king, desiring him to choose which of the two kingdoms he had the greatest mind to keep, since he could not hold both; for they were too great a people to be governed by a divided king, since no man would willingly employ a groom that he would have to share with another. Upon hearing this, the good prince was forced to quit his new kingdom and give it to one of his friends (who was not long after dethroned), and to be contented with his old one. To this I would add that after all those warlike attempts, the vast confusions, and the consumption both of treasure and of people that must follow them, perhaps upon some misfortune they might be forced to abandon it all at last anyway. Therefore, it seemed much better 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. Now how do you think such a speech as this would be heard?”

“I confess,” said I, “I think not very well.”

“And what if,” said he, “I should work with another group of ministers, those whose chief duties were to decide by what art the prince’s treasures might be increased? One might propose raising the value of money when the king’s debts are large, and lowering it when his revenues were to come in, so that he might pay much with little, and receive a great deal. Another proposes to pretend a war must be waged so that money might be raised in order to carry it on, but that a peace should be concluded as soon as the money has been raised. And this should be done with such appearances of religion as might work on the people, and make them impute it to the piety of their prince, and to his tenderness for the lives of his subjects. A third offers some old musty laws that have been antiquated by long disuse (and which, as they had been forgotten by all the subjects, so they had also been broken by them), and proposes levying the penalties of these laws, and that would bring in a vast treasure, since it would look like executing a law and doing justice. A fourth proposes prohibiting many things under severe penalties, especially such as were against the interests of the people, and then dispensing with these prohibitions, upon the payment of great fines, to those who might break them. This would serve two ends, both of them acceptable to many, since those whose avarice led them to transgress would be severely fined, and selling licenses to them would look as if a prince were acting for the good of his people and would not easily, or at low rates, dispense with anything that might be against the public good.

“Yet another minister proposes that the judges must be suborned, so that they may always declare in favor of the king; that they should often hold court so that the king may hear them argue those points in which he is concerned; since, however unjust any of his pretensions may be, yet still one or other of them, either out of contradiction to the others, or the pride of singularity, or to curry favor, would find some pretense or other to give the king a good chance to carry the point. For if the judges but differ in opinion, the clearest thing in the world is made by that means disputable, and truth being once brought in question, the king may then take advantage to expound the law for his own profit, and the judges that stand out will be brought over, either through fear or modesty. And the judges being thus persuaded, all of them may be sent to the Bench to give sentence boldly as the king would have it; for fair pretenses will never be wanting when sentence is to be given in the prince’s favor. It will either be said that equity is his side, or some words in the law will be found sounding that way, or some forced sense will be put on them. When all else fails, the king’s undoubted prerogative will be pretended, as that which is above all law, and to which a religious judge ought to have a special regard. Thus all will consent to that maxim of Crassus—that a prince cannot have treasure enough, since he must maintain his armies out of it; that a king, even though he would, can do nothing unjustly; that all property is in him, not excepting the very persons of his subjects; and that no man has any other property but that which the king, out of his goodness, thinks fit to leave him. And they think it is the prince’s interest that there be as little of this left as may be, as if it were his advantage that his people should have neither riches nor liberty, since these things make them less easy and willing to submit to a cruel and unjust government. Whereas necessity and poverty blunts them, makes them patient, beats them down, and breaks that height of spirit that might otherwise dispose them to rebel.

“Now what if, after all these propositions were made, I should rise up and assert that such counsels were both unbecoming a king and mischievous to him; and that not only his honor, but his safety, consisted more in his people’s wealth than in his own. If I should show that the people choose a king for their own sake, and not for his, so that, by his care and endeavors, they may be both easy and safe, and therefore a prince ought to take more care of his people’s happiness than of his own, as a shepherd is to take more care of his flock than of himself? It is also certain that they are much mistaken who think the poverty of a nation guarantees public safety, for who quarrel more than beggars? Who does more earnestly long for a change than he that is uneasy in his present circumstances? And who run to create confusion with so desperate a boldness as those who, having nothing to lose, hope to gain by it? If a king should fall under such contempt or envy that he could not keep his subjects in their duty but by oppression and ill usage, and by rendering them poor and miserable, it would be better for him to quit his kingdom than to retain it by such methods as make him, while he keeps the name of authority, lose the majesty due to it.

“Nor is it so becoming the dignity of a king to reign over beggars as over rich and happy subjects. And therefore Fabricius [Gaius Fabricius, Roman noted for his virtuous character], a man of a noble and exalted temper, said he ‘would rather govern rich men than be rich himself; since for one man to abound in wealth and pleasure when all about him are mourning and groaning, is to be a jailer and not a king.’ He is an unskillful physician that cannot cure one disease without casting his patient into another. So he that can find no other way for correcting the errors of his people but by taking from them the conveniences of life, shows that he knows not what it is to govern a free nation. He himself ought rather to shake off his sloth, or to lay down his pride, for the contempt or hatred that his people have for him takes its rise from the vices in himself. Let him live upon what belongs to him without wronging others, and accommodate his expense to his revenue. Let him punish crimes, and, by his wise conduct, let him endeavor to prevent them, rather

than be severe when he has suffered them to be too common. Let him not rashly revive laws that are abrogated by disuse, especially if they have been long forgotten and never wanted. And let him never take any penalty for the breach of them to which a judge would not give way in a private man, but would look on him as a crafty and unjust person for pretending to it.

To these things I would add that law among the Macarians—a people that live not far from Utopia—by which their king, on the day on which he began to reign, is tied by an oath, confirmed by solemn sacrifices, never to have at once above a thousand pounds of gold in his treasures, or so much silver as is equal to that in value. This law, they tell us, was made by an excellent king who had more regard to the riches of his country than to his own wealth, and therefore provided against the heaping up of so much treasure as might impoverish the people. He thought that moderate sum might be sufficient for any accident, if either the king had occasion for it against the rebels, or the kingdom against the invasion of an enemy. But it should not be enough to encourage a prince to invade other men's rights—a circumstance that was the chief cause of his making that law. He also thought that it was a good provision for that free circulation of money so necessary for the daily course of commerce and exchange. And when a king must distribute all those extraordinary accessions that increase treasure beyond the due pitch, it makes him less disposed to oppress his subjects. Such a king as this will be the terror of ill men, and will be beloved by all the good.

“If, I say, I should talk of these or such-like things to men that had taken their bias another way, how deaf would they be to all I could say!”

“No doubt, very deaf,” I answered. “And no wonder, for one is never to offer propositions or advice that we are certain will not be entertained. Discourses so much out of the ordinary could not help anything, nor have any effect on men whose minds were prepossessed with different sentiments. This philosophical way of speculation is not unpleasant among friends in a free conversation, but there is no room for it in the courts of princes, where great affairs are carried on by authority.”

“That is what I was saying,” replied he, “that there is no room for philosophy in the courts of princes.”

“Yes, there is,” said I, “but not for this scholastic philosophy, that makes everything to be alike fitting at all times; but there is another philosophy that is more pliable, that knows its proper scene, accommodates itself to it, and teaches a man with propriety and decency to act that part which has fallen to his share. If when one of Plautus' comedies is upon the stage, and a company of servants are acting their parts, you should come out in the garb of a philosopher, and repeat, out of *Octavia*, a discourse of Seneca's to Nero, would it not be better for you to say nothing than by mixing things of such different natures to make an impertinent tragi-comedy? For you spoil and corrupt the play that is in hand when you mix with it things of an opposite nature, even though they are much better? Therefore, go through with the play that is acting the best you can, and do not confound it because another that is pleasanter comes into your thoughts.

“It is even so in a commonwealth and in the councils of princes. If ill opinions cannot be quite rooted out, and you cannot cure some received vice according to your wishes, you must not, therefore, abandon the commonwealth, for the same reasons as you should not forsake the ship in a storm because you cannot command the winds. You are not obliged to deluge people with unaccustomed ideas they are not familiar with when you see that their received notions must prevent your making an impression upon them. You ought rather to cast about and manage things with all the dexterity in your power, so that, if you are not able to make them go well, they may go as little ill as possible; for, unless all men were good, everything cannot always be right, and that is a blessing that I do not at present hope to see.”

“According to your argument,” he answered, “all that I would be able to do would be to try to keep myself from going mad while I endeavored to cure the madness of others. For, if I want to speak the truth, I must repeat what I have said to you. As for lying, whether a philosopher can do it or not I cannot tell: I am sure I cannot do it. But though these discourses may be uneasy and ungrateful to princes and courtiers, I do not see why they should seem foolish or extravagant. Indeed, if I should either propose such things as Plato has contrived in his *Republic*, or as the Utopians practice in theirs, though they might seem better, as certainly they are, yet they are so different from our establishment, which is founded on property (there being no such thing among them), that I could not expect that it would have any effect on them. But such advice as mine, which only calls past evils to mind and gives warning of what may follow, has nothing in it that is so absurd that it may not be used at any time, for it can only be unpleasant to those who are resolved to run headlong the contrary way. And if we must let alone everything as absurd or extravagant—which, by reason of the wicked lives of many, may seem strange—we must, even as Christians, give over pressing the greatest part of those things that Christ hath taught us, though He has commanded us not to conceal them, but to proclaim on the housetops that which He has taught us. The greatest parts of His precepts are more opposite to the lives of the men of this age than any part of my discourse has been, but the preachers seem to have learned that craft to which you advise me: for they, observing that the world would not willingly suit their lives to the rules that Christ has given, have fitted His doctrine, as if it had been a leaden rule, to their lives, so that, some way or other, the two might agree. But I see no other effect of this compliance except it be that men become more secure in their wickedness by it, and this is all the success that I can have in a court, for I must always differ from the rest, and then I shall signify nothing. Or, if I agree with them, I shall then only help forward their madness.

“I do not comprehend what you mean by your ‘casting about,’ or by ‘the bending and handling things so dexterously that, if they go not well, they may go as little ill as may be;’ for in courts they will not bear with a man’s holding his peace or conniving at what others do: a man must barefacedly approve of the worst counsels and consent to the blackest designs, or pass for a spy, or, possibly, a traitor, who did but coldly approve of such wicked practices. Therefore, when a man is engaged in such a society, he will be so far from being able to mend matters by his ‘casting about,’ as you call it, that he will find no occasions of doing any good—the ill company will sooner corrupt him than be the better for his advice. If, notwithstanding all their ill company, he still remains steady and innocent, yet their follies and knavery will be imputed to him, and so, by mixing counsels with them, he must bear his share of all the blame that belongs wholly to others.

“It was no ill simile by which Plato set forth the unreasonableness of a philosopher’s meddling with government. ‘If a man,’ says he, ‘were to see a great company run out every day into the rain and take delight in being wet—if he knew that it would be to no purpose for him to go and persuade them to return to their houses in order to avoid the storm, and that all that could be expected by his going to speak to them would be that he himself should be as wet as they, it would be best for him to keep within doors, and, since he had not influence enough to correct other people’s folly, to take care to preserve himself.’

[The Evils of Private Property]

“Though, to speak plainly my real sentiments, I must freely own that as long as there is any property, and while money is the standard of all other things, I cannot think that a nation can be governed either justly or happily: not justly, because the best things will fall to the share of the

worst men; nor happily, because all things will be divided among a few (and even these are not in all respects happy), the rest being left to absolutely misery. Therefore, when I reflect on the wise and good constitution of the Utopians, among whom all things are so well-governed and who have so few laws, where virtue hath its own reward, and yet there is such an equality that every man lives in plenty—when I compare with them so many other nations that are still making new laws and yet can never bring their constitution to a just regulation; where, notwithstanding everyone having his own property, yet all the laws that they can invent have not the power either to obtain it or preserve it, or even to enable men clearly to distinguish what is their own from what is another's, of which the many lawsuits that every day break out, and are eternally pending, give too plain a demonstration—when, I say, I balance all these things in my thoughts, I grow more favorable to Plato, and do not wonder that he resolved not to make any laws for such as would not submit to a community of all things; for so wise a man could not but foresee that the equality of property was the only way to make a nation happy. And that cannot be obtained as long as there is property, for when every man draws to himself all that he can compass, by one title or another, it must needs follow that, however rich a nation may be, yet a few dividing the wealth of it among themselves, the rest must fall into indigence. So that there will be two sorts of people among them, who deserve that their fortunes should be interchanged—the former useless, but wicked and ravenous, and the latter, who by their constant industry serve the public more than themselves, sincere and modest men. So I am persuaded that till private 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 that is maintained, the greatest and by far best part of mankind will still be oppressed with a load of cares and anxieties.

“I confess, without taking private property quite away, those pressures that lie on a great part of mankind may be made lighter, but they can never be quite removed; for if laws were made to determine how much land, and how much money, every man must have—to limit the prince, that he might not grow too great, and to restrain the people, that they might not become too insolent—and that none might contentiously aspire to public office, which ought neither to be sold nor made burdensome by a great expense because, otherwise, those who serve would be tempted to reimburse themselves by corruption and violence, and thus it would be necessary to rely on rich men for these offices when it ought rather to be trusted to the wise. These laws, I say, might have such effect as good diet and care might have on a sick man whose recovery is desperate; they might allay and mitigate the disease, but the disease could never quite be healed, nor the body politic be brought again to a good habit as long as property remains.

“Further, it will fall out, as in a complication of diseases, that by applying a remedy to one sore you will provoke another, and that which removes the one ill symptom produces others, so that strengthening one part of the body weakens the rest.”

“On the contrary,” I replied, “it seems to me that men cannot live conveniently where all things are held in common. How can there be any plenty where every man will excuse himself from labor? For as the hope of gain doth not excite him, so the confidence that he has in other men's industry may make him slothful. If people come to be pinched with want, and yet cannot dispose of 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 ground? For I cannot imagine how order can be maintained among those that are in all things equal to one another.”

“I do not wonder,” he said, “that it appears so to you, since you have no notion, or at least no right one, of such a constitution, but if you had been in Utopia with me, and had seen their laws and rules as I did for the space of the five years I lived among them, during which time I was so

delighted with them that indeed I should never have left them if it had not been to make the discovery of that new world to the Europeans, you would then confess that you had never seen a people so well constituted as they.”

“You will not easily persuade me,” said Peter, “that any nation in that new world is better governed than those among us. For as our intellects are not worse than theirs, so our government (if I mistake not) being more ancient, long practice has helped us to find out many conveniences of life, and some happy chances have led us to the discovery of other things which no man’s understanding could ever have invented.”

“As for the antiquity either of their government or of ours,” said he, “you cannot pass a true judgment of it unless you had read their histories; for, if they are to be believed, they had towns among them before our countries were so much as inhabited. As for those discoveries that have been either hit on by chance or made by ingenious men, these might have happened there as well as here. I do not deny but we are more ingenious than they are, but they exceed us much in industry and application. They knew little concerning us before my arrival among them. They call us all by the general name of ‘The nations that lie beyond the equinoctial line,’ for their chronicle mentions a shipwreck that was made on their coast twelve hundred years ago, and that some Romans and Egyptians that were in the ship, getting safe ashore, spent the rest of their days among them; and such was their ingenuity that from this single opportunity they drew the advantage of learning from those unlooked-for guests, and acquired all the useful arts that were then among the Romans and which were known to these shipwrecked men. And by the hints that they gave them they themselves found out even some of those arts which they could not fully explain, so happily did they improve that accident of having some of our people cast upon their shore. But if such an accident has at any time brought any Utopians into Europe, we have been so far from improving ourselves by it that we do not so much as remember it, as, in aftertimes perhaps, it will be forgot by our people that I had ever traveled there, for though they, from one such accident, made themselves masters of all the good inventions that were among us, yet I believe it will be long before we learn or put in practice any of the good institutions that are among them. And this is the true cause of their being better governed and living happier than we, though we come not short of them in point of understanding or outward advantages.”

Upon this I said to him, “I earnestly beg you would describe that island very particularly to us. Be not too short, but set out in order all things relating to their soil, their rivers, their towns, their people, their manners, their constitution, laws, and, in a word, all that you imagine we desire to know, and you may well imagine that we desire to know everything concerning them of which we are hitherto ignorant.”

“I will do it very willingly,” said he, “for I have digested the whole matter carefully, but it will take up some time.”

“Let us go, then,” I said, “first and dine, and then we shall have leisure enough.”

He consented; we went in and dined, and after dinner came back and sat down in the same place. I ordered my servants to take care that none might come and interrupt us, and both Peter and I desired Raphael to be as good as his word. When he saw that we were very intent upon it, he paused a little to recollect himself, and began in this manner: [See More, *Utopia*, Book II]

### **Topics for Writing and Discussion**

1. In discussing whether he could be of any use in advising rulers, Raphael gives several reasons why he thinks his advice would not be listened to. For example, he says, “there are none that are



not so wise as to need no assistance, or at least, that do not think themselves so wise that they imagine they need any. And if they court any, it is only those for whom the prince has much personal favor, whom by their fawning and flatteries they endeavor to fix to their own interests, and, indeed, nature has so made us, that we all love to be flattered and to please ourselves with our own notions.” Today we have the same problem. It is hard to find intelligent and gifted people to run for office, whether in city, state, or national elections, because of the cost and magnifying-glass scrutiny a candidate must undergo. One consequence is that politicians are held in low esteem (see the latest Pew Research poll), and a very low percentage of qualified voters actually turn out for elections, particularly those in which there are no state or federal offices up for grabs. What can be done about this vital issue? Twenty-two countries make voting mandatory. Should we do that in the US? What else can be done? Discuss with your group and the class.

2. In More’s time, many crimes were punished by hanging, even theft. Raphael argues against such a harsh policy. Today, many countries, as well as many states in the US, prohibit capital punishment. In states where the punishment of life without parole has been instituted, the number of death sentences has declined. Do you think the death penalty should be abolished? If so, why? If not, why not? Discuss with your group. Write an argument on one side or the other of this debate.

3. Near the end of his discourse, Raphael says: “I must freely own that as long as there is any property, and while money is the standard of all other things, I cannot think that a nation can be governed either justly or happily: not justly, because the best things will fall to the share of the worst men; nor happily, because all things will be divided among a few (and even these are not in all respects happy), the rest being left to absolutely misery.” In Book II, Raphael describes the country of Utopia, where property is held in common. Through the centuries since More’s time, many communities have been founded on the principle of property held in common (most failed), and today the struggle between socialism and capitalism continues. In the United States, we have a capitalist society, but we also have many government social programs to help the old, the poor, and the disabled. There is a continuous struggle between those, on the one hand, who would have our national government take only a small role in society, taxing citizens to support national defense and certain other large-scale projects, and, on the other, those who think the role of the government should be much larger, taxing people to ensure that everyone who wants to can go to college, for example. What do you think the role of government should be? Do some research and discuss with your group. You might want to distinguish between federal, state, and local government.