



### Utopian Ethics and their Philosophical Roots

*Ethics was traditionally understood as the study of the “final end” or “ultimate good” for human beings, which is to say, of human happiness and how to achieve it. A pioneer of this inquiry, Aristotle begins his Nicomachean Ethics with the observation that “every action and every choice is held to aim at some good.”<sup>1</sup> Both classical and Christian philosophers approached the question by deliberating on the relative merits of three different categories of goods: the goods of fortune or external goods (such as wealth, honor, and physical pleasure), the goods of the body (such as health, strength, and beauty), and the goods of the soul (moral and intellectual virtue).<sup>2</sup> Cicero’s *De finibus* dramatizes a debate between spokesmen for these different goods: the Epicurean position that pleasure is the greatest good is compared to the Stoic position that virtue alone is sufficient for happiness and the Peripatetic position that external goods are necessary but not sufficient for happiness. As Cicero shows, these views on the nature of the ultimate good have political consequences insofar as they influence who should govern, and towards what shared aims.*

*Although the Utopians have never heard of these philosophers, Raphael says the Utopians “discuss the same issues as we do” (188/32). Their vocabulary and questions resemble those of the Stoic, Epicurean, and Christian thinkers widely read in More’s time.*

- What do most Utopians regard as the greatest human good?
- How does their philosophy inform “the structure of the commonwealth” and its way of life (181/67-72)?
- Raphael claims that there is no happier *respublica* anywhere in the world (193/29-33). Does his description of Utopian life support this claim? Does Utopia support the final end, the happiness, of the human being?

### The Soul

*Cicero shows in *De finibus* that a philosophical school’s answer to the question about the human good can be traced back to the school’s position on the nature of the soul. The Epicureans believe that the soul is material and finite, for example, while the Stoics and Christians believe in the immortality of the soul. Their differing views of the ultimate good for a human being follow.*

*In Utopia, these “first principles” of ethics are drawn from religion, not reason. Utopus mandated two religious beliefs as necessary support for Utopian ethics: 1) the soul is immortal and created by God for happiness, and 2) virtue is rewarded and vice is punished in an afterlife (188/56-62, 204/70-80). The Utopians believe that without these principles, all would pursue pleasure regardless of right or wrong (188/66-9). Hence the Utopians hold the opinion that anyone who denies these beliefs “has degraded the lofty nature of his soul to the base level of a beast’s wretched body” (204/79-80).*

- Why might such beliefs on the soul be compulsory in Utopia? What view of human nature justifies this compulsion? What are some alternative views and the grounds of each? Was Utopus prudent?
- Are these religious beliefs consistent with the Utopians’ ethical opinions on the human good?

### Virtue, Pleasure, and Fear

*Cicero argues in *De officiis* that moral and intellectual virtue are inherently honorable (honestum) or good in themselves.<sup>3</sup> Likewise Socrates’ interlocutors in the *Republic* charge him with the task of proving the goodness and desirability of a well-ordered soul “in itself,” apart from any “wages” or external benefits that accrue.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Epicurus argues that virtue is desirable primarily as a means of acquiring pleasure.<sup>5</sup> The Utopians define virtue as living according to nature, and they define the end of virtue as pleasure (188/40-4). Raphael registers his surprise at this opinion, especially because it is supported by the Utopian religion, which is “sober and strict and, indeed, almost gloomy and stern” (188/46-9). The Utopians distinguish between natural and false pleasures; virtue and consciousness of a good life, pleasures which abide in the mind, are the highest pleasures for them (190/5-28, 192/49-53). The Utopians believe that “religious fear of the heavenly beings [is] the greatest and practically the only incitement to virtue” (208/35-7) and that without their compulsory religious beliefs, “it would be truly insane to pursue virtue, which is harsh and difficult, and not only to banish the pleasures of life but even to seek out pain of your own accord, and to expect to get nothing out of it” (188/72-6).*

- Are the Utopians’ opinions consistent on the status of virtue as pleasure?
- Is the Utopian definition of virtue sufficient? Is nature a sufficient foundation for virtue?
- How do Utopian ethics compare to the thinking of Augustine in *The City of God*?

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1094a

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, I.viii.2, *Politics*, VII.i.3-4, and Plato, *Laws* 697b, 743e

<sup>3</sup> Cicero, *De officiis*, I. 14-15

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 357b-358d; Cicero, *De finibus* II.45

<sup>5</sup> See Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. II, trans. R.D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1935), 663; Cicero contests this claim in *De officiis*, III.117.