



Returning to the Sources: “*Ad fontes*,” or the cry to return “to the sources,” was a common inspiration and imperative among writers in the Renaissance. More’s *Utopia* reflects this approach and spirit in a number of thought-provoking ways. Below are some key terms from *Utopia* that suggest More’s interest in stirring new reflection on the beginning points – and possible ends or goals – of human life. In this sense, *Utopia* is a “radical” book, since it leads the reader to consider the “roots” of things.

- ***fontes*, “springs” or “sources” of conduct**
Peter Giles claims that More’s account of Utopia reveals the *fontes* from which all goods and ills of republics arise (151/60). Poet Geldenhauer claims that Utopia reveals *fontes* of right and wrong (213/51). Poet Schrijver asks, “Do you want to know the *fontes* of the virtues?” (213/59), and directs the reader to *Utopia*.
- ***semina*, “seeds” (connoting a dynamic source, origin, root)**
Raphael wishes to ask kings to uproot from their souls the seeds of evil and corruption (168/38). Raphael argues that the industrious Romans learned “useful skill” from the *seminibus* of others (174/46-49). Bude calls More’s book a “nursery” or *seminarium* of useful institutions (148/57).
- ***principia*, “principles”**
Raphael claims that the first principles of Utopians are derived from their religion, not reason (188/50, 56). Poet Schrijver suggests that More’s book can help one understand the *principia* of the world’s ills (213/60).
- ***fundamentum*, “foundation”**
Raphael says most Utopians consider health as the foundation of all pleasures (192/3). Raphael praises Utopia for laying the foundations of a commonwealth “most happy” and “likely to last forever” (211/1). Thomas More says that the foundation of all Utopian institutions seems absurd: common life without money (211/21).

As an example of the depth of *Utopia*’s terminology, consider the word *principia*. What is a “principle” for More?

- “Principle” comes from *principium*, meaning a “beginning” or starting point of reasoning, making, or doing. For example, the “principle of non-contradiction,” or an axiom/postulate in mathematics is a beginning or “first principle.”
- A first principle of practical reason is “the end” or purpose, used to judge good making [*technē*] or good doing [*praxis*]. For example, in the activities of making a bridge or a cake or a knife, each has its end: safe passageway in the case of the first, good taste in the case of the second, cutting well in the case of the third. Further, a “good general” is one who can achieve the end of victory and knows how to judge the means accordingly. What is needed for good generalship is knowledge, experience, training, keenness, and talent to reason and act soundly.
- An “end” – which is first in intention, though last in execution and achievement – depends on choosing the right means.
- The first principle of ethics [“good doing”] is the “supreme good” or “end” of life – happiness. As with other key subjects in *Utopia*, More draws inspiration from a classical source, the thought of Cicero.¹

“*Ad fontes*”: Cicero on first principles (*principia*) and the ultimate end (*finis*) of human action

- For Cicero, we know the first principles of human action through self-knowledge arising from comprehensive philosophic reflection on the human soul, the world, and the gods – in themselves and as manifested over time and in many different places (e.g., esp. *De Finibus* 5.34-46).
- In *De Finibus*, Cicero holds that the best of the Stoics and of the Peripatetics actually agree on the source that supports their ethics: the source is the nature of the soul with its innate impulses (*appetitus*) for knowledge, sociability, magnanimity, and apt-decorous-tempered-action. These moving powers – what Cicero calls “seeds” or “springs” – are naturally present in the soul and are tied to our distinctively rational power whereby we desire to know truth and to live in society; these are the “first principles” of human action. See, for example, *De Finibus* 4.16-18, 32-40; 5.15-22, 41-44. Raphael addresses *appetito* in *Utopia* 190/6 and 190/9.
- In *De Officiis*, Cicero gives his last account of those “principles of nature that we are bound to follow” (*principia naturae... quae sequi debeas*, 3.52). Those principles are the “four springs of moral excellence” [*quattuor fontibus honestatis*, 3.96] set forth in 1.11-14: those innate “moving powers” to know the truth, to live justly and benevolently in society, to act in a great-souled or magnanimous manner, and to live in a decorous or fitting manner. This is Cicero’s reformulation of Plato’s four cardinal virtues.

¹ For the importance of the *summum bonum*, the *finis* [end] of life, and the happy life see especially Cicero’s *De Officiis* 1.5; *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* 1.11, 2.5; *Tusculan Disputations* 3.1-2, 4.5-6, 5.1-2. See also the marginal glosses in *Utopia* on page 65: “Higher and lower goods” [*Ordo bonorum*], “Supreme goods” [*Fines bonorum*], and “The Utopians consider honest pleasure the measure of happiness” [*Utopiani felicitatem honesta voluptate metiuntur*]. For Augustine’s review of these issues, see *City of God* 19.1-4, 11.