

Pleasure: Humanity's Compass Throughout Life

It is pretty common for individuals to indulge in thoughts of creating a society befitting of descriptions that evoke images of perfection. The various ideological facets that are instituted through complementary systems of social decorum serve as the foundation to promote such a place as not only viable but also as robustly alluring. However, as objective as it may seem to the individual doing the constructing, it is quite important for them to realize that their specific approach will most likely carry idiosyncratic partialities to some degree. This is simply because, as persons who are exposed to a superfluous amount of ideals, experiences, and knowledge from a plethora of unique sources, humans are more inclined to foster ideas around improving, inaugurating, or over-ambitiously perfecting new processes that will eradicate shortcomings and establish an infrastructure that does not defile longevity. I found this the case through extensive descriptions given by Raphael regarding the nature of the political, economical, sociological, legal, religious, and ethical systems in Thomas More's *Utopia*. The extent taken to depict the distant island of Utopia as perfect and by far superior to any country in Europe, and even the world, certainly does reflect a strong competency in rhetoric on the part of More. Furthermore, through a close, comprehensive reading of the text, I posit that the Utopian view of pleasure is arguably the central most ideology that permits the population to sustain a modest lifestyle keen on prosperity through moderation.

In the midst of reading Book Two in *Utopia*, I noticed that Raphael spends a considerable amount of time – roughly around eight pages (pgs. 71-79) – meticulously speaking about the ethical theory of pleasure embraced by society as a whole. In comparison to the lengths he goes to remark on other systematic and structural attributes, it becomes apparent that the inhabitants of Utopia associate one's interpretation of pleasure with the manner in which they choose to evaluate indulgences in pertinence to modest living. He introduces this topic by saying, "But their chief subject of dispute is the nature of human happiness – on what factor or factors does it depend? Here they seem rather too much inclined to take a hedonistic view, for according to them human happiness consists largely or wholly in pleasure" (Bk. II, pg. 71). His specific choice of words attests to the reason he feels the need to expound on the influence of pleasure because, frankly, human happiness is an all-encompassing theme that spawns subtopics, which in turn incites the proliferation of varying discourses that seek to build theoretical frameworks capable of guiding the masses. This is affirmed when he goes on to say, "Surprisingly enough, they defend this self-indulgent doctrine by arguments drawn from religion... You see, in all their discussions of happiness they invoke certain religious principles to supplement the operations of reason, which they think otherwise ill-equipped to identify true happiness" (Bk. II, pg. 71). This statement marks the introduction of two important concepts that have been a great cause of debate among many prominent philosophers, such as Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, or Voltaire, throughout history: *faith* and *reason*. Now, while the purpose of this paper is not to highlight particular arguments around these terms, it is crucial to connect their meanings with the subject of pleasure in correspondence with happiness. As it is widely stated that certain religious principles, which in some way or another relate to faith, are used to assuage the gaps in reason, it is conjunctively conveyed that gaining a complete understanding of happiness is not possible through solely considering reasonable hypotheses for the origin of pleasure.

Therefore, this necessitates Utopians to adopt a set of values that amalgamates theism with fideism, which Raphael clarifies: “The first principle is that every soul is immortal, and was created by a kind God, Who meant it to be happy. The second is that we shall be rewarded or punished in the next world for our good or bad behavior in this one” (Bk. II, pgs. 71-72). It seems rather appropriate for their belief system to commence with the preconception that the soul is inherently designed to seek happiness because the latter principle directly correlates to the former through contingent circumstances. The rationale drawn from these principles presents a compelling argument given that it emphasizes the use of reason within a faith based context to provide individuals with validation for their indulgence in pleasures with respect to right and wrong. Raphael explains that Utopia is objective in its logical reasoning by conceptualizing the idea of seeking pleasure with restraint in a manner that gives inhabitants no other choice but to adhere. This is owed to the fact that, since no one has to worry about security in the broadest contexts, the odds of engagement in illicit pleasures that conflict with just ones or have painful repercussions, is slim to none. As if to show subtle biasedness, he goes on to strategically pose two rhetorical questions that directly correspond to the two principles: “For what’s the sense of struggling to be virtuous, denying yourself the pleasant things of life, and deliberately making yourself uncomfortable, if there’s nothing you hope to gain by it? And what can you hope to gain by it, if you receive no compensation after death for a thoroughly unpleasant, that is, a thoroughly miserable life?” (Bk. II, pg. 72). It is no doubting his appeal to Utopian reasoning around this matter because it cleverly encourages order that is autonomous through a type of self-imposed causality. In time perhaps, the modern world will gain a level of maturity essential to respecting this type of governance and see the same effects.

There is also an interrelationship between virtue and pleasure that Raphael begins to describe when he says, “...we’re naturally impelled by virtue – which in their definition means following one’s natural impulses, as God meant us to do” (Bk. II, pg. 72). It is fully established when he characterizes the attitude of the sternest ascetic to that of the individual who simply obeys instinct to find a balance between his or her own likes and dislikes. He expounds on Utopian logic by reasoning that an ascetic will abstain from a number of pleasures both intrinsically and extrinsically because of a rigid view of pleasure as it is applied to God, but will encourage the easing of sufferings and privations of other people. This is hypocritical, and perhaps heretical, when considering his intent to remain committed to the condemnation of pleasure because it seemingly rejects the will of God and imposes his own. This is a critical point that justifies Utopian logic in its conclusion that pleasure is woven into the very sinewy fabric of human beings to nourish the immortal soul. As confirmation of this: “The Utopians therefore regard the enjoyment of life – that is, pleasure – as the natural object of all human efforts, and natural, as they define it, is synonymous with virtuous” (Bk. II, pg. 73). It is the duty of every individual to seek pleasures, while remaining cognizant of where each one takes root, and embrace the sensations by which they are accompanied because there exists a predisposition that causes gravitation towards experiences that yield this feeling. This awareness can also be applied to socioeconomical representations that are often seen in the world today through thinking of pleasures in terms of personal and public interests. Just as it is wrong for a person to deprive another of a certain level of prosperity so that they can alone enjoy it, it is wrong to abuse one’s ability to experience pleasure at the expense of another in the same respect. Though, approaching either situation with philanthropic benevolence in order to enrich another person’s life is an act of humanity that always begets more than that which is lost.

The substantiality of pleasure becomes yet even clearer as Raphael reiterates the definition that has been applied to it by Utopians, then expatiating about the "...idiotic conspiracy to call some things enjoyable which are naturally nothing of the kind" (Bk. II, pg. 73). He makes a point to mention 'pleasure-addicts' who: think that they are better than others because their clothing is of a finer quality, attach importance to a lot of empty gestures (i.e. bowing to 'noblemen') that serve no functional purpose, think it essential to get a hold of authentic jewels for the value placed on them, accumulate superfluous wealth for no better reason than to enjoy the thought of having that much, gamble rashly, and participate in hunting and hawking. The reason he takes the time to depict these kinds of deplorable activities is to stress the perversion of the tastes of those participants who consider them major pleasures of life and even the chief reasons for living. He intends to address the ignorance and misconceptions about the nature of pleasure in order to provoke feelings of disdain for such activities. I find the argument about individuals who are overcome with greed the most convincing because the perpetuation of money as a source of true happiness is indeed a delusion that will only lead to displeasure in the end. As he shares his opinion of each of these illusory forms of pleasure, I can see that he grows weary of speaking about them when he delivers his final statements in regards to hunting, "...the Utopians consider hunting below the dignity of free men, and leave it entirely to butchers, who are, as I told you, slaves" (Bk. II, pg. 76). The confinement of such a detestable act to slaves says volumes about their appearance in the eyes of Utopians, which makes me wonder whether they believe slaves are even capable of experiencing pleasure. According to Raphael, "...the Utopians believe that, so far from contributing to happiness, this type of thing makes happiness impossible – because, once you get used to it, you lose all capacity for real pleasure, and are merely obsessed by illusory forms of it...But however much one's judgment may be impaired by habit or ill health, the nature of pleasure, as of everything else, remains unchanged" (Bk. II, pg. 74-76). Therefore, I suppose they are capable, although their heavy engagement in these unpleasant forms substantially lowers the likelihood they will ever be able to gain true happiness from natural pleasure.

This line of thinking becomes more difficult to refute as Raphael further describes the threshold of pleasure in its profound complexity, especially given the extent that Utopians have gone to dictate a logical order around it. He states that real pleasures are divided into two categories, mental and physical, with the latter pleasures functioning as an umbrella for two practical types: "First there are those which fill the whole organism with a conscious sense of enjoyment...Their second type of physical pleasure arises from the calm and regular functioning of the body" (Bk. II, pgs. 76-77). I regard this classification and application of pleasure as one that seeks to encapsulate the interconnectedness of the human soul with its surroundings, while also tactfully outfitting the nature of pleasure to our material being. The first type is represented by allusions to the metabolism of the body as regulated through consumption of food and drink, bodily discharge, and relief of irritation, and even external stimuli, such as music, that do not satisfy an organic need but act directly on one's senses to evoke reactions. The second is considered the greatest pleasure in life because the proper functioning of one's health is satisfaction enough without the need to invoke external processes or stimuli. Raphael deems the pleasure experienced through the persistence of normal health as 'less ostentatious', and says, "It's enough by itself to make you enjoy life, and unless you have it, no other pleasure is possible" (Bk. II, pg. 77). Consequently, I think his phrasing is a key component to understanding the human capacity to contain good and evil intent, separately and in combination with one another, because health itself is an entity that has the ability to sustain the presence of both beneficial and

detrimental elements while displaying no physical sign of either. This is, for example, often seen through the uncanny development and disappearance of disease. He goes on to explain that the basis for such an argument was established through breaking down the relationship between illness and pain, illness and health, and health and pleasure: "...illness involves pain, which is the direct opposite of pleasure, and illness is the direct opposite of health, therefore health involves pleasure" (Bk. II, pg. 76) The logic behind this is practically infallible, so the importance of pleasure in Utopia definitely transcends the bounds of its usual, more rudimentary connotation.

This thorough explanation of physical pleasures surely presents a rather plausible argument, but additional reasoning around mental pleasures promotes great laudability. Raphael adds, "Mental pleasures include the satisfaction that one gets from understanding something, or from contemplating truth. They also include the memory of a well-spent life, and the confident expectations of good things to come," (Bk. II, pg. 76) to introduce it as the complementary portion of the spectrum that pleasure covers by nature. There is an obtrusive interaction between the mind and the body, and between the environment within a human being and the elements that make up its surroundings that is revealed through close examination of both pleasure types. Thus, the assertion can be made that physical and mental pleasure, when both are assigned to a particular situation, are experiences that cannot take favorable forms if one holds more favorability than the other. By this deduction, it is implied that good behavior and a clear conscience yield a considerable amount of mental pleasure that then affects the type of physical pleasure in which an individual will invest their time. If, at any point, either of these pleasures takes an unfavorable form, the outcome will be one that is not nurturing for or conducive to the soul; which is most likely the case for slaves in Utopia.

As I briefly stated previously, Utopians feel that human beings have been intentionally outfitted with natural gifts that obviously encourage us to associate with the world in a manner that will permit us to experience nothing but favorable pleasures. Raphael affirms this in stating, "They're also keen on the pleasures of sight, hearing, and smell, which are peculiar to human beings – for no other species admires the beauty of the world, enjoys any sort of scent, except as a method of locating food, or can tell the difference between a harmony and a discord" (Bk. II, p. 79). I agree with this supposition because, antithetically, humans can also behold scenes not aesthetically pleasing, smell putrid scents, and touch harmful things that discourage repeated contact. It is as if they believe that Mother Nature has equipped mankind with pleasure as an incorporeal compass strong enough to assist in maneuvering through life and its many unpredictable transpirations. For this reason, they look down upon persons who take their abilities for granted or undermine them: "For they think it's quite absurd to torment oneself in the name of an unreal virtue, which does nobody any good, or in order to steel oneself against disasters which may never take place" (Bk. II, pg. 79). In other words, a partiality in either direction, manifesting as abuse or deliberate privation, is a gesture of ungratefulness and a sign of disrespect to God and his Nature.

However, I believe the solution lies within the very ethical theory of pleasure that the Utopians have intuitively contoured because has proven central to their livelihood. Their social system is very analogous to Epicureanism because the latter explicitly states that the way to attain real pleasure is through modest living, and through gaining knowledge about the actions of the world and the limits of one's desires, while the former only implies it. Taking this into consideration presents impeccable evidence that supports the assertions made in regards to pleasure and its role within a much larger frame. The fact is, Epicurus

was yet another philosopher historically known to have concerned himself with the problem of evil and so, from his postulations he founded his own philosophical system that sought to appease the ambiguity around the existence of good and evil within human creatures. Moreover, Raphael makes a statement about pleasure that is almost entirely symmetrical to the statements that have made about the presence of evil only being detected by contrast with the presence of good. His words are: “Some thinkers used to maintain that a uniformly tranquil state of health couldn’t properly be termed a pleasure since its presence could only be detected by contrast with its opposite” (Bk. II, pg. 77). He ends his extensive exposition of pleasure within Utopian society by proclaiming that he wishes to only describe their way of life rather than defend it, but his lengthy deposition does far more than either of these actions. The depth to which it is taken to relate pleasure to the purpose of the human creature clearly has an imperative meaning, especially when pleasure manages to come back up only in reference to the universally respected priests who ‘renounce all the pleasures of this life’ (Bk. II, pg. 103).