Sam Wittmer

One of the interesting characteristics of two fictional Utopian societies, Thomas More’s *Utopia* and Plato’s *Republic*, is that in these model societies there is a recognized inequality among the people. In the setting we live in, one infatuated with the idea of equality, it may seem surprising to know that these philosophers believed that a perfect society would have people that were better than others. The relationships of ruler to subject, in *The Republic* and *Utopia*, are based upon a group of the elite presiding, not forcefully, over another group that the society has been determined to be in a different position, with each party doing their duty for the gain of the State.

Although the statuses of the citizens of each state are not equal, there is not unrest among the classes. Plato speaks of a metaphor that the people should be told to explain these different classes; humans are each comprised of a type of metal from birth that determines status; gold, silver, and iron or bronze. Those of gold, the guardians or rulers, would preside over those who were simply not born to rule.[[1]](#footnote-1) In *Utopia,* as well, the state is structured with people who are higher, such as the prince and the priests. Its structure allows it to function. Workers produce goods which are equally distributed to all—including the higher class—and from the rulers they receive protection. Each class relies on the other.

In *Utopia,* the act of manual labor or labor in general is not looked on with disdain as it often is in societies that esteem nobility, but is respected and even revered. Some devotees to religion would dedicate themselves to laborious tasks that no others would want to do. The state’s opinion of them is that “by their stooping to such servile employments, they are so far from being despised, that they are so much the more esteemed by the whole nation.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This respect (from the ruling class) of labor comes from the understanding that labor is not simply the unsightly means to an end, but part of a system of cogs. In *The Republic* as well, Plato speaks of the duty of the ruled to be productive in their best strengths for the good and for the rulers to govern justly and that this network is to be respected—that the system is a relationship of mutual understanding of duty.

The rulers of these two societies function as parts of their state and recognize their duty to lead instead of being tyrants. Therefore, the lower classes work to serve the community to fulfill their duty.

1. Plato, *The Republic* (Toronto: Dover, 2000), 86-87 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thomas More, *Utopia* (Toronto: Dover, 1997), 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)