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978-0-521-41954-3 - T. R. Malthus: An Essay on the Principle of Population

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HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT



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T. R. MALTHUS

*An Essay on the
Principle of Population;*

or

A View of its past and present Effects on
Human Happiness;

With an Inquiry into our Prospects respecting
the future Removal or Mitigation of the
Evils which it occasions

Selected and introduced by

DONALD WINCH

Professor, School of Social Sciences, University of Sussex

using the text of the 1803 edition as prepared by
Patricia James for the Royal Economic Society, 1990,
showing the additions and corrections made in the 1806, 1807,
1817, and 1826 editions



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Introduction

I

The proverbial relationship of great rivers to small springs is well illustrated by Robert Malthus's most famous work. The *Essay on Population* surfaced in 1797 in the form of a friendly argument between the author and his father: it has continued to flow, often as a disturbing torrent, ever since. The argument originally centred on a self-consciously paradoxical essay written by the political philosopher and novelist, William Godwin, whose public reputation was at its zenith during the last half of the 1790s, largely as a result of the interest aroused by his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*. Since Malthus's father was an ardent follower of Rousseau, it can be inferred that he was attracted by Godwin's anarchistic vision of a perfect egalitarian society without government or social hierarchy; and that he may also have been sympathetic to the conclusions of another work on human perfectibility published at this time, the Marquis de Condorcet's speculations on a future form of society reconstructed by science from above in his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*. For the sake of clarity, Robert Malthus hurriedly committed his ideas to paper, adopting a polite yet decidedly contrary position which – as he admitted – imparted a 'melancholy hue' to the subject. This was the work – now usually known as the first *Essay* – that was published as *An Essay on the Principle of Population, as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society, with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and Other Writers* in 1798.

What the world still knows, accurately or not, as the 'Malthusian' position, therefore, and what was to become the basis for Malthus's

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entire career as an author and teacher, made its initial appearance as an anonymous pamphlet. It was the first published work of a mild-mannered country clergyman, aged 32, who was unmarried and still living with his parents while holding the curacy of a small rural parish near their home in Surrey. Apart from the fact that Malthus was born with a harelip and cleft palate, disabilities that were an impediment to advancement within the church, the most unusual thing about him at this time was his education. Although always destined for a career in the Church of England, his father had sent Robert, his second son and seventh child, to the Dissenting Academy at Warrington, where he was left in the charge of Gilbert Wakefield, a learned and controversial figure in the Unitarian movement who was later to die after being imprisoned for opposing the war with France in terms that were regarded as seditious. After Warrington, in 1784, Malthus went up to Wakefield's old college at Cambridge, Jesus College, where his tutor, William Friend, like Wakefield, was also a Unitarian and held equally unorthodox views on religion and politics that were later to lead to banishment from the university. We know nothing about Malthus's reaction to these influences when he was an undergraduate, but he was always sympathetic to the main reform aim of the dissenters, the abolition of the Test and Corporation Acts which excluded them from many aspects of public life. A couple of years before he wrote the first *Essay*, he also sought to publish a pamphlet in support of the Foxite Whigs and those who opposed the repressive policies of Pitt during the early years of the war with France. The only other thing that can be said about Malthus's Cambridge education with any certainty is that he obtained a good degree in mathematics and was sufficiently well thought of by his college to be offered a non-teaching Fellowship.

In the first version of the thesis that is now linked with his name, Malthus described himself as a reluctant opponent of the radical interpretation of the science of politics that was then most readily associated with the French revolution and those *philosophes*, such as Condorcet, who were thought to have provided its inspiration. According to this interpretation, politics connoted the activity of human reason operating directly through positive laws and via the remodelling of political institutions to improve the lives of individuals and nations. Standing this proposition on its head, Malthus maintained that misery and vice were attributable to a fundamental law of nature that was impervious to institutional change and legislative contrivance. He also shifted the terms

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of debate from political culture towards biology by grounding his law of nature on the population principle – an ever-present propensity for population growth to outstrip the means of subsistence that placed the happiness and morals of the mass of society under persistent threat. Since any scheme of lasting improvement in the human condition had to confront the dilemma embodied in the population principle, Malthus embarked on a life-long attempt to show that those who attributed human suffering to defective social and political institutions overlooked one of its perennial sources and were guilty of fundamental error. At best the error aroused unrealizable hopes; at worst it was a recurrent source of revolutionary unrest. In either respect, it compounded difficulties that were ultimately remediable, not through constitutional innovation and egalitarian experimentation, but through the slow processes of education, a constant struggle with circumstances, and the exercise of individual prudence in personal affairs.

Such views would probably arouse controversy at any time, but Malthus's most uncompromising statement of the primacy of nature over political culture acquired some of its initial potency from the circumstances surrounding its publication in 1798. The works of Godwin and Condorcet, in their different ways, belong to a period of reflection on the experience of the French revolution, when it seemed necessary for those who had set store by this grand experiment to rescue hopes of indefinite improvement through political change from the violent realities of the revolution itself. The radiant optimism contained in the final parts of Condorcet's *Sketch* had acquired a tragic dimension when its author became a victim of the very events which he had hoped would mark a new dawn for mankind. With hindsight, therefore, Malthus's *Essay* could be seen as another sign of that scepticism or hostility towards the revolution in Britain that set in during the final years of the century and was to continue throughout the Napoleonic wars. By association at least, Malthus's work acquired a conservative or counter-revolutionary complexion that tempts comparison with Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Although that is certainly not how Malthus wished to have his work regarded – he explicitly saw himself as an arbiter between the Burkean and Godwinian extremes – the conservative reputation of Malthus's *Essay* needs to be mentioned in any account of why 'Malthusian' acquired a negative connotation in some circles during his life-time, and why the antagonism, both then and later, came from such a wide range of the political spectrum

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– from ‘romantics’ such as Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, from Tory radicals such as William Cobbett, as well as from some socialists, Owenite and Marxian alike.

Malthus’s opinions, despite considerable modification and expansion in the second and subsequent editions of the *Essay* published after 1803, remained controversial throughout the Napoleonic wars and during the post-war period. The difficulties connected with securing a cheap supply of domestic food for Britain’s growing population, sporadic outbreaks of political unrest, and rising public expenditure on pauper support lent additional weight to Malthus’s basic thesis on population. They also account for the attention Malthus paid to two bodies of legislation, the reform or extension of which was much debated during this period: the Corn Laws and the Poor Laws. With regard to the former – a system of duties and bounties designed to encourage and protect domestic production of what was then the basic subsistence good – Malthus reluctantly came to the conclusion at the end of the war in 1814–15 that a measure of protection from foreign competition should be retained. In the eyes of many of his contemporaries within the small community of political economists, adherents of Adam Smith’s ‘system of natural liberty’ almost to a man, this constituted an act of apostasy, a departure from the general principle of free trade between nations. It therefore required some intellectual courage on Malthus’s part, but was more often interpreted in the highly charged political atmosphere surrounding the subject as evidence of a corrupt allegiance or bias in favour of the interests of the land-owning aristocracy.

For a larger public, and over a far longer period, however, the policy for which Malthus was best known and least loved was that of gradual abolition of the legal right of paupers to obtain family assistance from their parish under the English Poor Law. Elizabethan in origin, this law remained the first line of defence against indigence, though the terms upon which relief was granted, especially to those classed as able-bodied paupers, underwent considerable change during the Napoleonic wars. Malthus countenanced several different short-term remedies for acute distress, but abolition of automatic relief under the Poor Law remained his long-term aim until his death in 1834, on the eve of the passage of the Poor Law Amendment Act. Despite the fact that Malthus cannot be blamed for or credited with this controversial measure of reform, by a process of ideological association his name was and remains linked with it.

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An understanding of what made Malthus's *Essay* such a persistent source of dissension, therefore, requires attention first to his interpretation of the population principle itself, and secondly to the implications that he drew from it in the course of sustaining the larger role of political moralist – where the emphasis falls about equally on the adjective and noun in this description. For although the *Essay* later assumed an important place in the history of political economy, a discipline that was increasingly becoming autonomous, Malthus was more sympathetic to the view that treated this science as it had been treated by Adam Smith, namely as a subordinate branch of the science of politics and morals. Political moralist, therefore, though a term of late twentieth-century interpretative art, captures more of Malthus's intentions, interests, and methods of pursuing them than political economist or demographer, without denying the usefulness of these terms for some purposes. It also has to be borne in mind that Malthus was a sincere Christian, which means that his thinking on all questions of morals and politics has an important theological dimension – one that supported and was in turn supported by his philosophical and scientific beliefs.

II

Malthus made no claim to originality so far as his basic principle was concerned. That population depends on the availability of subsistence, and will respond to changes in that availability, was an eighteenth-century commonplace, with David Hume, Adam Smith, and Robert Wallace being the figures to whom Malthus gave most credit for his own initial understanding. The list of names grew as his own inquiries were extended (see pp. 7–8 below). Although his conclusions could have been sustained on the basis of the simpler assumption that the rate of potential population increase exceeds that of food production, Malthus imparted an added air of drama and precision to the subject by contrasting the geometric rate at which population was capable of increasing with the arithmetic rate at which subsistence could be expanded. This formulation proved intellectually significant as well as arresting and often misleading. Thus when Charles Darwin reread the *Essay* in 1838, the mathematical determinism of Malthus's geometric rate of increase enabled him to appreciate the constancy of the pressure behind the competition for food and space – a constancy essential to his own theory of species selection in nature, where the instinct to reproduce was

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unchecked by foresight. The arithmetic rate of increase proved equally pregnant: it developed in the hands of Malthus and others into a generalization known later as the law of diminishing returns – a law, held to be peculiar to agriculture and the mining of raw materials, that was to dominate English political economy for over half a century. It provided the basis for one of Malthus's most important contributions to classical political economy, the theory of rent advanced as an explanation for the peculiarities of the income derived from the ownership of scarce natural resources.

Such were some later biological and economic implications of Malthus's formulation of the population principle. The most distinctive feature of his position from the outset, however, was the stress placed on the 'imminent and immediate' nature of population pressure, as opposed to what Godwin and Condorcet had noted, namely its distant potential (and hence, to them, avoidable) catastrophic effects. Malthus's writings were also remarkable for their detailed exploration of the mechanisms by which various positive checks (acting via death rates) and preventive checks (operating on marriage and birth rates) regulated population growth in different societies and at different times. The first two books of the second and later editions of the *Essay* contained a large body of historical, ethnographic, and statistical evidence on the operation of checks which Malthus endeavoured to keep up to date as new information, particularly census data, appeared. Most of this empirical material has had to be omitted from this edition, but it must be remembered that one of Malthus's most telling criticisms of Godwin and Condorcet was that they had endangered the very notion of science as a progressive enterprise by infringing Newtonian precepts. In arriving at conclusions based solely on extrapolation, they had reasoned from causes to possible effects rather than from observed effects to possible causes.

Malthus's education as a mathematician was designed to produce a Newtonian scientist capable of subjecting all theories, whether those of natural or moral philosophy, to the test of observation and experiment. It encouraged him, through travel and reading, to become an assiduous collector of information on his chosen subject; and it helps to explain his pride in claiming that he confined his inferences to what the history of mankind had already revealed. Since his basic thesis was a universal one, historical investigation had to be conducted on the largest of canvases. Although centred around a single basic idea, therefore, the comparative-historical and encyclopaedic features of the *Essay* place it alongside such

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large-scale Enlightenment enterprises as Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* (1748), Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776). It was certainly imposing enough to make Malthus the leading, if always disputed, authority on population questions for a generation or more; and it has earned him a lasting place in the pantheon of historical demography for his analysis of population response mechanisms in pre-industrial societies.

Another distinctive feature of Malthus's thinking derives from his belief that many of these mechanisms involved *delayed* responses – usually, in modern commercial societies, to wage and price signals. This accounts for a pervasive concern with cycles and irregularities in what might otherwise be continuous processes of demographic or historical adjustment. It explains why Malthus treated the living standards of those at the base of the social pyramid – those who were most vulnerable to movements in the supply-and-demand forces acting on wages and the cost of basic subsistence – as being subject to perpetual oscillation around a culturally-defined minimum standard. He was interested in short-term remedies for the effects of cycles and in long-term methods of raising minimum standards, but the fact that 'periodic misery' seemed to be the allotted fate of those who lived by labour obliged him, both as clergyman and Newtonian philosopher, to provide a means of reconciling the sombre side of his conclusions with continued belief in fixed laws of nature and the beneficence of the divine plan. Malthus argued that God had created a universe ruled by laws in which the pressure of scarcity, and the unavoidable 'partial evils' associated with this state of affairs, were necessary in order to activate man's powers of mind and overcome a natural human tendency towards indolence. The struggle to reduce evil and overcome difficulty lay at the heart of the process known as civilization. But once achieved, civilization was not something whose continuance could be guaranteed. A degree of tension between man's circumstances and wants had to be sustained if the process was not to be halted or reversed.

This feature of Malthus's thinking appears in different guises throughout his work. It can best be illustrated by reference to the single most important change of emphasis introduced into the second edition of the *Essay* in 1803, the recognition of moral restraint, alongside vice and misery, as a third category of check. This constituted a move in a more positive direction, affording greater scope to human agency in minimiz-

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ing the moral and political consequences of the population threat – a move captured in the new subtitle, which stressed ‘the future removal or mitigation of the evils’ arising from that threat. In promoting moral restraint as the preferred response, Malthus was expanding on his earlier treatment of preventive checks that entailed prudence and foresight while at the same time divesting prudence of any vicious connotations. *Moral* restraint was strictly defined (see p. 23 n.4 below) as marriage delayed until a family could be supported, while observing strict sexual continence during the waiting period. The restraint would show itself in a rise in the average age of marriage, and hence in a reduction in the period of female fecundity. But Malthus was opposed to what might seem an equally effective remedy: the use of contraception within marriage. He believed that the widespread use of birth control, if that ever occurred, would encourage indolence. National and world population would fail to ‘reach its natural and proper extent’ (see p. 369 below). In short, birth control within marriage was contrary to God’s beneficent design because it removed a stimulus to industry.

Here then was the source of that narrow but deep rift which separated Malthus from many later supporters of his diagnosis of mass poverty – those called neo-Malthusians – for whom artificial methods of contraception within marriage offered a means of removing population pressure from the list of barriers to social progress. As the example of John Stuart Mill illustrates, neo-Malthusians could be more welcoming to socialistic experimentation than Malthus ever found it possible to be. Malthus’s acceptance of the idea of a divine plan also resolves what might otherwise be a paradox: how he could, on the one hand, be the leading opponent of attitudes and policies that favoured population growth, and yet at the same time express fears that remedies such as birth control, if effective, would run the risk of removing an essential stimulant to progress.

III

Striking a balance between negative and positive forces, defining the golden mean in both private and public conduct, characterizes much of Malthus’s thinking as a political moralist. The population principle served a negative polemical purpose – more prominent in the first edition of the *Essay* – in denying that Godwin’s (in some ways) appealing vision of an alternative society based on reason, sincerity, mutual benevolence,

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and common ownership of property (including spouses) could ever be established permanently. More positively, Malthus asserted that in order to mitigate the problems created by the inevitable resurgence of scarcity, vice, and misery in Godwin's ideal future state, it would be necessary to reinvent precisely those institutions of private property, marriage laws, and reliance on the system of personal rewards and penalties which Godwin had hoped would disappear. In this respect, while acknowledging that the status quo contained serious imperfections and injustices that ought to be redressed, Malthus was advancing a powerful defence of the most basic features of existing society. Any objective inquiry, he was asserting, would conclude that a 'society divided into a class of proprietors and a class of labourers, and with self-love for the mainspring of the great machine' (see p. 67 below) was an inescapable fact of social existence.

Malthus was, of course, criticizing Godwin for failing to see that self-interest was the only motive capable of inspiring action on the part of the mass of society, and hence for failing to recognize that his portrait of a society based purely on universal benevolence was unrealizable. But Malthus was also standing Godwin's entire moral psychology, based on the possibilities of making unalloyed reason the sole basis for future conduct, on its head. Godwin had maintained that mind would gain hegemony over matter; that the pleasures of the intellect would overcome those associated with the body; and that the disinterested pursuit of communal welfare would replace self-regarding pursuits. Malthus countered by arguing that mind was neither separate from matter nor were its pleasures inherently superior to those arising from material pursuits. Since all passions, including the passion between the sexes, had been implanted as part of the divine plan, their pursuit must be presumed as beneficial to individual and social welfare. Any dangers arose from lack of moderation in indulging the passions rather than from their existence. The close connections between intellectual and corporeal pleasures implied that actions based on conviction could never be a matter of rationality alone, divorced from actual feeling and experience – where the experience could be pleasant, as in the case of sex and conjugal affection, or painful, as in the case of punishment for crime or any other excess. Pain and evil could be reduced but not abolished. Neither reason nor institutions were capable of controlling all the results of the passions.

On this fundamental issue in moral philosophy, though not on other questions, Malthus followed the brand of theological utilitarianism

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patented by William Paley in his highly successful Cambridge textbook on the *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785), believing that God had designed a world in which pleasure/pain was the reward/penalty attached to actions that were most conducive/detrimental to our happiness. The rules that should guide the conduct of individuals could also be applied as the criterion for judging legislation and social outcomes, namely that the happiness of the community should be maximized and/or the sum of misery and vice minimized. The task of the practical moralist was to draw attention to the lessons of experience and suggest realistic solutions based on an assessment of human nature and the costs and benefits of different courses of action. A balance between vice and virtue, and sometimes between the lesser of two vices, would often have to be struck, with the added complication that short-term gains or losses had to be set against expected long-term results.

The Malthusian version of this moral calculus can be illustrated by considering his arguments for moral restraint and against those influences or competing remedies that worked against its acceptance. Moral restraint was clearly the remedy intended by a beneficent deity as the optimal solution to the population dilemma: it maximized happiness and virtue and minimized misery and vice. While such an argument met the requirements of theodicy, of a system for explaining and justifying the ways of God to man, the practical moralist had to go beyond theodicy to address the likely results of partial recourse to this solution in an imperfect world. The private and social benefits derived from delaying marriage until a family could be supported accrued under various headings: the reduction of excessive toil, indigence, irregularity of employment, crime, and vicious practices, together with higher wages and lower mortality rates. Against this had to be set the costs of any additional vice associated with a later age of marriage, chiefly in the form of male promiscuity and female prostitution. But sexual vices had no special status: they took their place in the moral scale alongside other sources of misery, one of the most important of which, in Malthus's opinion, was that associated with high rates of pre-adolescent mortality.

Malthus believed that moral restraint was adapted to man as he is rather than how he ought to be or might be. With some re-education to overcome long-established prejudices in favour of early marriage and the supposed public benefits of large and rising populations, he maintained that moral restraint was within the grasp of ordinary understanding; that

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it did not require heroic forms of self-denial and rational foresight into distant consequences; and that its benefits did not depend on immediate and universal acceptance. All those who adopted the solution would gain, 'whatever may be the number of others who fail' (see p. 226 below).

Clearly, however, the social benefits would be greater if education and personal responsibility were more widespread, and if the influence of those institutions which undermined individual prudence was removed. Chief among these institutions, in Malthus's opinion, was the English Poor Law, which attempted to guarantee a minimum level of subsistence to all those whose incomes fell short of what was necessary to support them and their families. Malthus's case against this system of legal relief was that, as a matter of principle and fact, the promise embodied in the right to subsistence had not been and could not be delivered. The effect of redistributing money income from rich to poor under conditions of acute food scarcity was simply to raise prices and spread the burden from the very poor to the poor. Attempts to raise money wages in line with the price of food had the same effect, at the greater cost of increasing unemployment. The long-term result of the Poor Law, therefore, was to encourage population without increasing the food supply, thereby raising prices, lowering real wages and spreading the disease of dependent poverty to a larger section of the lower classes. Although Malthus later acknowledged that the facts did not bear out his contention that the Poor Law encouraged early marriage and raised birth rates, he claimed that the experience of administering the system during and after the Napoleonic wars amply supported his diagnosis and long-term remedy, gradual withdrawal of the right of support.

What is equally characteristic of Malthus, however, is the way in which he consistently combined the long-term case for abolition with recognition that, along with such remedies as employment on public works, the Poor Law could be defended for its short-term benefits. He hoped that abolition would be accompanied by an increase in less regular and systematic forms of private philanthropy capable of discriminating between the idle and the industrious, and seeking to support only those who had fallen into pauperism for reasons beyond their control. Realizing that such a reform represented a major change in English provision and expectations, Malthus proposed that it should be attempted only when the process of re-education had gone further than any signs revealed that it had done so far. This was one reason why Malthus became an enthusiastic advocate of a national system of education for the

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lower or, as he later increasingly called them, the labouring classes. It would acquaint them with the true causes of their condition, and thereby reduce the chances of their supporting some of the more radical and revolutionary schemes that were afoot. It would encourage personal responsibility and aid the diffusion of 'personal respectability' previously associated only with the middle classes. Without education, in fact, it would be impossible to achieve another of Malthus's aims, the extension of civil and political liberty to the unpropertied in Britain.

IV

Controversial authors attract bold denunciations, inaccurate labels, and considerable misunderstanding. Malthus has suffered all of these. Despite his efforts to respond to new evidence and tone down or remove passages that had given offence (see especially the famous excision on p. 249 below), the replies to his critics published in the Appendices he added in 1806 and 1817 show that he had good reason to complain about being both misunderstood and misrepresented – in some cases, deliberately. To a large extent this has continued to be his fate, opening up a sizeable gap between his reputation and the intentions expressed in his writings. On the evidence of the *Essay*, then, how should Malthus be characterized and regarded as a social and political thinker?

Well before his death, Malthus had firmly attached his name to the population principle as an explanation for general poverty. Despite the fact that few people would now accept the inevitability of the dilemma he posed, the reputation stands. On many of the wider issues he addressed as a political moralist, however, Malthus was often following in the footsteps of earlier generations of moral philosophers and political economists and applying established perspectives to new problems. For example, Malthus was adopting the views of David Hume and Adam Smith when he held that the diffusion of commerce and manufacturing in Europe, a process that had gone furthest in Britain, had undermined the stagnation and servility of feudal society and created legal and political conditions favourable to economic growth, upward social mobility, and the diffusion of civil and political liberties. In his earliest response to Godwin, Malthus had called on Smith's analysis of self-interested behaviour, market exchange, and capital accumulation to show that the system of natural liberty provided the best means of dividing the labour and distributing the incomes of society non-coercively, without

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direct government intervention or unacceptable forms of paternal dependence.

Neither Smith nor Malthus treated the resulting distribution of efforts and rewards as equitable, but the system was prized for its role in creating and maintaining a large measure of personal independence and liberty of conscience and action. Challenged by the radical egalitarianism released by the French revolution, as well as by periodic unrest in Britain, Malthus gave a more forthright defence of the *necessary* connections between inequality, prosperity, and liberty than anything that can be found in the *Wealth of Nations*. He opposed all schemes based on common property, communal provision, and compulsory social insurance that held out a promise of equal security and plenty for all, regardless of merit or effort. He defended all solutions that were voluntary and adapted to individual circumstances – from moral restraint to savings banks. Egalitarian schemes, such as those put forward by Robert Owen or Thomas Spence, exacerbated the population problem and provided no incentive to exercise personal responsibility through moral restraint. Where no effective or virtuous means of controlling population growth existed, restraint would have to be imposed from above by means of a general law, the enforcement of which would entail arbitrary infringements of liberty. Malthus was advancing a more overtly Christian version of the self-interest model, in which Smith's emphasis on the pervasive desire for personal betterment was counterbalanced by the fear of falling in the social scale. Inequality supplied the rewards *and* penalties, the 'goad of necessity' as well as the positive incentives, that were needed to sustain the advance of civilization.

One could also say that Malthus put forward a more overtly Newtonian model to deal with the pressure of population on food production under conditions of diminishing returns. He demonstrated that a social and economic system based on individual property and operating through competitive markets was the only one capable of guaranteeing the production of a surplus over basic needs and raising living standards. On this topic Malthus accomplished something Smith had not felt obliged to do, namely to prove that this type of society would provide an *optimal* solution to the population dilemma by preventing production from going beyond what was economically sustainable, even when this solution fell short of the maximum level of output that was physically possible. Much of Malthus's *Essay* can be read, negatively, as a statement of the impossibility of constructing remedies for poverty that

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ignore market forces, or, positively, as an assertion of the capacity of the market to maintain an optimal relationship between population and resources through time.

But if a basic commitment to the wisdom of following the invisible hand in economic matters is the hallmark of an orthodox political economist, there is much in Malthus that raises doubts about his rights to membership of this club. As noted already, on at least one major policy question, the Corn Laws, Malthus rejected Smith's economic logic as well as that of his friend and fellow economist, David Ricardo. Several of the chapters in Book III of the *Essay* on agricultural and commercial systems reached their final form only in 1817, after Malthus had published pamphlets revealing his support for agricultural protection. But they began life in 1798 as a pair of chapters in the first *Essay* questioning Smith's correctness in maintaining that economic growth was invariably associated with improvements in the standard of living of the labouring classes when capital accumulation was concentrated in manufacturing as opposed to agriculture. At that time Malthus declared himself not to be 'a very determined friend' to the unstable and 'unwholesome' growth of urban manufacturing employments, suggesting that if economic growth assumed this shape higher per capita incomes were being bought at too high a price. The chapters that eventually appeared in the 1817 and 1826 editions were originally conceived as a separate treatise: they contain Malthus's speculations (and anxieties) about the unbalanced course on which the British economy was embarked under the artificial stimulus of war. They constitute, therefore, a short treatise along comparative-historical lines on the relative merits of dependence on agriculture, commerce and manufacturing, where the problems facing what is described there as a 'large landed nation' are those of Britain. Malthus became friendlier to manufacturing over time, chiefly because he came to see the spread of conveniences and luxuries to the labouring classes as an incentive system that supported moral restraint. Nevertheless, he continued to believe that it was imprudent for a country in Britain's situation to forsake the security and stability that came with being able to meet the chief food needs of her population from domestic sources. The Newtonian in Malthus was querying once more whether an optimum point was in danger of being passed.

This was not the only topic on which Malthus found himself at odds with the new orthodoxy that was forming around Ricardo's ideas,

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though the evidence for this is better displayed in his correspondence and his *Principles of Political Economy* (1820) than in the *Essay*. Compared with other political economists, Malthus was less confident about the self-adjusting properties of markets and more attentive to the ways in which cycles and other irregular forces created short-term disturbance, unemployment, and, possibly, long-term stagnation. It was this aspect of Malthus that led John Maynard Keynes, writing in the light of his own preoccupation with finding an explanation for unemployment in the 1930s, to regret the way in which Ricardian presumptions had defeated Malthusian ones on this question.

When Malthus proposed, as a remedy for post-Napoleonic-war depression, that effective demand could be sustained through the unproductive expenditure of those in receipt of rental incomes, it confirmed the hostile opinion of those who already suspected him of excessive tenderness towards the land-owning interests in parliament. Along with his clerical status, it helped to lay the groundwork for a set of ideological charges, later codified by Karl Marx and his followers, to the effect that Malthus had aligned himself with the anti-progressive historical forces that opposed the revolutionary potential of the emerging capitalist system, while maintaining that the best any alternative economic systems could do would be to redistribute human misery. Once more, as in the case of his early opposition to Godwin and Condorcet, Malthus's affiliations were made to seem conservative and counter-revolutionary. But does this do justice to his political opinions and other intellectual allegiances?

Malthus did not share the radical political opinions on parliamentary reform of Ricardo and his mentor in these matters, James Mill. But neither was Malthus a Burkean or anti-jacobin on political rights and constitutional reform. He remained a moderate Whig who deplored the way in which the war with France, acting in conjunction with misguided popular agitation, had become the pretext for curtailing civil liberties in Britain. The two chapters on this subject in the *Essay* (pp. 243–58 below) are written in a mood of regret that war and the threat to public order had forced those, like himself, who occupied the middle position to defend government rather than engage in the more natural pursuit of pressing for the reform of constitutional defects and keeping a close watch on executive encroachment.

The biographical evidence suggests that Malthus was temperamentally averse to controversy and opposed to extremes on all matters. Such

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caution and moderation could be the clue to his opposition to radicalism and utopianism, though the position also has deeper intellectual roots. These consist of a combination of the consequentialism of the utilitarian view of morals with a predilection for Newtonian analogies based on mathematics, ballistics, weights, springs, and countervailing forces. When social problems are posed as being analogous to those of the infinitesimal calculus, the choices involved in maximization or minimization become ones of balancing opposed forces, of marginal rather than all-or-nothing adjustments. In this respect, Malthus's *Essay* can be read as an applied treatise on the proper methods of reasoning in the moral or social sciences, with examples being drawn from the abundant literature on remedies for poverty to illustrate popular fallacies and erroneous inferences. As will be clear from the chapter devoted to showing why theories or general principles are essential if the fallacy of composition is to be avoided (pp. 312–24 below), Malthus's caution was not based on reverence for facts in themselves. His penchant for Newtonian analogies sometimes takes elaborate forms, as when he speaks of 'the different velocities . . . of projectiles passing through resisting media', where the principles adopted by the natural philosopher to explain such problems are treated as being equally applicable to moral and political philosophy (see p. 374 below). But Malthus's meaning and tone are just as readily captured in more homely models involving putting the hare of population growth to sleep in order to allow the tortoise of food production to pass it (see p. 230 below), or in appeals to common sense that affirm there is 'no argument so frequently and obviously fallacious as that which infers that what is good to a certain extent is good to any extent' (see p. 174 below).

Like so much else in the *Essay*, Malthus's belief that Newton's methods were applicable to the moral or social sciences proclaims his close relationship with the broader phenomenon known as the Enlightenment. Neither his clerical allegiances nor his opposition to one style of thinking that we rightly associate with radical, usually French, versions of the Enlightenment – the positivist vision of social reconstruction through the application of science to human affairs – alter this affinity. His religious beliefs were not primarily directed at preaching docility and resignation: evils remained such, whatever part they played in the larger divine scheme. On the central issues raised by Godwin and Condorcet and kept before the public eye by Paine, Owen, and each successive generation of radical reformers – the role of human institu-

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tions in generating improvement – Malthus had reached the conclusion in 1806 that: ‘Though government has but little power in the direct and immediate relief of poverty, yet its indirect influence on the prosperity of its subjects is striking and incontestable’ (see p. 252 below). Like the benefits derived from a wider diffusion of luxuries, equal laws and a voice in framing them were part of the process of enhancing dignity and respectability that was essential to improvement.

Malthus thought of himself as having helped to restore the ‘rational expectations’ that had been usurped by ‘the late wild speculations’ provoked by the French revolution (see pp. 325 and 331 below). Prudential checks were gradually replacing positive ones, and might later be replaced by wider recourse to moral restraint. Some progress had been made towards making mortality rates, particularly among the young, a sounder guide to the state of the nation than rising numbers alone. If the tortoise of food production overtook the hare of population growth, Malthus could envisage a state in which increasing population would be compatible with rising standards of living for all. Life’s lottery would contain ‘fewer blanks and more prizes’ (see p. 323 below), and those who fell into a state of poverty would do so for reasons that it was impossible to control in advance. Malthus described this vision as ‘very cautious’, but ‘far from being entirely disheartening’ (see pp. 328 and 331 below). It was not, perhaps, a noble or inspiring vision – more decent than heroic. But it does not deserve the epithet that is still repeatedly applied to it – grim – and there is, of course, no reason to think that Malthus was any less humane than those who have professed larger goals.

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Acknowledgements and notes on the text

The text on which this selection and edition are based is taken from the variorum of the *Essay* prepared by Patricia James for the Royal Economic Society, and published by Cambridge University Press in two volumes in 1990. This variorum takes the 1803 edition as its base text and records the changes, additions, and deletions that were made in the 1806, 1807, 1817, and 1826 editions. It also records the incorporation of material from the first *Essay* (1798) – indicated by an asterisk at the beginning and end of the passages. The page references to this work refer to the original edition: see the facsimile version published by Macmillan for the Royal Economic Society and entitled *First Essay on Population, 1798*, London, 1966. Black dots are used to show passages that were excised or substantially rewritten.

The editor's comments in the footnotes are preceded by a parenthesis and the editorial voice in all notes is that of Patricia James, with whom – before her untimely death in 1987 – this edition was originally planned as a collaborative enterprise. In addition to the apparatus included here, the full James edition identifies all of the authorities cited by Malthus in the text.

As an indication of the scope of the work from which the selections have been made, a complete list of the chapters in the 1826 edition is given in the contents pages. As will be clear from this, the material omitted consists largely of the illustrative historical, anthropological, and statistical material in Books I and II.

While my debts to Patricia James's edition of the text will be obvious to any reader, those to the friends who made encouraging and useful comments on my introduction are known only to me. Accordingly, I should like to express my thanks to John Burrow, Stefan Collini, and Quentin Skinner for their help.

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Principal events in the life of Robert Malthus

- 1766 Born at The Rookery, Wooton, Surrey, 13 February. Seventh child and second son of Daniel Malthus.
- 1782–4 Educated by Gilbert Wakefield at the Dissenting Academy at Warrington and later at Wakefield's home in Bramcote, Nottinghamshire.
- 1784–8 Undergraduate at Jesus College, Cambridge, where he graduated as Ninth Wrangler in the Mathematics Tripos.
- 1789 Ordained as Deacon and appointed curate of Okewood, near his parent's home in Surrey.
- 1793 Appointed Fellow of Jesus College.
- 1796 Wrote 'The Crisis, a View of the Present Interesting State of Great Britain, by a Friend to the Constitution' (unpublished).
- 1798 First *Essay on Population* published anonymously.
- 1799 Travel in Norway, Sweden, and Germany with friends, also collecting additional material on population.
- 1800 Published *An Investigation of the Causes of the High Price of Provisions*.
- 1803 Second and much enlarged edition of *Essay on Population*. Appointed Rector of Walesby, Lincolnshire, a living which he retained throughout his life, paying a curate to carry out the duties.
- 1804 Married Harriet Eckersall: first of their three children born.
- 1805 Appointed first Professor of General History, Politics, Commerce and Finance at East India College, Haileybury, an establishment designed to train civil servants prior to service in India.
- 1807 Published *A Letter to Samuel Whitbread* criticizing Whitbread's proposals for the Poor Law.

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- 1811 Beginning of correspondence and friendship with David Ricardo.
- 1814 Published *Observations on the Effects of the Corn Laws*, in which he adopted an impartial approach to the merits of free trade and protection.
- 1815 Published *An Inquiry into the Nature and Progress of Rent* and *The Grounds of an Opinion on the Policy of Restricting the Importation of Foreign Corn*, the latter expressing a 'deliberate, yet decided opinion' in favour of import restrictions.
- 1820 Published *Principles of Political Economy Considered with a View to their Practical Application*, a work partly designed to embody the conclusions he had reached as a result of teaching political economy at Haileybury, and partly to answer David Ricardo's *Principles*.
- 1823 Published *The Measure of Value Stated and Illustrated* and the article on 'Population' for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, later re-issued as *A Summary View of the Principle of Population* (1830).
- 1826 Published sixth and final edition of *Essay on Population*.
- 1827 Published *Definitions in Political Economy*.
- 1834 Founder member of London Statistical Society.
- 1834 Died 29 December, buried in Bath Abbey.

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These notes deal with the principal authors and works mentioned by Malthus in this edition. For fuller notes on all Malthus's sources the reader should consult Patricia James's edition of the *Essay*, volume II, pp. 253–357. The dates appended to the titles of works refer to the first and last date of publication during Malthus's lifetime.

CONDORCET, Jean-Antoine-Nicholas Caritat, Marquis de (1743–94), *philosophe*, mathematician and supporter of the French revolution who became one of its victims after writing the *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1795), one of the works criticized by Malthus in the first and all subsequent editions of the *Essay*. Condorcet figures here as a believer in organic perfectibility, the author of proposals for a form of social insurance fund, and as an advocate of what Malthus regarded as 'unnatural' methods of birth control. See p. 23 n. 4 and p. 368 below.

EDEN, Sir Frederick Morton (1766–1809), author of *The State of the Poor* (1797), a major study of the incidence of poverty. Malthus also cites the estimates of the ratio of deaths to total population in Eden's *An Estimate of the Number of Inhabitants in Great Britain and Ireland* (1800).

FRANKLIN, Benjamin (1706–90), American philosopher, scientist, and politician, whose *Political, Miscellaneous and Philosophical Pieces* (1779) contains the 'Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind' cited by Malthus. Franklin was also responsible for the estimate of American population growth which plays an important role in Malthus's belief that the doubling of population over a period of twenty to twenty-five years represents the maximum rate at which population could grow under the most favourable of circumstances.

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GODWIN, William (1756–1836). Author of the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793–7), a work that was at the height of its popularity in radical circles when Malthus responded to it in the first edition of the *Essay* – though it was an essay ‘Of Avarice and Profusion’ in Godwin’s *The Enquirer* (1797) that was the proximate source of Malthus’s friendly quarrel with his father. After meeting and corresponding with Malthus, Godwin replied in his *Thoughts Occasioned by Dr. Parr’s Spital Sermon* (1801). He endorsed Malthus’s theory and findings on population, but rejected their implications for the future. Malthus replied to this work (see Book III, Chapter iii (a) below), but dropped the chapter in 1817. Godwin responded to this slight by retracting all his earlier concessions and by mounting a bitter attack on Malthus entitled *Of Population* (1820): see Malthus’s curt dismissal of this work on p. 387 below.

HUME, David (1711–76). Philosopher and historian, whose political essays are cited in the *Essay*, especially the essays on the populousness of ancient nations, and on whether the British government inclines more to absolute monarchy or to a republic. Malthus accepts Hume’s position on the ‘euthanasia’ of the British constitution in absolute monarchy, and his views on the indispensability of theory in politics. He rejects Hume’s view that only indolence stands between man and a perfect future. Malthus also cites Hume’s controversial *Dialogues on Natural Religion* (1779).

MONTESQUIEU, Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de (1689–1755). French philosopher and political scientist, all of whose chief works (*Spirit of the Laws* (1748), *Persian Letters* (1721), and *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline* (1734)) are cited by Malthus.

OWEN, Robert (1771–1858). A philanthropic industrialist who had pioneered a new form of factory organization in his cotton mills at New Lanark. Malthus supported Owen’s campaign for reducing the hours of work of children in factories, but criticized Owen’s ideas on equality and his scheme for creating pauper communities based on common property as outlined in Owen’s *A New View of Society* (1816). See pp. 75–80 below.

PALEY, William (1743–1805), theologian. The author of *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785), a highly successful textbook that remained in use at Cambridge until the 1840s. Malthus subscribed to

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Paley's basic theological utilitarianism – the doctrine that public happiness, being the object of God's beneficent design, was the ultimate test of moral obligation and any scheme of social improvement. Paley in turn announced his conversion to Malthus's view of population in *Natural Theology* (1802), another work cited by Malthus. On the subject of the dangers of the diffusion of luxury among the populace at large, however, Malthus differed from Paley (see p. 321 below).

PRICE, Richard (1723–91). A dissenting minister and moral philosopher, chiefly known for the support he gave to both the American and French revolutions, and hence, in the latter case, for provoking Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Malthus refers to Price's estimates of declining British population in *Observations on Reversionary Payments* (1771–92).

SMITH, Adam (1723–90). Moral philosopher and political economist. The author of *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776–84) and the advocate of the 'system of natural liberty' with which Malthus was in general agreement and on which he based most of his teaching at Haileybury. From the first *Essay* onward, however, Malthus expressed misgivings about Smith's identification of capital accumulation with improvements in the happiness of the mass of society. He also departed from Smith's principles on the subject of the Corn Laws. There is no reference to Smith's other work as a moral philosopher, the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759–90), perhaps because Malthus followed Paley's utilitarianism on morals and politics.

STEUART, Sir James (1712–80). The author of *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Oeconomy* (1767), a work that Malthus acknowledges for its treatment of population, while criticizing Stuart's policy conclusions.

SUMNER, John Bird (1780–1862), future Archbishop of Canterbury and the author of *A Treatise on the Records of the Creation, and on the Moral Attributes of the Creator; with particular Reference to the Jewish History and to the Consistency of the Principle of Population with the Wisdom and Goodness of the Deity*, 1816. Malthus endorsed this work (p. 76 n. 5), which became influential in making Malthusianism part of official Anglican doctrine.

TOWNSEND, Joseph (1739–1816), an Anglican clergyman whose *Journey through Spain* (1791) is cited by Malthus as well as his *Dissertation on the*

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Poor Laws (1817). Malthus disapproved of Townsend's proposal for compulsory savings schemes as a remedy for pauperism.

WALLACE, Robert (1697–1771). Malthus acknowledged Wallace as a precursor on the principle of population and was often accused of plagiarizing Wallace's *Various Prospects of Mankind* (1761) – a work in which Wallace predicted that a society based on common property would eventually perish through its inability to control population growth. Malthus differed from Wallace in believing that population pressure was constantly at work rather than something that could be postponed (see pp. 45–6 below).

YOUNG, Arthur (1741–1820). Secretary to the Board of Agriculture and the best-known authority on agrarian questions as a result of his *Tour of Ireland* (1780) and his *Travels in France* (1787–90). Malthus cites the latter, but was critical of Young's proposals for dealing with pauperism by means of the distribution of land and the cow system, a form of peasant proprietorship. Events in Ireland in the 1840s confirm Malthus's criticisms.