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THE ESSAY OF MALTHUS: A CENTENNIAL
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The essay of Malthus: a centennial review



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A PAPER BY

FRANK A. FETTER.

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THE ESSAY OF MALTHUS: A CENTENNIAL REVIEW.

ONE hundred years ago appeared the first edition of the *Essay on the Principle of Population*, by Thomas Robert Malthus. It attracted immediate attention and has been the subject of almost continuous discussion ever since both in economic and popular circles. It has been answered or defended elaborately many times, not to mention the multitude of briefer expositions and criticisms. One is tempted to think that in this centennial year of its publication the time has come to pass final judgment on the work, and to close the controversy. Such is not, however, the task that is here undertaken. The occasion and the circumstances of the appearance of this book, the interests and cherished opinions which it affected either favorably or unfavorably, the manner of its thought and mode of its expression, all predestined for it stormy discussion rather than calm and scientific study. Such a controversy can not be brought to a close by any magazine article, for it does not arise merely from differences of judgment on a formal proposition and the questions connected with it. It arises also from differences in temperament, in sympathies, and in the general attitude toward social questions. It may, however, be of interest and of service to point out the occasions for these misunderstandings, and the nature of the differences; and to indicate the trend of scientific judgment on the *Essay* of Malthus and the doctrine of population.

One need only refer to the oft noted circumstances of the time in which the *Essay* was written. The industrial revolution was in full course. The growth of factory centers, of population in general and especially of city population, the heavy taxation and the high price of grain caused by the war with France, the radical political and socialistic ideas of the time, are all facts which help to account for the book and many of the ideas in it. These facts were all present in the author's mind as he wrote, but it was the political and social discussion

embodied in the writings of Godwin which gave to the Essay its first form. Godwin, infected with the enthusiasm of the French Revolution, had preached a doctrine of equality, not only in political rights, but in material goods as well, and had pictured the era of happiness and perfection which would then ensue. The objection had been urged against communism of goods many years before (by Wallace in 1761,) that the growth of population would destroy any such society, reducing its members from a condition of plenty, brought about by the equal division of goods, to want and suffering. Godwin, in his book on *Political Justice*, published in 1793, had referred to this objection, and had given what he calls "the obvious answer" to it, "that to reason thus is to foresee difficulties at a great distance. * * * * Myriads of centuries of still increasing population may pass away, and the earth be still found sufficient for the subsistence of its inhabitants."¹ Again in 1797 Godwin dealt with the same subject in an essay entitled *Avarice and Profusion*, one of the series called the Enquirer. Daniel Malthus, Robert's father, a country gentleman of literary tastes, was strongly attracted by these pictures of equality and universal happiness. Robert, a young man of thirty years of age, had taken his master's degree at Cambridge the year before. He had read Adam Smith and was inclined good-naturedly to oppose the sanguine social opinions of his father. He chose as his chief, indeed almost his sole, weapon against the system of equality or community of goods, that which Godwin himself calls in the title of his chapter the "Objection to this system from the principle of population."² The phrase is apparently Godwin's; the argument is Wallace's. It needed only that Malthus should develop, illustrate, and apply the thought to this political speculation and to various practical questions, to attain fame.

We shall refer again to the use made by Malthus of "the principle of population" in his argument against communism, but let us now first inquire what the principle is of which he writes. A century later, after all that Malthus and others have written about it, there still remains some doubt as to just what

¹ *Political Justice Book*, VIII, ch. 9.

² *Idem*.

he meant by the phrase. His concept is a shifting one and his language not consistent.

(1) It seems at one point¹ clear to the reader that the principle is: "The power of population is indefinitely greater than the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man."

(2) Following this is a sentence apparently meant to express the same thought in a different way: "Population when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio; and subsistence for man in an arithmetical ratio."²

(3) Mr. Edwin Cannan thinks the principle is the "degree of misery" which necessarily results when population begins to outrun subsistence; and he supports this view by several apposite quotations.³

(4) The writer has shown elsewhere⁴ that there are several other expressions also that may be looked upon as statements of the principle. Malthus uses the phrase "principle of increase" as the percentage of increase actually taking place, so that if the population were stationary there would be no principle of increase.⁵

(5) Again he seems to consider either the birth rate alone, (not the net increase,) as the principle, or the combination of circumstances that favors a high birth rate, though no net increase of population occurs; a very complex concept.⁶

(6) Again, still varying the thought, the "principle" of "increase" or of "population" is a force or energy exerted to increase the population, mainly if not entirely by the increase of the birth rate. This use of principle makes it in several instances synonymous with "power of population" and "tendency of population" as Malthus uses them. It appears to become at times an expression for "the passion between the sexes," "the power of reproduction," or the "fecundity" of mankind.⁷ Each one of these different things, some psychological, some physiological facts, is in turn referred to as "principle of population."

¹ Parallel Chapters from the First and Second Editions, N. Y., 1895, pp. 6, 7.

² Idem, p. 9. ³ *Theories of Production and Distribution*, London, 1894.

⁴ *Versuch einer Bevölkerungslehre*, Jena, 1895.

⁵ E. g. *Malthus*, 7th edition, pp. 15, 238.

⁶ Idem, p. 54.

⁷ Examples in *Versuch einer Bevölkerungslehre*, pp. 16-17.

(7) Spencer, in his *Study of Sociology*,¹ says that a law should not be regarded as itself a power or force, but that "the accepted conception of law" among "philosophers and men of science" is "an established order, to which the manifestations of a power or force conform." We should expect a principle of population to be the formula of verbal expression of such an order. The chief question which the principle of population should help us to answer is: why is the population of the world and of the different countries what it is? What, if anything, regulates the number of people living in any land? This sense of the phrase "principle of population" Malthus was also conscious of, in fact, it was the central concept around which all the others were grouped. He speaks of the principle of population as a thing to be understood, of facts as exemplifying it.² The principle should express the relation between one fact, the number of people, and some other fact. This other fact Malthus thought to be the means of subsistence, or quantity of food available for the nourishment of man. (The principle of population in this sense is: The population is determined by the quantity of food. The demonstration of this in the mind of Malthus was simple, and he thought, conclusive. Food being necessary to life, population can never be greater than the food will nourish; it may, however, be so great, that food will be insufficient for health, in which case there will follow famine, suffering, disease. Vice and moral restraint also aid to reduce the birth rate and thus keep population to the level of the food. It will never for any considerable period be below this level, because of the "tendency of population" to outrun food; that is, if there is any food available for more people than will surely be born, but if there are more people needing food it is by no means sure they will find it.

The reader who will consult the pages even of the last edition of the *Essay of Malthus*, in which all his amendments and corrections are embodied, will find in almost every chapter illustrations of several of the meanings of "principle" above referred to. It is of the essence of this criticism to contend not for one exclusive interpretation of the words of Malthus,

¹ P. 42.

² E. g. *Malthus*, 7th ed., pp. 173, 215.

but to show the changing and dissolving nature of his thought on even the most fundamental factors of the problem he dealt with. That this is, however, the central thought of the Malthusian doctrine, the one to which Malthus ever reverts, will be evident to any one, who, with the thought clearly in mind, will undertake to read the Essay itself. The following discussion, however, is not entirely bound up with this interpretation, and does not enter into mere verbal criticism of the Essay, but deals rather with its general tenor. While treating of its defects and inconsistencies the attempt will be made to furnish a brief guide to the study and judgment of Malthus' general body of doctrine.

1. It is to note that the criterion or regulator of the population with Malthus is an objective one, the level or amount of food. In many connections this level seems to have in his mind a fatalistic character. Just what determines its amount he never clearly explains or even attempts adequately to discuss. The means of subsistence are a fixed thing at any moment, and as to changes that take place over a series of years there seems to be only an occasional or vague recognition of the elastic nature of the food supply. It has, in consequence, been contended by able critics¹ that in arriving at his general conclusions Malthus did not have in mind at all the principle of diminishing returns in agriculture. This appears, though, to be a mistake; the essential thought of diminishing returns is included in the contrast between the increase of food and of population. But what is absolutely certain is that Malthus fails to apply the concept of technical diminishing returns consistently, and that he frequently looks upon the limit of food as a fast and unyielding one. He never clearly grasps the difference between a real increase of food and a merely potential increase. This potentiality is always present, since more labor will always be able to secure more food absolutely, though less relatively. With Malthus, however, there is generally the implication that all of the energies of the population are devoted to food production, and that therefore there is no productive

¹ Edwin Cannan, *Production and Distribution*.

force to divert to its increase. Malthus pushes so far the idea of food as the objective criterion of the population, that the proposition seems frequently to reduce itself to the mere truism that where food is gotten by provident effort as in civilized societies, the community does not deliberately produce year after year a surplus to throw away. In this sense of course population and the means of subsistence will always remain nearly on the same level. Malthus was right in rejecting the fallacious view that density of population has no effect, or a necessarily favorable one, on the difficulty of procuring food; but he did not prove equal to the delicate task of stating the true relations. He reacts to an extreme view, inconsistent and untenable. This is true also of the latest edition (1826), revised by him years after the discussion of the nature of rent and the law of diminishing returns. Having cast his general doctrine in its original form, he found it impossible, despite numerous alterations, to change its character in this respect. The principle that the means of subsistence determine the population thus bears a striking resemblance to the old form of the wage-fund doctrine. Malthus never shows with any clearness what determines and alters the size of the food fund, and a valid thought of great importance thus is made to take the form either of a mere truism or of an absurd error.

2. It is to be noted next that Malthus thinks and speaks of the population as a whole when referring to its increase, its pressure against the limits of food, its suffering from excess of numbers, etc., etc. He deals with it as a unit, or as an aggregate of homogeneous units, not as an aggregate of most diverse elements. This is a mode of speech that he adopted when arguing against the possibility of a state where all men would be equal, that is, a communistic state, where all food and resources would be shared in common to the last crust. In that connection it was quite proper. There was great force in Malthus' argument against the communistic state, an argument recently restated by Professor Arthur Hadley¹ more clearly and with a broad historical and philosophic conception of its social bear-

¹ In his *Economics*, and in the Proceedings of the American Economic Association, 1895, the paper on *Population and Capital*.

ings that is lacking in Malthus. Private property and existing institutions limit population, said Godwin, and this works a hardship. True, replied Malthus in substance, they do limit population and thus prevent all from being reduced to the level of the poorest. The real check to population is "institutional," says Professor Hadley, expressing the conclusions of the later studies of the history of the family, of private property and of various other regulative institutions that have displaced a more primitive communal life. These institutions, as we now see, bring home to the individual or to the smaller family group the responsibility for too great a production of children, or too small a production of food. This much Malthus saw; but after thus applying the concept of private property in his discussion of communal society, he turns to the discussion of the problem of population in modern nations and in many connections applies to them the conception of a communistic state. The movement of populations as a whole is now a resultant of a multitude of more or less independent movements of family groups. The virtue of private property largely consists in its offering a way of escape to the provident and the capable from the miseries of excessive population in a communistic state. To think and speak now of the population as a homogeneous whole gradually increasing until it exceeds the food supply is a *lapsus mentis* into the communistic concept.]

3. A point closely connected with the foregoing, yet deserving of separate mention, is the habit that Malthus had of ignoring differences in the industrial quality and the economic condition of the elements composing the increasing portion of the population. He did not recognize that it made any important difference which of the family groups increased, since in any case the total population would make greater demands on the food; neither did he clearly recognize that differences in mental and physical capacity in the oncoming additions to the population were important as affecting the available food supply. This being in some unexplained if not inexplicable way, fixed, and every mouth calling for its quota, it is a simple problem in addition. If he would abolish public aid to the poor, it is not because the more ignorant and incapable elements of the population are

thus encouraged to propagate and the average of the industrial and moral capacity of the population is thereby lowered; but it is because the population is thus increased while the food supply is not, and in consequence just that much food must be taken from the self-supporting laboring classes,—a view which probably contains an ounce of truth and a pound of error. We now recognize that the elastic limit of food will yield to the more vigorous pressure of more intelligent and capable individuals. A fertile and sparsely settled country may be made industrially poorer by additions to the less capable portions of its population; an old and densely settled one might be enriched by the increase of the better elements. Likewise additions to the family groups already near the margin of want will have results much different from additions to the groups well provided with food and able to secure more. Malthus dealt with the problem in bulk, and the finer analysis which alone can lead to valid conclusions on this subject, is wanting in his treatment.

4. In saying that Malthus overemphasized the objective factors of the problem, it has already been implied that he underrated the subjective or psychological factors. He did not entirely overlook them, but never succeeded in harmonizing them with his fundamental thesis. The Malthusian principle would attain its maximum validity in the case of herbivorous animals, safe from all enemies, on an isolated island. The food would be the measure of the increase of population. But in the case of men cultivating the soil and influencing the birth-rate through various institutions, the "principle" would certainly be profoundly modified. Malthus saw, not as an after-thought, but almost at the first glance, that such a conscious and volitional control in fact takes place in civilized society. It is the essence of his argument against Godwin, as already mentioned. Malthus never after that came as near again to a correct conception of the influence of this factor. [There has been a curious and almost universal misunderstanding of the attitude of Malthus on the subject of "moral restraint" in his first as compared with his second edition. The belief is general that this check was newly introduced by him in the second edition in 1803. By his more faithful disciples he is thought to have

thereby amended all the defects of the first form of the doctrine, and to have evaded all objections that could be made against it. Others (e. g. Bagehot) think that he thereby radically changed the character of his views. A considerable change can indeed be noted in the *tone* of the author's conclusions, from those which have "a melancholy hue"¹ to much more hopeful ones as to "the probable improvement of society."² But the argument is essentially unchanged. In the statements of Malthus himself, in the preface to the second edition, is found the basis for the usual misunderstanding. He says: "Throughout the whole of the present work, I have so far differed in principle from the former as to suppose another check to population possible, which does not strictly come under the head either of vice or misery."³ Moreover he had said in the first edition that "all these checks may be fairly resolved into misery and vice," whereas in the later edition he formally adds moral restraint to the list.⁴ A glance, however, at the first edition, shows that in it moral restraint was distinctly recognized by Malthus as a check, in fact was greatly emphasized, though he did not call it by exactly that name. He says he means by "moral restraint" "a restraint from marriage with a conduct strictly moral."⁵ He said in the first edition that "restraint from marriage almost necessarily, though not absolutely so, produces vice,"⁶ which recognizes a "moral restraint" of marriage. In chapter four he shows at length how the "foresight of the difficulties attending the rearing of a family acts as a preventive check" on the rapid increase of population. This "preventive check appears to operate in some degrees through all the ranks of society in England." He then illustrates by the cases of the man of liberal education, the sons of tradesmen and farmers, the laborer, and servant who lives in gentlemen's families. Nothing therefore but the descriptive word "moral" is added in the second edition to the force of this recognition of the volitional element; the thing described is the same.

Only recalling that Malthus gave a very narrow meaning to

¹ Preface to 1st edition.

² Preface to 2d edition.

³ Parallel Chapters, p. 70

⁴ *Idem*, p. 90.

⁵ *Idem*, p. 90.

⁶ *Idem*, p. 14.

moral restraint, that he never distinctly recognized the possibility of a moral restraint in but only from marriage, let us consider how moral restraint as he meant it fits with the general principle. If human volition can by any method limit the birth rate, can reduce the number of people in the various social classes and family groups below the maximum possible, and consequently reduce the total population, what becomes of "the level of the means of subsistence" as the criterion of the population? Malthus seems to have reasoned as follows: limitation of the birth rate in this way occurs only because of the lack of the means of subsistence. It will never act therefore when food is plenty, will never be sufficiently strong to keep the population below the level of the means of subsistence, but only strong enough to help in keeping it from going beyond and producing misery. The ambiguity of some of the phrases here used has already been pointed out. Let us note more particularly only that of the phrase "the means of subsistence." Malthus uses it evidently in most cases as a synonym for food. Yet in discussing the preventive check he speaks of the refined tastes and sentiments which in many cases would have to be sacrificed by early marriage. He should have carried the thought further. Anything that becomes so essential to the happiness of a person that he or she will postpone marriage to secure it, is as much a "means of subsistence" in this connection as is food itself. It is, in fact, the marginal pleasures, the comforts and luxuries, the fear of losing which constitutes the real motives for abstaining from marriage throughout all classes of society. The lower the standard of life, the nearer the individuals are to the minimum of subsistence, the less does conscious forethought act to postpone marriage and reduce the birth rate. Malthus at times recognizes this fact clearly enough. He frequently seems to be trying to adjust it to his general principle. He says distinctly¹ that only such an increase in the means of subsistence as would be distributed to the lower classes would give a stimulus to the population. This impliedly admits all the objections above enumerated, but Malthus evidently does not consider that the admission is of great import-

¹ Parallel Chapters, p. 96.

ance. In fact, however, there is no limit that can *a priori* be assigned to the operation of volitional control of the rate of increase. All classes exemplify it to some extent. The phrase "level of the means of subsistence" becomes thus an abstract and almost meaningless expression for the maximum population possible to an individualistic society. It is a real maximum only for those classes in which at the same time the economic efficiency and "moral restraint" are at the lowest point.]

[These are not all the defects and inconsistencies of Malthus' treatment of the subject, but they are the leading ones. A coach and four can be driven in any direction through the formal portions of the doctrine. The obvious question is: Why could such vulnerable theoretical views have obtained so numerous and intelligent a following? We may summarize the answer as follows:

1. The soundest portion of his argument refuted the views of the more radical social reformers, and thus had, and have continued to have, much importance in discussions of socialism. Acceptance of the doctrine of Malthus, with all its inconsistencies, became the test of political conservatism. The questioning of its propositions was the proof that one held radical social views. Malthus was loved for the enemies he made.

2. The explanation of poverty which he offered, while fitting in well with facts of English experience, was most acceptable and satisfying to the well-to-do classes. It was one of the type of sweeping explanations of social misery, like that of Henry George's land monopoly, which leaves out of account the great factor of differences in men. Its absurdities are on the face of it, and the faith of Malthus himself in this explanation became less than half-hearted as years went on. Yet its simplicity and universality still make it to many the readily accepted and self-evident theory to account for the presence of the poor-house on rich prairies newly opened to settlement.

3. Being at once incorporated with the system of economic thought then forming, it became interwoven with all the leading tenets of so-called orthodox science. The rejection of it threatened to bring the whole economic structure toppling to the ground. Only in the recent period of the economic renaiss-

sance has it been possible to criticise it in a calm scientific spirit without appearing to be an economic anarchist.

4. The very defects of its presentation by Malthus contributed to its continued success. Never have been brought together into single propositions concepts more vague and shifting in meaning than those in this Essay. Such phrases as "tendency of population," "power of population," "level of food," etc., etc., are beyond all salvation for clear thinking. The more one studies, for instance, the proposition, "Population has a tendency to increase faster than food," the more is one convinced that, simple as it at first seems, it is an utterly illogical combination of ideas. As occasions for controversy such propositions are unsurpassed. If one confidently undertakes to overthrow an evident error, he finds himself suddenly in the Antaeus-like arms of an unquestionable truth.

5. Finally, and closely connected with the last, are to be mentioned the facts of great significance and importance to which Malthus appeals for support. Strange to say, it has very frequently been not the illogical slips, the inconsistent word-usage, or the unwarranted conclusions of Malthus, which his opponents have selected as the objects of attack. They have chosen rather to beat their weapons against certain and impregnable facts.

(a) The first of these is the enormous possibilities of the birth rate in the human race. Recent biologic studies have given a tremendous import to the statement made by Franklin and quoted by Malthus, that every species of living creature, plant and animal, produces vastly more offspring than do or could survive during a succession of generations. It is in the opportunity for selection thus presented that the evolutionists see the cause of progress in organic life. Moreover, if the birth rate were only sufficient to maintain a stationary population in one set of circumstances, a slight unfavorable change in the conditions would cause the extinction of the species. This factor of safety, so to speak, must always be present, and in fact, as Malthus saw, the physiologically possible birth rate is enormously greater than the realized one. Such men as Sadler, Doubleday, and Spencer, who arguing that for

various reasons the physiologically potential birth rate will soon decline until the balance of births and deaths will be automatically maintained, appeal to some sound facts, but they vastly overestimate the importance of them in the practical problem. The error is great in supposing that the institutional and volitional control of the birth rate will cease to be practically the one of the greatest social significance.

(b) If in the case of the birth rate the actual falls far short of the physiologically possible, in the case of the death rate the actual is considerably in excess of the physiologically necessary. Malthus no doubt assigns to this fact an exaggerated importance, but, justly estimated, its importance is still considerable. In large classes of the population, to some extent in every class, the death rate exceeds that which would occur with sufficient food, proper conditions of life, and good sanitation. The progress of hygienic science itself would, with a stationary birth rate, result in a great increase of population. Indeed the phenomenon of a decrease both of the birth rate and death rate while population still increases, is the familiar fact of recent vital statistics. On the other hand, it will always be true that in any given set of circumstances an increase of the birth rate will be followed by somewhat increased mortality. From this fact, however, Malthus draws unwarranted and sweeping conclusions.

(c) Another great fact to which Malthus appealed was that the capacity of the soil in food production is limited. The complexity of the productive process in modern society makes much less clear, but can not conceal, the fact that there exists some relationship more or less immediate between the fertility of land and the number of inhabitants it can support in comfort. The mercantilist views, still prevalent when Malthus wrote, were the exaggerated expression of a complementary truth. Those who have attempted to deny "diminishing returns in agriculture" have reached such absurd conclusions that they have added much to the renown of Malthus. Malthus himself, as above shown,¹ applied but lamely in his Essay the "law of diminishing returns," though he developed it more consistently

¹ Criticism No. 1.

in his other writings. It will ultimately be recognized that instead of being a law peculiar to agricultural production, arising out of the nature of land, this is only a special case of the universal law of economic production; the factors must be combined in certain proportions to produce the maximum result. On this firm foundation it is beyond controversy.

No further reasons are needed to account for the wide vogue which the doctrine of Malthus has enjoyed despite its theoretic weakness. His championing of individualism, his plausible and popular explanation of poverty, the central place the doctrine took in economic theory, the seductive ambiguity of his language, the eternal biologic and physical facts to which he appealed, these are reasons enough. To estimate justly the services of this Essay to economic science is not easy. It seems safe now, however, to say they have been greatly exaggerated; that not only did the teachings of Malthus, more than anything else, give to economics the false sombre hue which it had for many decades, but that they sent the discussions on wages, rent, and interest, and on the nature of economic progress, off on false paths which only lately have begun to be retraced. The practical service done by Malthus in the part he had in the reform of the poor laws is far greater than the merit of his "principle of population" considered as a theoretical economic proposition.

In fact it is evident one hundred years after Malthus that such a thing as a "principle of population" in any tenable sense of the phrase is a chimera. The problem of the relations of the number of people and their welfare to the material environment is much too complex ever to be expressed by any single principle or even single paragraph. A doctrine, or body of generalizations on the subject, which will contain all the truths that Malthus saw while avoiding his errors, is not only possible but has been gradually evolving. Too much of the current discussion of the subject still is in the nature of the old fallacious answers to Malthusian riddles, or is treadmill reiteration of the worn-out phrases. Meantime the evolution doctrine advances, in the biologic and psychological sciences, juster views of economic motives and the nature of economic consumption,

broader studies of the growth of social institutions, exacter statistics from widely separated fields, have placed the subject of population in an entirely different perspective. A true doctrine of population, taking account of all these factors, will in turn throw light on every other problem connected with the well-being of man upon this earth. The gentle, just, and ruth-loving spirit of Malthus must, if he still interests himself in mundane problems, view with satisfaction the progress that has been made in the last quarter of a century toward sounder conceptions on this subject to which, a hundred years ago, he gave such prominence in economic discussion. [The next few years should see an end of a century of word-quibbling debate. It should see a recognition of the errors of Malthus and of the eternal significance of some of the things he contended for. Practical problems of the highest importance, connected with the doctrine of population, await the attention of the sociologist and the statesman. [The degeneration of the race and the depopulation of the superior classes are becoming more serious threats to civilization than was the excessive growth of numbers among the poor of England, which in large part was responsible for the remarkable Essay of Robert Malthus.]

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