

MALTHUS AND HIS WORK

BY
JAMES BONAR

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.

BOOK I. THE ESSAY.

CHAPTER I. FIRST THOUGHTS, 1798.

CHAPTER II. SECOND THOUGHTS, 1803.

CHAPTER III. THESES.

CHAPTER IV. THE SAVAGE, BARBARIAN, AND ORIENTAL.

CHAPTER V. NORTH AND MID EUROPE.

CHAPTER VI. FRANCE.

CHAPTER VII. ENGLAND, SCOTLAND, AND IRELAND.

BOOK II. ECONOMICS.

CHAPTER I. THE LANDLORDS.

CHAPTER II. THE WORKING MAN.

CHAPTER III. GENERAL GLUTS.

CHAPTER IV. THE BEGGAR.

BOOK III. MORAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.

BOOK IV. THE CRITICS.

BOOK V. BIOGRAPHY.

TO

Professor Edward Caird

THIS BOOK,
WHICH OWES MUCH TO HIM,
IS DEDICATED.

INTRODUCTION.

Of the three English writers whose work has become a portion of all Political Economy, Malthus is the second in time and in honour. His services to general theory are at least equal to Ricardo's; and his full illustration of one particular detail will rank with the best work of Adam Smith.

In the following pages the detail will be the main subject, and general theory the episode. The *Political Economy* and minor writings of Malthus (which are not few) will be noticed only in relation to the *Essay on Population*.

Accordingly, the First of these Five Books will deal with the genesis, history, and contents of the Essay, plunging the reader *in medias res* and keeping him there, till the facts force him, in the Second Book, to recur with the author to Economical theory. The Third will show the mind of Malthus more clearly by adding to his economics his Ethics and Political Philosophy; and the Fourth, with the case now fully stated, will criticize the Critics of the Essay, and try to determine how much of its doctrine remains still valuable. The Fifth Book, with its Biography, may help the reader to associate the living personality of the man with his writings.

London, June 1885.

MALTHUS AND HIS WORK

BOOK I. THE ESSAY.
CHAPTER I.
FIRST THOUGHTS, 1798.

The Common Caricature—The Essay an Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations—Godwin’s *Political Justice* and *Enquirer*—The Two Postulates and Conclusions from them—Condorcet’s *Sketch of the Progress of the Human Mind*—Organic Perfectibility of Man and its Obstacles—Historical Context of the Essay—*The Crisis*—Pitt’s Poor Bill—Malthus and his Teachers—Success explained—Theology and Metaphysics—Faults of the Essay—Immediate aim secured.

He was the “best-abused man of the age.” Bonaparte himself was not a greater enemy of his species. Here was a man who defended small-pox, slavery, and child-murder; who denounced soup-kitchens, early marriage, and parish allowances; who “had the impudence to marry after preaching against the evils of a family;” who thought the world so badly governed that the best actions do the most harm; who, in short, took all romance out of life and preached a dull sermon on the threadbare text—“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Such was the character of Malthus as described by his opponents.

If an angry man is probably in the wrong, an abusive man is certainly so; and, when not one or two, but one or two thousand are engaged in the abuse, the certainty amounts to a demonstration. We may measure the soundness of the victim’s logic by the

violence of the personal attacks made upon him. For most worldly purposes, to be ignored and to be refuted are the same thing.

Malthus from the first was not ignored. For thirty years it rained refutations. The question, as he stated it, was thoroughly threshed out. The *Essay on Population* passed in the author's lifetime through six editions (1798, 1803, 1806, 1807, 1817, and 1826); even between the first edition, in 1798, and the second, in 1803, there were more than a score of 'Replies'; and the discussion was carried on in private correspondence, as well as in public journals and parliamentary speeches. The case was fully argued; and no one who fairly considers the extent of the discussion, and the ability of the disputants, can fail to believe that we have, in the records of this controversy, ample materials for forming our own judgment on the whole question in dispute.

Such a privilege is seldom used. The world has no time to consult authorities, though it likes them to be within reach of consultation. When an author becomes an authority, he too often ceases to be read, and his doctrines, like current coin, are worn by use till they lose the clear image and superscription of the issuer. In this way an author's name may come to suggest, not his own book, but the current version of his doctrines. Malthus becomes Malthusianism,—Darwin, Darwinism; and if Adam Smith's name were more flexible he too would become an epithet.¹¹ As it is, Adam Smith has left a book which "every one praises and nobody reads," Malthus a book which no one reads and all abuse. The abuse is, fortunately, not quite unanimous; but it is certain that Malthus for a long time had an experience worse than Cassandra's, for his warnings were disbelieved without being heard or understood. Miss Martineau, in her girlhood, heard him denounced "very eloquently and forcibly by persons who never saw so much

as the outside”^[2] of his book. This was in 1816; and when at a later time she inquired about him for herself, she could never find any one who had read his book, but scores who could “make great argument about it and about,” or write sentimental pamphlets on supposed Malthusian subjects. This carelessness was not confined to the general public; it infected the savants. Nothing more clearly shows how political economy, or at least one question of it, had descended into the streets and become a common recreation. Even Nassau William Senior, perhaps the most distinguished professor of political economy in his day, confessed with penitence that he had trusted more to his ears than to his eyes for a knowledge of Malthusian doctrine, and had written a learned criticism, not of the opinion of Mr. Malthus, but of that which “the multitudes who have followed and the few who have endeavoured to oppose” Mr. Malthus, have assumed to be his opinion.^[3]

The “opinion” so imagined by Senior and the multitude is still the current Malthusianism. A Malthusian is supposed to forbid all marriage. Mr. Malthus was supposed to believe that “the desire of marriage, which tends to increase population, is a stronger principle than the desire of bettering our condition, which tends to increase subsistence.”^[4] This meant, as Southey said, that “God makes men and women faster than He can feed them.” The old adage was wrong then: Providence does not send meat where He sends mouths; on the contrary, He sends mouths wherever He sends meat, so that the poor can never cease out of the land, for, however abundant the food, marriage will soon make the people equally abundant. It is a question of simple division. A fortune that is wealth for one will not give comfort to ten, or bare life to twenty. The moral is, for all about to marry, “Don’t,” and for all statesmen, “Don’t encourage them.”

This caricature had enough truth in it to save it from instant detection, and its vitality is due to the superior ease in understanding, and therefore greater pleasure in hearing, a blank denial or a blank affirmation as compared with the necessary qualifications of a scientific statement. The truth must be told, however, that Malthus and the rest of the learned world were by no means at utter discord. He always treated a hostile economist as a possible ally. He was carrying on the work of their common Founder. In the *Essay on Population* he was inquiring into the nature and causes of poverty, as Adam Smith had inquired into the nature and causes of wealth. But Malthus himself did not intend the one to be a mere supplement to the other. He did not approach the subject from a purely scientific side. He had not devoted long years of travel and reflection to the preparation of an economical treatise. Adam Smith had written his *Moral Sentiments* seventeen years before his greater work. When he wrote the latter he had behind him an academical and literary reputation; and he satisfied the just expectations of the public by giving them, in the two quarto volumes of the *Wealth of Nations*, his full-formed and completely digested conclusions and reasonings definitively expressed (1776). Malthus, on the contrary, gained his reputation by a bold and sudden stroke, well followed up. His *Essay* was an anonymous pamphlet in a political controversy, and was meant to turn the light of political economy upon the political philosophy of the day. Whatever the essay contained over and above politics, and however far afield the author eventually travelled in the later editions, there is no doubt about the first origin of the essay itself. It was not, as we are sometimes told, that, being a kind-hearted clergyman, he set himself to work to inquire whether after all it was right to increase the numbers of the population without caring for the quality of it. In 1798 Malthus was no doubt in holy orders

and held a curacy at Albury; but he seems never to have been more than a curate. The Whigs offered him a living in his later years, but he passed it to his son;^[5] and we should be far astray if we supposed his book no more than the “recreations of a country parson.” “Parson” was in his case a title without a *rôle* and Cobbett’s immortal nickname is very unhappy.^[6] He had hardly more of the parson than Condillac of the abbé. In 1798 Pitt’s Bill for extending relief to large families, and thereby encouraging population, was no doubt before the country; but we owe the essay not to William Pitt, but to William Godwin. The changed aspect of the book in its later editions need not blind us to the efficient cause of its first appearance.

Thomas Robert Malthus had graduated at Cambridge as ninth wrangler in the year 1788, in the twenty-second year of his age. In 1797, after gaining a fellowship at Jesus College, he happened to spend some time at his father’s house at Albury in Surrey. Father and son discussed the questions of the day, the younger man attacking Jacobinism, the elder defending it. Daniel Malthus had been a friend and executor of Rousseau, and was an ardent believer in human progress. Robert had written a Whig tract, which he called *The Crisis*, in the year of Pitt’s new loan and Napoleon’s Italian campaign (1796); but he did not publish it, and his views were yet in solution. We may be sure the two men did not spare each other in debate. In the words of the elder Malthus, Robert then, if at no other time, “threw little stones” into his garden. An old man must have the patience of Job if he can look with calmness on a young man breaking his ideals. But in this case he at least recognized the strength of the slinger, and he bore him no grudge, though he did not live to be won by the concessions of the second essay (1803). That Robert, on his part, was not wanting in

respect, is shown by an indignant letter, written in February, 1800, on his father's death, in reply to the supposed slight of a newspaper paragraph.^[7]

The fireside debates had in that year (1797) received new matter. William Godwin, quondam parson, journalist, politician, and novelist, whose *Political Justice* was avowedly a "child of the Revolution,"^[8] had written a new book, the *Enquirer*, in which many of his old positions were set in a new light. The father made it a point of honour to defend the *Enquirer*; the son played devil's advocate, partly from conviction, partly for the sake of argument; and, as often happens in such a case, Robert found his case stronger than he had thought. Hard pressed by an able opponent, he was led, on the spur of the moment, to use arguments which had not occurred to him before, and of which *The Crisis* knows nothing. In calmer moments he followed them up to their conclusions. "The discussion," he tells us,^[9] "started the general question of the future improvement of society, and the author at first sat down with an intention of merely stating his thoughts to his friend upon paper in a clearer manner than he thought he could do in conversation." But the subject opened upon him, and he determined to publish. This is the plain story of the publication of the *Essay on Population*, reduced to its simplest terms. At the very time when the best men in both worlds were talking only of progress, Malthus saw rocks ahead. French and English reformers were looking forward to a golden age of perfect equality and happiness; Malthus saw an irremovable difficulty in the way, and he refused to put the telescope to his blind eye.

There had been Cassandras before Malthus, and even in the same century. Dr. John Bruckner of Norwich had written in the same strain in his *Théorie du Système Animal*, in 1767;^[10] and a few years

earlier (in 1761) Dr. Robert Wallace, writing of the *Various Prospects of Mankind, Nature, and Providence*, had talked of community of goods as a cure for the ills of humanity, and then had found, very reluctantly, one fatal objection—the excessive population that would ensue. Men are always inclined to marry and multiply their numbers till the food is barely enough to support them all. This objection had since Wallace’s time become a stock objection, to be answered by every maker of Utopias. It was left for Malthus to show the near approach which this difficulty makes to absolute hopelessness, and to throw the burden of proof on the other side. As the *Wealth of Nations* altered the standing presumption in favour of interference to one in favour of liberty in matters of trade, so the *Essay on Population* altered the presumption in favour of the advocates of progress to a presumption against them. This may not describe the final result of the essay, but it is a true account of its immediate effect. People had heard of the objection before; it was only now that they began to look on it as conclusive.

How had Godwin tried to meet it, when it was still in the hands of weaker men, and therefore not at all conclusive? He could not ignore it. In his *Political Justice* (1793) he had given the outlines of a “simple form of society, without government,” on the principle of Tom Paine, which was also a received Jacobin motto, “Society is produced by our wants, government by our wickedness.”¹⁴ He says, with the ruling philosophy, that man is born a blank, and his outward circumstances make him good or evil. Thanks to human institutions, especially lawyers, sovereigns, and statesmen, the outward circumstances, he says, are as bad as they can be. Everywhere there is inequality. There is great poverty alongside of great riches, and great tyranny with great slavery. In

the same way the best of his novels, *Caleb Williams* (1794), tells us how “things as they are” enable the rich sinner to persecute the poor righteous man. But he is no pessimist. The *Political Justice* does not end with a statement of evils. It goes on to show that in the end truth will conquer; men will listen to reason, they will abandon their present laws, and they will form a society without law or government or any kind of force; no such things will be needed when every man listens to reason, and contents himself with plain living and high thinking. There will be no king in Israel; every man will do that which is right in his own eyes. In our present society, says Godwin, it is distribution and not production that is at fault. There is more than enough of wealth for all, but it is not shared amongst all. One man has too much, another little or nothing. In the new society reason will change all that. Reason tells us that, if we make an equal division, not only of the good things of this life, but of the labour of making them, then we shall secure a production quite sufficient for the needs of plain livers, at the cost of perhaps half-an-hour’s labour in a day from each of them.⁴²¹ Each of them will, therefore, have leisure, which is the true riches, and he will use the time for his own moral and intellectual improvement. In this way, by the omnipotence of truth and the power of persuasion, not by any violence or power of the sword, perfection and happiness will in time be established on the earth.

Godwin made no essential change in these views in the later editions of the *Political Justice* (1796 and 1798), or in the *Enquirer* (1797). “Among the faithless, faithful only he,” when the excesses of the Terror made even Sir James Mackintosh (not to say Bishop Watson, Southey, and Wordsworth) a lukewarm reformer. Nothing in Godwin’s life is more admirable than the perfect confidence with which he holds fast to his old faith in democratic principles

and the perfectibility of man. If it is obstinacy, it is very like devotion; and perhaps the only author who shows an equal constancy is Condorcet, the Girondist, marked out for death, and writing in his hiding-place, almost under the eyes of the Convention, his eager book on the *Progress of the Species*. Nothing but intense sincerity and sheer depth of conviction could have enabled these men to continue the defence of a dishonoured cause. They had not the martyr's greatest trial, the doubt whether he is right. The great impression made by their works was a sign that, as they felt strongly, they wrote powerfully. Malthus, who refuted both of them, apologized for giving serious criticism to Condorcet's palpable extravagances by saying that Condorcet has many followers who will hold him unanswerable unless he is specially answered.^[13] Of Godwin, Mr. Sumner, writing in 1816, says that though his book (the *Political Justice*) was becoming out of date, it was still "the ablest and best known statement" of the doctrines of equality that had ever appeared in England.^[14] It has been justly called the "first text-book of the philosophical radicals." The actual effect of it cannot be measured by the number of copies sold on its first appearance. Godwin had placed it far beyond the reach of ordinary democrats by fixing the price at three guineas. In 1793 many who would have been his keenest readers could not have paid three shillings for it. But the event proved him wise in his generation. The Privy Council decided they might safely tolerate so dear a book; and a small audience even of the rich was better to Godwin than prosecution, which might mean exile and no audience at all.^[15] Few writers of our own day have so good an excuse for making themselves inaccessible to the poor. Godwin, however, like Ruskin, reached the poor in spite of his arrangements for avoiding them. He filtered down among the masses; and his writings became a political as well as a literary

power in England, long before he had a poetic son-in-law to give him reflected glory. If a species is to be judged by its best individual, then Godwin represents better than Paine the class of political writers to which they both belong; and many fell down with Godwin when he fell down before Malthus.

The *Enquirer* was less popular than the *Political Justice*. Part of the charm of the latter undoubtedly lay in the elaborate completeness and systematic order of the whole discussion. The foundations were laid in the psychology of Locke; and then the building was raised, stone by stone, until the whole was finished. But in the *Enquirer* Godwin's dislike of law had extended even to the form of composition. He had been wrong, he said, in trying to write a systematic treatise on society, and he would now confine himself to detached essays, wholly experimental, and not necessarily in harmony with one another. "He (the author) has carried this principle so far that he has not been severely anxious relative to inconsistency that may be discovered between the speculations of one essay and the speculations of another."¹⁶ The contrast between these two styles is the contrast between a whole oratorio and a miscellaneous concert, or between a complete poem and a volume of extracts.

The thoughts were the same, though they had lost their attractive expression. The essay on *Avarice and Profusion*¹⁷ tells us, among other things, that "a state of cultivated equality is that state which, in speculation and theory, appears most consonant to the nature of man, and most conducive to the extensive diffusion of felicity." This was the essay which led Malthus and his father into their fruitful argument. The essay on *Riches and Poverty*, and the one on *Beggars*,¹⁸ contain other applications of the same idea, with many moralizing digressions. Godwin has not lost his sweet Utopian

vision; he has not yielded to the objections that baffled Dr. Robert Wallace; he thinks he has removed all objections.

He meets them^[20] by saying first of all: “There is a principle in the nature of human society by means of which everything seems to tend to its level,” when not interfered with; and the population of a country when left to itself does not seem to increase beyond the food. But in the second place, supposing things not to find their level in this way, the earth is wide and the evil day is far off. It may take myriads of centuries to till the untilled acres and to replenish the empty earth with people, and much may happen before then. In fact, he views the subject as many of us view the question of our coal supply. Before it is exhausted we may be beyond the need of it.^[20] The earth itself may have collapsed with all its inhabitants. Don’t let us refuse a present blessing from fear of a remote future danger. Besides, it is not very hard to imagine a safeguard. Franklin says that “mind will one day become omnipotent over matter;”^[21] why not over the matter of our own bodies? Does not the bodily health depend largely on the mind?

“A merry heart goes all the day;
Your sad tires in a mile, O!”

The time may come when we shall be so full of liveliness that we shall not sleep, and so full of life that we shall not die. The *need* for marriage will be superseded by earthly immortality, and the *desire* for it by the development of intellect. On the renewed earth of the future there will be neither marrying nor giving in marriage, but we shall be as the angels. “The whole will be a people of men, and not of children. Generation will not succeed generation, nor truth have, in a certain degree, to recommence her career every thirty years. Other improvements may be expected to keep pace

with those of health and longevity. There will be no war, no crimes, no administration of justice as it is called, and no government. Besides this, there will be neither disease, anguish, melancholy, nor resentment. Every man will seek with ineffable ardour the good of all.”^[22]

This sweet strain had been enchanting the public for four or five years, when Malthus ventured to interrupt it with his modest anonymous *Essay on the Principle of Population as it affects the Future Improvement of Society*. The writer claims to be as hearty a philanthropist as Mr. Godwin, but he cannot allow the wish to be father to the thought, and believe in future perfection against evidence. To prove a theory true, he says, it is not enough to show that you cannot prove its contradiction, or that you can prove its usefulness. It would be very useful to have eyes in both sides of our head; but that does not prove that we are going to have them. If you told me that man was becoming a winged creature like the ostrich, I should not doubt that he would find wings very useful, but I could hardly believe your prophecy without some kind of proof beyond the mere praises of flying. I should ask you to show palpable signs in his body and habits that such a change was going on, that his neck has been lengthening, his lips hardening, and his hair becoming feathery. In the same way, when you tell me that man is becoming a purely intellectual being, content with plain living and high thinking, I see there might be advantage in the change, but I ask for signs that it is in progress. I see none; but, on the contrary, I see strong reasons for believing in its impossibility. Grant me two postulates, and I disprove your millennium. The first is, that food is necessary; the second, that the instinct for marriage is permanent. No one denies the first, and Godwin’s denial of the second is purely dogmatic. He has given us no proofs. Men have

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