

Malthus on sex, procreation, and applied ethics¹

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Abstract: I argue that Malthus's *Essay on Population* is more a treatise in applied ethics than the first treatise in demography. I argue also that, as an ethical work, it is a highly innovative one. The substitution of procreation for sex as the focus makes for a drastic change in the agenda. What had been basically lacking in the discussion up to Malthus's time was a consideration of human beings' own responsibility in the decision of procreating. This makes for a remarkable change also in the approach, namely, the discussion becomes an examination of a well-identified issue, taking cause-effect relationships into account in order to assess possible lines of conduct in the light of some, widely shared and comparatively minimal, value judgements. This is more or less the approach of what is now called applied ethics, at least according to one of its accounts, or perhaps to the account shared by a vast majority of its practitioners. In a sense, both the subject matter, sexuality, was substituted with a more restricted issue, namely reproduction, and the traditional approach, moral doctrine, was substituted with a more modest approach, in Malthus's own words, the 'moral and political science'. Such a drastic transformation brought about a viable framework for a discussion of ethical issues that were still unforeseen by Malthus, namely those having to do first with the technical feasibility of eugenics programs and secondly with the scientific discovery of genetics as a field of study but also of possible intervention. Malthus's ethics had obviously enough nothing to say on those unforeseen issues in so far as it was meant to treat just the 'quantitative' dimension of procreation, that is, 'how many'. Later discussions and controversies

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will arise around different dimensions, that is, not just 'how many' but also 'how healthy, how strong, how far empowered'. Yet, what Malthus's lesson can still teach to proponents of opposite views is that the mentioned questions can be construed in such a way as to avoid unending controversy.

Keywords: population; poverty; virtues; sex; applied ethics.

Resumo: Argumento que o *Ensaio sobre População* de Malthus é mais um tratado em ética aplicada do que o primeiro tratado de demografia. Argumento também que, como uma obra ética, é uma obra altamente inovadora. A substituição da procriação pelo sexo como o foco produz uma mudança drástica na agenda. Basicamente o que faltou na discussão até a época de Malthus foi uma consideração da própria responsabilidade dos seres humanos na decisão de procriar. Isto gera uma mudança notável também na abordagem, mais precisamente, a discussão se transforma no exame de uma questão bem identificada, ao assumir relações de causa-efeito como forma de avaliar possíveis linhas de conduta à luz de alguns juízos de valor amplamente compartilhados e comparativamente mínimos. Essa é mais ou menos a abordagem do que agora é chamada de ética aplicada, pelo menos de acordo com uma de suas interpretações, ou talvez a mais compartilhada por uma vasta maioria de seus praticantes. De certo modo, tanto o objeto de estudo, a sexualidade, foi substituída por uma abordagem mais modesta, nas próprias palavras de Malthus, a "ciência moral e política". Essa transformação drástica trouxe à tona um enquadramento viável para uma discussão de questões éticas até então não previstas por Malthus, ou seja, aquelas que concernem primeiro com a viabilidade técnica dos programas eugênicos e, em segundo lugar, com a descoberta científica da genética como um campo de estudo, mas também um de possível intervenção. A ética de Malthus obviamente não tinha nada a dizer sobre essas questões imprevistas, na medida em que se destinava a tratar apenas a dimensão "quantitativa" da procriação, ou seja, "quantos". As discussões e controvérsias posteriores levantar-se-ão em torno de dimensões diferentes, isto é, não apenas "quantos" mas também "quão saudáveis, fortes e empoderados". No entanto, o que a lição de Malthus ainda pode ensinar aos proponentes de pontos de vista opostos é que as questões mencionadas podem ser interpretadas de forma a evitar uma controvérsia interminável.

Palavras-Chave: população; pobreza; virtudes; sexo; ética aplicada.

1. From traditional sexual morality to the discovery of procreation ethics as applied ethics

There is a long-standing traditional misrepresentation of Malthus as an ogre. Also recently, this tradition reappears here and there taking poor Malthus as a straw-man to hit in the name of any kind of evil in the world. The paper is meant to place Malthus's population theory in its own context. It shows how an unintended result in the social sciences was a side effect of an attempt of settling an ethical issue. Besides it proves how Malthus's contribution was not just the discovery of a previously ignored scientific law but also a radical transformation of one field in traditional applied ethics (or in Thomist jargon, in the treatment of the special virtues), namely the transformation of sexual morality into an ethic of reproduction.

I will discuss in the concluding paragraph where the transformation precisely lies. Let me suggest now that the substitution of procreation for sex as the focus and the substitution of ethics to morality both hint at the direction into which the transformation process leads. And let me add that such a drastic transformation paved the way to a discussion of ethical issues that were still unforeseen by Malthus, namely those having to do first with the technical feasibility of eugenics programs and secondly with the scientific discovery of genetics as a field of study but also of possible intervention. Malthus's ethics had obviously enough nothing to say on those unforeseen issues in so far as it was meant to treat just the 'quantitative' dimension of procreation, that is, 'how many'. Later discussions and controversies will arise around different dimensions, that is, not just 'how many' but also 'how healthy, how strong, how empowered', but what Malthus's lesson could have taught and still can teach to partners defending opposite views in these controversies is that such issues may be framed in a way that possibly avoids unending controversy on incompatible ultimate principles once the strategy is turned upside down and a principle of responsibility becomes the overriding rule in the treatment of such ethical issues.

2. Malthus the ogre

It is interesting that on the web the image of Malthus as a reactionary, a preacher of immorality and an enemy of the poor comes back again in connection with eugenics, somewhat confusedly presented as the quintessence of barbarity, related with racism and leading directly to the horrors

perpetrated in the first half of the twentieth century, primarily by Nazism, nicely summarized by Mayhew with the three keywords 'Compulsory sterilization, Avoidable famine. Auschwitz'². For example, we may read in an article in an Italian online popular journal that

The key figure in what was bound to become the eugenic movement was Thomas Robert Malthus. This Anglican clergyman in his *Essay on the Principle of Population in its Effects on the Improvement of Society* of 1798 first formulated the problem arising from the relationship between population and available resources. The Malthusian theory aimed at proving the incompatibility of the pace of demographic growth with that of resources. Malthus assumed that, while population was growing following a geometric proportion, resources were growing just in an arithmetic proportion. Such unbalance would lead mankind, in case its reproduction were not kept under control, to be left in a near future without means of subsistence.

Such a theory was welcome in Britain at the time, a country where the specter of poverty was felt as an impending threat. Malthus also manifested perplexity with regard to the opportunity to keep existing welfare policies aimed to protect the weakest social strata, which were also the less prudent in demographic matters. He believed it necessary to fight unlimited reproduction by taking the bourgeoisie's reproductive pattern as a model³.

Examples may be easily found also elsewhere in the world. A Brazilian educational website informs us that Malthus believes that remedies in order to avoid coming catastrophes,

são os seguintes: negar às populações toda e qualquer assistência (hospitais, asilos, etc.) e aconselhar-lhes a abstinência sexual para diminuir a natalidade.

A origem dessas ideias de Malthus é, em parte, econômica, em parte, religiosa [...] Malthus era um calvinista rígido, considerando a má sorte do gênero humano como consequência irremediável da predestinação que lhe fora reservada pela Providência⁴.

Something astonishing in this, as well as in many other such popular accounts, is systematic accumulation of factual mistakes. Malthus was not Calvinist, he was a liberal Anglican and his theological inspiration derived from a tradition of fierce opponents to Calvinism, a tradition I have

² Mayhew 2014: 181.

³ Masi 2011.

⁴ Anonymous 2016.

described as ‘voluntarist consequentialism’⁵; he was no kind of sombre pessimist and, in the last editions of his *Essay*, his view of a possible decent society where the poor are offered an occasion of living in a way that is virtuous, respectable and happy wins more and more weight⁶; his argument did not aim at denying any kind of assistance to the poor, last of all at abolition of hospitals, but at abolishing a system of assistance, the Poor Laws, that he believed was perversely carrying out results opposed to the one it was originally devised for, and particularly the notorious work-houses, asylums where the poor were interned and lived under jail-like conditions doing hard labour; his alternative strategy turned around the idea of self-help, general instruction, religious and moral education, encouragement of saving, and primarily prudence, that is, responsibility – in turn implying primarily postponement of marriage with chastity before marriage⁷.

Behind such contemporary fallout on the web, an unbelievable story lies, lasting two centuries, of Malthus use, misuse, and abuse (Mayhew 2014). To give just an idea of the more serious printed sources on which recent online bad-copying draws, let me quote what the highly respectable *Catholic Encyclopaedia* had to say:

The most notable results of the work and teaching of Malthus may be summed up as follows: he contributed absolutely nothing of value to human knowledge or welfare. The facts which he described and the remedies which he proposed had long been sufficiently known. While he emphasized and in a striking way drew attention to the possibility of general overpopulation, he greatly exaggerated it, and thus misled and misdirected public opinion. Had he been better informed, and seen the facts of population in their true relations, he would have realized that the proper remedies were to be sought in better social and industrial arrangements, a better distribution of wealth, and improved moral and religious education. As things have happened, his teaching has directly or indirectly led to a vast amount of social error, negligence, suffering, and immorality⁸.

Not surprisingly, had the contributor to the *Catholic Encyclopaedia* ‘been better informed’, he could have found, at least in the sixth edition of Malthus’ second *Essay*, more or less his three

⁵ Cremaschi 2008: 31-33.

⁶ Cremaschi

⁷ Cremaschi 2013; 2014: 157-165.

⁸ Ryan 1911: 279.

proposed remedies, namely, first, better *social* arrangements (perhaps not *industrial* arrangements, but Malthus manifested a high opinion of Robert Owen's visionary experiments in this direction), secondly, a better distribution of wealth, and thirdly, improved moral and religious education (Cremaschi 2014: 157-165)

3. Malthus's discovery of population theory

One of the myths the present paper is meant to dismantle is that of Malthus the founder of demography. The reasons for revision are two: first, Malthus was the accidental discoverer of the principle of population and the self-aware author of a new moral theory applied to poverty and procreation; secondly, as it happened for most new theories, also the theory of population was, if not a case of multiple discovery, at least an example of how a comparatively new idea may be formulated by several authors but left without important consequences until it is put by somebody into a new context where it proves its potential in revolutionary implications.

Coming to the first reason, hints about a relationship between the growth of resources and the growth of population may be found perhaps in writers from early Christianity. Tertullian wrote that 'in very deed, pestilence, and famine, and wars, and earthquakes have to be regarded as a remedy for nations, as the means of pruning the luxuriance of the human race'⁹.

In times closer to Malthus's, after a subject named political economy had come into being, population became a focus of interest for political, military, and commercial reasons. The shocking example provided by newly founded American colonies where population growth seemed to become several times faster than in Europe, fostered reflection on causes and mechanisms of such phenomena. Richard Cantillon declared that 'men multiply like mice in a barn if they have unlimited means of subsistence'¹⁰. Robert Wallace argued that 'Under a perfect government, the inconveniences of having a family would be so entirely removed that... mankind would increase so prodigiously, that the earth would at last be so overstocked, and become unable to support its numerous inhabitants'¹¹. David Hume argued that the permission to suppress undesired children

⁹ Tertullianus 2010, ch. 30.

¹⁰ Cantillon 1755: 110 [37].

¹¹ Wallace 1761: 113.

tends to encourage instead of checking the growth of population. In 'Of the populousness of ancient nations' he wrote that

CHINA, the only country where this practice of exposing children prevails at present, is the most populous country we know of; and every man is married before he is twenty. Such early marriages could scarcely be general, had not men the prospect of so easy a method of getting rid of their children¹².

Adam Smith noted that marriage 'is encouraged in China, not by the profitableness of children, but by the liberty of destroying them. In all great towns several are every night exposed in the street, or drowned like puppies in the water. The performance of this horrid office is even said to be the avowed business by which some people earn their subsistence'¹³.

Malthus, in the first *Essay* of 1798, while arguing against William Godwin's utopian design of a perfect society, set out to trace the full implications of Wallace's idea that under a perfect government mankind would increase prodigiously and the earth would become unable to support its inhabitants. Malthus's hypothesis was that there should be checks to the power of population, unless the 'germs of existence contained in this spot of earth, with ample food, and ample room to expand in, would fill millions of worlds, in the course of a few thousand years' ¹⁴. He added that others had noticed that population cannot grow beyond the supply of food, but no one had inquired into the kind of mechanism that keeps population down to the means of subsistence, and advanced his own hypothesis, namely that such checks consisted in vice and misery.

His argument is articulated in four steps: (i) there are two postulates, namely that food is necessary for human existence, and that population, if not checked, tends to grow faster than the power in the earth to produce subsistence; (ii) the effects of these two unequal powers must be kept equal; (iii) misery and vice are the causes which bring about the effect of balancing population and food; (iii) the necessity of keeping population and resources on a par constitutes the 'strongest obstacle' to any improvement of society' and makes the perfectibility of man impossible; (iv) yet the Principle of Population constitutes the main source of encouragement to industry and virtue. After reactions by critics, the argument was modified in the second *Essay* of 1803 allowing now for a third cause able to bring about a balance in the run between resources

¹² Hume 1752: 396.

¹³ Smith 1776, I.viii.24

¹⁴ Malthus 1798: 9.

and population, namely ‘moral restraint’, that is postponement of marriage until one is able to keep a family.

This well-known change in his theory implied not only a modified explanatory scheme, but also a modified relationship between descriptive and prescriptive discourse. Malthus’s evolution was not simply an evolution from lore to science, metaphysics to empiricism, religion to atheism, but a complex path towards a more empirical and less deductive explanatory approach and in the meantime towards more, not less, room for a moral theory as an essential element of his intellectual construction.

4. Consequentialist voluntarism

Besides the myth of Malthus’s evolution from metaphysics to empiricism going with his transition from the Essay of 1798 to the second Essay of 1803, another diehard source of confusion has been the myth of Malthus’s utilitarianism. This was created by a rewriting of history which occurred in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Utilitarianism had become some kind of official ideology and accordingly all previous more or less ‘progressive’ thinkers were added to the Utilitarian pedigree in order to prove its quarters of nobility. My claim is that Malthus viewed his own population theory and economic theory as auxiliary disciplines to moral and political philosophy, that is, empirical enquiries to be carried out in order to be able to pronounce justified value judgments on such matters as the Poor Laws. *A converso*, Malthus’s population theory and political economy were no value-free science and his policy advice – far from being ‘utilitarian’ – resulted from his overall system of ideas and was explicitly based on a set of familiar moral assumptions. James Bonar created the myth of Malthus’s ‘Utilitarianism’¹⁵, which carried in turn a pseudo-problem concerning Malthus’s lack of consistency with his own alleged Utilitarianism; besides it may be argued that such misinterpretation was hard to die and still persists in Hollander’s reading of Malthus’s work. It is mistaken to claim that ‘Malthus’s explanation of disharmony by reference to Divine Wisdom is extraneous to analysis and without influence on the theory of policy’¹⁶. It is true instead that consequentialist voluntarist considerations, such as were

¹⁵ Bonar 1885; CF. Cremaschi 2014: 1-13.

¹⁶ Hollander 1989: 171; cf. Hollander 1997.

widespread in Anglican eighteenth-century moral theology, were appealed to within the context of his moral epistemology in order to provide a justification for received moral rules, but such considerations were meant to justify a rather traditional normative ethics, quite far from the Benthamite 'new morality'¹⁷.

In more detail the test of Utility for Malthus no less than for Cambridge eighteenth century divines was a way of discovering the will of God, and accordingly the laws of nature, which he has imposed on this Creation; thus our principal duties turn out to be (a) strict attention to the consequences carried by the satisfaction of our passions, (b) regulation of our conduct conformably to such consequences. It is worth stressing that the test of utility is a test for *detecting* whether a maxim is a law of nature, not a standard for *establishing* what is right and wrong or, in other words, that it is a *clue* for detecting the *will of God* (who has established in his full right – being omnipotent – but not arbitrarily – being benevolent and omniscient – what is right and what is wrong).

Surprisingly enough, Malthus was so far from utilitarian that his own normative ethics was a typical example of virtue ethics. It focuses on two main 'natural' virtues, that is, *benevolence* and *chastity*. In a social, but pre-political, state such as that of men living without government and law, there would be at least a few, albeit rather loosely defined duties, those of helping one's neighbour and of forming a stable attachment to a person of the other sex. To men living in such a state, these would be taught to be laws of nature by experience, since they might easily notice the nefarious consequences of acting according to opposite lines. There is a second group of virtues: artificial virtues, which begin to exist as soon as the transition to the political state is accomplished; to such kind of virtues *love for equality* and *love for liberty* belong. Special place is granted to a fifth virtue, Prudence, which governs both individual quest for happiness and collective quest for the public good. This special virtue also provides an invisible link between the private and the public domains, in so far as it contributes in combining self-love with general happiness through the unintended results mechanism, by which 'the most ignorant are led to promote the general happiness'¹⁸, since all 'the greatest improvements' are effected thanks to an effort by each individual in pursuing his own "interest and happiness"¹⁹.

¹⁷ Cremaschi 2008: 31-33; 2014: 16-40.

¹⁸ Malthus 1803, 2: 214.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 105.

5. Malthus on sexual morality

It is a commonplace idea that the Victorian age was obsessed by sex. This was the result of a mass campaign aimed at spreading civilized manners and instigating inner control over passions. The sexual drive was the omnipresent enemy and religion, education, and manners were all meant to conspire in confining, channelling, and making it almost invisible. Victorian morality was largely the Evangelicals' achievement and in the Evangelical armaments there was a battery of doctrines about family, marriage, procreation, industry, thriftiness, and self-control that derived to a large extent from Malthus's views on the principle of population. How far is Malthus guilty of the Victorian sin of obsession with Sex? Sexual morality is indeed one important, and perhaps the most important chapter in Malthus's view of private morality, but it is because of the relationship he discovered between procreation and poverty, phrased as a slogan, the discovery that 'too much sex makes you poor'. On the other hand the tone of Malthus's treatment of the subject is far from bigotry, for example, pregnancy outside the wedlock is deemed to be the result of 'so natural a sin'.

How did it come about that sex turned out so important? The most urgent problem of his time was, as illustrated above, poverty, and this was the central issue in the first *Essay*. The main difference between the 1798 and the 1803 outlook is the role that prudence may play in making a tolerable individual existence and a decent society possible. This implies that the problem of theodicy may be settled now not exclusively taking an after-life into account but both in inner-worldly and in other-worldly perspective. I have illustrated how Vice, Misery, and the Prudential Restraint were already mentioned on one occasion in the first *Essay* as the three factors contrasting the population principle, but the third element was declared irrelevant in accounting for past history and was declared to be unviable on 'technical' reasons in designing our future, and reduced eventually, on moral reasons, to the first of the three factors, that is, vice. The reasons for irrelevance are the following: 'among plants and animals' the effects of the 'imperious and all-pervading law of nature of necessity' are 'waste of seed, sickness, and premature death, among mankind, misery and vice. The former, misery, is an absolutely necessary consequence of it. Vice is a highly probable consequence, and we therefore see it abundantly prevail; but it ought not, perhaps, to be called an *absolutely necessary* consequence'²⁰. The prudential check to population

²⁰ Malthus 1798: 9; emphasis added.

growth 'almost necessarily, though *not absolutely* so, produces vice'²¹. This check consists in the action of reason, which interrupts the effects of a powerful instinct that would urge man to pursue the dictate of nature in an early attachment to one woman. The clause '*not absolutely* so' seems to hint at the possibility of 'moral restraint' (which accordingly would have been envisaged by Malthus as a possible solution as soon as in 1798) but this seems to be confined to pure speculation, since Malthus seems to believe that, in practice, checks to population are 'resolved into misery and vice'²².

I mentioned that the great change of 1803 was systematic introduction of a third item in the list of checks to population, now modified so as to include 'moral restraint, vice, and misery'²³. *Moral* restraint is expressly declared to be different from the *preventive* check as such. The latter in fact consists in postponement of marriage accompanied by 'irregular gratification', whereas the former means postponement of marriage with absolute chastity in the meanwhile, which does not exclude virtuous attachments which are enjoyable per se without ceasing to be virtuous, where marriage comes at last as a longed for prize.

In the second *Essay*, chapter 3 of the third book, Malthus acknowledges Godwin's innovation in admitting of a kind of check to population of which he may admit as morally acceptable and that he admits he has now incorporated into his own solution. In this chapter, while replying to Godwin's counter-objections in *Thoughts occasioned by the perusal of Dr. Parr's Spital Sermon* (1801), after arguing that in the past no check has ever contributed to keep down the population to the level of the means of subsistence, that does not fairly come under some form of vice or misery²⁴, he mentions the check of 'moral restraint'²⁵, that he admits that is recommended by Godwin as 'that sentiment whether virtue, prudence, or pride, which continually restrains the universality and frequent repetition of the marriage contract'²⁶. Malthus admits that this has now become the main item of his own system and contends that in Godwin's system it is bound to become ineffective. The reason is that in order to have a powerful motive for human conduct we need 'a sense of duty, superadded to a sense of interest'²⁷, and if 'we were to remove

²¹ *Ibid.*:14.

²² *Ibid.*: 38; emphasis added.

²³ Malthus 1803, 1: 23.

²⁴ Godwin 1801: 329

²⁵ Malthus 1803, 1: 329.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 331.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

or weaken the motive of interest, which would be the case in Mr. Godwin's system', we would be left with a sense of duty alone, which would be 'a weak substitute'²⁸.

It is fair to add that Malthus, even though he understands moral restraint in terms of 'restraint from marriage from prudential motives, which is not followed by irregular gratifications'²⁹, is less naïve about human nature than the last sentence may seem to suggest, since he is explicit enough about the idea that sex outside marriage is not the worst sin and that it is not true that 'the vices which relate to the sex are the only vices which are to be considered in a moral question; or that they are even the greatest and most degrading to the human character'³⁰. Elsewhere, in a footnote added in 1806, he admits that it is true that the *moral* restraint has been seldom practised in the past³¹, and one should not be too naïvely hopeful also about future prospects, but he argues in the 1806 Appendix that a greater degree of sexual promiscuity accompanied by the practice of contraception, an evil that may be carried as a side-effect by widespread 'prudential check to marriage', is still 'better than premature mortality'³². And thus, once we may prove that the world at large is not an evil place, at least on principle, since a decent society would be possible on the basis first of all of prudence and secondly of other virtues, and that a more humane world is a viable prospect, Malthus believes that we must dare to face also the unpalatable implication that we should point first at bigger evils, that is, misery and vice ensuing from an excessive birth-rate, and only after that at the lesser evil, that is, sexual promiscuity. Nonetheless, he has clear in mind that 'if every man were to obey at all times the impulses of nature in the gratification of this passion, without regard to consequences, the principal part of these important objects [those fixed by nature as the ends promoted by sexual instinct] would not be attained, and even the continuation of the species might be defeated by a promiscuous intercourse'³³. As a consequence, he believes that sexual promiscuity 'ought always strongly to be reprobated' since such sins 'can rarely or never be committed without producing unhappiness somewhere or other'³⁴, and have the effect 'to weaken the best affections of the heart'³⁵, as well as an obvious tendency 'to degrade the female character'³⁶, and to spread real distress and aggravated misery among 'unfortunate females'.

²⁸ *Ibid.*: 332.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 330 fn .

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 2: 111.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2: 222.

³² *Ibid.*, 2: 222.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1: 156.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Malthus 1803, 2: 97.

Malthus believes that, starting with observation of the workings of the laws of nature, we may conclude that chastity is a virtue, and it involves not only avoidance of casual sex and indulging in sexual intercourse before marriage, but also not practising contraception and avoiding marriage before one is in condition to support a family. No matter how probable and how direct the evils carried by the contrary vice may be, the existence of such evils is a clear proof of the existence and detailed contents of this virtue, for also in other instances 'it has not been till after long and painful experience that the conduct most favourable to the happiness of man' has been recognized to be such, and thus the 'delayed consequence of particular effects does not alter their nature, nor our obligation to regulate our conduct accordingly'³⁷.

Malthus, not unlike Hume, Smith, and Paley, believes that there is 'a very natural reason why the disgrace which attends a breach of chastity should be greater in a woman than in a man'³⁸, since the children born of irregular unions may either fall upon the society for support or starve. And to prevent the frequent recurrence of such an inconvenience, as it would be highly unjust to punish so natural a fault by personal restraint or infliction, the men might agree to punish it with disgrace. Malthus notes that males and females are *de facto* not treated in the same manner as far as this virtue is concerned and women are subject to 'superior disgrace' than men when they perpetrate a breach of chastity. He admits that such inequality is unfair, it is a breach of '*natural justice*' and yet it has a *natural* origin since the offence is 'more obvious and conspicuous in the woman, and less liable to mistake'. He concludes that the fact

that a woman should at present be almost driven from society, for an offence, which men commit nearly with impunity, seems to be undoubtedly a breach of natural justice. But the origin of the custom, as the most obvious and effectual method of preventing the frequent recurrence of a serious inconvenience to a community, appears to be natural, though not perhaps perfectly justifiable³⁹.

Indeed society would punish the man in case the offence was obvious and easy to establish. Since it is not so, the result is that 'the largest sum of blame' falls where 'the evidence of the offence

³⁶ Malthus 1803, 1: 18.

³⁷ Malthus 1803, 2: 99.

³⁸ Malthus 1803, 1: 324.

³⁹ Malthus 1798: 73.

was most complete and the inconvenience to the society at the same time the greatest'⁴⁰. Such a custom is not *justifiable* and yet it is *natural*, for it has the same 'very natural origin' as the artificial institutions of property and marriage, in turn carrying their own artificial virtues. It originates in the state of scarcity which inevitably arises from the combined effect of the tendency of population to grow and of the impossibility of a parallel growth in the production of supplies. Since we should not expect that a woman has resources sufficient to support her own children, once a woman has intercourse with a man 'who had entered into no compact to maintain her children' and 'has deserted her', these children will be a burden to society. Thus, in order

To prevent the frequent recurrence of such an inconvenience, as it would be highly unjust to punish *so natural a fault* by personal restraint or infliction, the men might agree to punish it with disgrace⁴¹.

Note the distinction between what is *natural*, here in the sense of 'spontaneous' or 'not artificial', and what is *justifiable*, in the sense of what is conforming to impartiality and conducive the greatest mass of happiness.

Malthus elaborates on the point in the second *Essay*. The general theory on laws of nature and virtue that has been presented in the previous chapter provides the background for discussion of chastity. Physical evils, such as disease and death, are unavoidable consequences, by the fixed laws of nature, of vice, that is of such conditions as are unfavourable to happiness and virtue. This seems to have been a 'benevolent dispensation', since the unhappy lot of the vicious one carries out the function of 'a beacon to others'⁴². This holds true for such vices as intemperance in eating and drinking, which are followed by ill health, as well as for those vices that imply as a consequence that 'we increase too fast for the means of subsistence'⁴³, which are followed by squalid poverty and all the consequences coming with it. Not unlike desire of food is a necessary passion, but one that must be limited by a corresponding virtue, so also the passion between the sexes is not only necessary for the survival of the species, but it is also 'one of the principal ingredients of human happiness'⁴⁴, and yet 'much evil flows from the irregular gratification of it'⁴⁵.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*: 73.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*: 73; emphasis added.

⁴² Malthus 1803, 2: 89.

⁴³ *Ibid.*: 89.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*: 92.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*: 92.

Nonetheless, Malthus reaffirms also in 1803 the same degree of sympathy with the woman who has committed 'so natural a sin' as that of getting pregnant before marriage and severe judgement on the man involved in the affair, and admits of the tragic contrast between the dictates of fairness and the laws of nature. He writes that it may appear to be

hard that a mother and her children, who have been guilty of no particular crime themselves, should suffer for the ill conduct of the father; but this is one of the *invariable laws of nature*; and, knowing this, we should think twice upon the subject, and be very sure of the ground on which we go, before we presume systematically to counteract it⁴⁶.

He adds that the kind of self-respect which inspires female chastity that may be learned and cultivated only when a person is respected first by others, what seldom happens among the poorest members of society. Abject poverty – he remarks –

particularly when joined with idleness, is a state the most unfavourable to chastity that can well be conceived. The passion is as strong, or nearly so, as in other situations; and every restraint on it from personal respect, or a sense of morality, is generally removed. There is a degree of squalid poverty, in which, if a girl was brought up, I should say, that her being really modest at twenty was an absolute miracle. Those persons must have extraordinary minds indeed, and such as are not usually formed under similar circumstances, who can continue to respect themselves when no other person whatever respects them. If the children thus brought up were even to marry at twenty, it is probable, that they would have passed some years in vicious habits before that period⁴⁷.

The virtue opposite to irregular gratification of the passion which unites both sexes is chastity, and 'virtuous love' is the alternative to irregular gratification of the passion. Thus there is a 'law of chastity', which

cannot be violated without producing *evil*. The effect of anything like a promiscuous intercourse, which prevents the birth of children, is evidently *to weaken the best affections of the heart*, and in

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*: 143, emphasis added.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*:114.

a very marked manner to degrade the female character. And any other intercourse would, without *improper arts*, bring as many children into the society as marriage, with a greater probability of their becoming a burden to it⁴⁸.

All this implies the assumption that contraception as such is vicious.

To the less versed in the history of Christianity among Malthus readers it may sound quite strange that he neatly rules out birth control within marriage without second thoughts. In fact he lists 'unnatural' practices that 'would prevent breeding'⁴⁹ or 'improper arts' that 'prevent the birth of children'⁵⁰ among evils such as sexual promiscuity and abortion⁵¹. He insists, under pressure from critics, that he has always opposed the restraints prescribed by Condorcet and that he has always reprobated 'any artificial and unnatural modes of checking population, both on account of their *immorality* and their tendency to remove a necessary *stimulus to industry*'⁵². As talk is here of married couples, it is clear that the 'immorality' in question does not consist in promiscuous intercourse but in contraception as such. In the 1817 Appendix he adds a specification of the reason why contraception is vicious. He declares that

if it were possible for each married couple to limit by wish the number of their children, there is certainly reason to fear that the indolence of the human race would be very greatly increased⁵³.

This is quite in tune with the general consequentialist voluntarist approach for which the usual 'private hell general heaven' equation holds. In fact, he never explains what is *intrinsically* immoral in birth control within marriage but his general outlook exonerates him from the burden of detecting any intrinsic moral quality in actions, for moral qualities are by definition superimposed on kinds of actions and the general, albeit remote, tendency to produce evils is enough as a *mark* of the vicious character of a category of actions. On the other hand he may have never felt a need to explain the sources of immorality in contraception because it was something simply obvious for his readers and even discussing it was likely to arouse strong reactions. In order to understand what precisely was so obvious, it is important to avoid mixing together different lines of thought

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: 97.

⁴⁹ Malthus 1803, 1: 310.

⁵⁰ Malthus 1803, 2: 97.

⁵¹ Malthus 1803, 1: 18.

⁵² Malthus 1803, 1: 235.

⁵³ *Ibid.*: 235.

that to the present-day (supposedly secularised) reader may seem vaguely similar while it is not. Malthus, while alluding to intrinsically immoral character of contraception within marriage, does not use the argument of *conformity to nature* (that was to become typical of Catholic, or better Thomist, theology when the topic of contraception will come into focus at the end of the nineteenth century) because he is a voluntarist and believes general laws to have been proclaimed by God not respecting the essence of things he had created but instead keeping in mind the *general consequences* of compliance with such general laws.

It may be a temptation for the modern reader to dismiss all this as mere hypocrisy. It is true that Malthus was pleading what was far from being a popular cause, and the last thing he needed was raising more opposition than it was unavoidable by contrasting also rooted prejudices in matters of sexual morality. This is probably part of the story, but assuming it was all the story would contrast with Malthus's courage, not to say lack of diplomacy, in contrasting prejudices in other fields. Perhaps in this case (no less than in those of trade-unions as far as wages are concerned and welfare institutions as far as old age, illness, and unemployment are concerned) Malthus was talking about possibilities that seemed as unrealistic as travels to the Moon. It may be added that contraceptive techniques were rudimentary and the most advanced one (the sponge imbibed with some mildly acid liquid such as lemon juice) was even dangerous for women (for sponges tended to lose pieces that were the sources of quite dangerous infections); that they had been used by soldiers and sailors in intercourse with prostitutes and by the libertine elite especially in France, and carried accordingly a social stigma as something associated with immorality, so that a gentleman would use a sponge with his whore, but never with his wife since it would have been a grievous insult to her. Last but not least, the Christian churches had always taken refusal of contraception as a matter of course, partly because in the first centuries of Christianity in the Roman-Hellenistic society it was customarily associated with other obviously immoral practices such as prostitution and extramarital sex, partly because potions used for contraceptive purposes were not clearly distinguished from abortive potions, partly because it was associated with one doctrinal tendency, the Gnostic 'left' that favoured contraception *because* it favoured free use of sexuality.

6. Sex and poverty

The striking novelty in Malthus's discourse – which is indeed new even if his morality is a traditional one, not Bentham's new morality, and even if he candidly preaches such unpalatable lessons as chastity before marriage for men as well as for women and such an even less palatable lesson as refusal of contraception, is that sex has more to do with poverty than with the struggle between reason and the passions. In other words, the Church fathers less convincing conclusions in matters of marriage and sex had to do – as I have briefly mentioned – with their agenda more than with their Platonic philosophy and their non-existing Biblical exegesis; that is, they were facing unjust and oppressive moral practices of the Roman Empire and their competitor was provided by various Gnostic currents. Malthus's agenda is quite different and his merit is having opened his own eyes to a completely different social context. Accordingly the discussion of sexual morality is framed by Malthus in strict relationship with that of another issue that corresponds in applied ethics to the virtues of justice and beneficence, namely poverty.

The main issue of both a public and a private morality for modern times is poverty. Malthus found it necessary to insist in the 1817 Appendix that in his work – be it read with alterations introduced in later editions or without those alterations – it will appear to 'every reader of candour' that 'the practical design' in the mind of the writer is 'to improve the condition and increase the happiness of the lower classes of society'⁵⁴. Why a need to insist on the point was felt in 1817 is a problem, but it is worth recalling – in the face of a long tradition depicting Malthus as an ogre or a reactionary – that these are Malthus's own words, declaring that his main concern had always been waging a war on poverty.

It is as well to add that the same line of argument with regard to poverty is what lies behind even the most infelicitous statements in both *Essays*, included the one on the 'mighty feats of Nature', which Malthus withdrew in following editions as being – as he admits, again in the 1817 Appendix – 'not sufficiently indulgent to the weaknesses of human nature and the feelings of Christian charity'⁵⁵.

In the first *Essay* he writes that the inevitability of the existence of a class of landowners and a class of labourers is proved, but also that we cannot by no means infer from such inevitability that 'the present great inequality of property, is either necessary or useful to society.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2: 251.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*: 250.

On the contrary, it must certainly be considered as an evil, and every institution that promotes it, is essentially wrong and impolitic',⁵⁶ and that a better lot for the working classes is a necessary wish for 'every friend of humanity'⁵⁷. In 1826, when he was – as always – not too brilliantly retreating under his critics' fire he added:

If all could be completely relieved, and poverty banished from the country, even at the expense of three-fourths of the fortunes of the rich, I would be the last person to say a single syllable against relieving all, and making the degree of distress alone the measure of our bounty⁵⁸.

That is, he is still insisting that the point he has been making through decades is not the legitimacy of property as contrasted with lack of legitimacy in the claims of the poor, but much less, namely impossibility of totally eliminating poverty as such.

For Malthus there is one more reason why the condition of the poor should be the moral and political philosopher's main concern, namely that his subject of inquiry is not just *the wealth* of a nation, as Adam Smith allegedly believed – in fact he did not, but this goes beyond the point of the present essay – but *the mass of happiness* that is allotted to the members of this society, which is, 'after all, the legitimate end even of its wealth, power, and population'⁵⁹.

Since the working classes make for the bulk of society – Malthus contends in a spirit that is precisely Smith's spirit – it is their condition that should be our main concern. Thus – he repeats 22 years later – 'it is most desirable that the labouring classes should be well paid, for a much more important reason than any that can relate to wealth; namely the happiness of the great mass of society'⁶⁰. In this spirit, Malthus declared once more that every friend of humanity would find that to allow the greatest part of society to live a better life is a desirable object, while noting that 'unfortunately the working classes, though they share in the general prosperity, do not share in it so largely as in the general adversity'⁶¹. And in a passage added in 1817, he argues that even if the 'errors of the labouring classes of society are always entitled to great indulgence and consideration', since they 'are the natural and pardonable results of their liability to be deceived by first appearances, and by the arts of designing men, owing to the nature of their situation, and

⁵⁶Malthus 1798: 102 fn

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 49.

⁵⁸ Malthus 1803, 2: 369.

⁵⁹ Malthus 1798: 116.

⁶⁰ Malthus 1820: 472.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*: 522.

the scanty knowledge which in general falls to their share⁶², these mistakes are to be corrected by spreading knowledge of the true causes of poverty, rather by patience and the gradual diffusion of education and knowledge, than by any harsher methods⁶³. The 'mere knowledge of these truths' would improve the prudential habits of the poor with regard to marriage, and as a result of apt combination of duty and interest, and the natural check to population may be expected to become 'still more effective, as the lower classes of people continue to improve in knowledge and prudence'⁶⁴.

The point on which Malthus insists is that the desired goals cannot be reached neither by the traditional means prompted by Tory-humanitarians nor by those advocated by radicals of the Godwin kind, that is indiscriminate private charity or, even worse, public assistance, an assistance that would include the able-bodied in its beneficiaries or, even worse than worst, abolition of private property and family. The reason is that such measures yield or would yield results opposite to the intended ones, for any attempt to reverse the laws of nature implies 'not only that they should fail in their object, but that the poor who were intended to be benefited, should suffer most cruelly from this inhuman deceit'⁶⁵.

Malthus's morale is that, even if a society with no inequality is a visionary dream, yet a society with less inequality is a viable goal for sensible policies. In such a society the distance between the top and the bottom would be less, and besides the positions at the bottom would be less crowded, while more individual would be placed in middle positions. He adds:

The structure of society, in its great features, will probably remain unchanged. We have every reason to believe that it will always consist of a class of proprietors and a class of labourers; but the condition of each, and the proportion which they bear to each other, may be so altered as greatly to improve the harmony and beauty of the whole⁶⁶.

In other words, the 'unhappy persons who in the great lottery of life have drawn a blank'⁶⁷ will at least be fewer in number and '[1806: the lottery of] human society would appear to consist of

⁶² Malthus 1803,1: 334-5.

⁶³ *Ibid.*: 335.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*: 338.

⁶⁵ Malthus 1798: 127; cf. 33; Malthus 1803, 2: 192.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*: 203.

⁶⁷ Malthus 1803, 1: 325.

fewer blanks and more prizes; and the sum of social happiness would be evidently augmented'⁶⁸, that is, the degree of inequality and the mass of unhappiness will thus be greatly reduced, even if some amount of both will remain unavoidable. The importance of this conclusion could hardly be overemphasised, since it contradicts in general the widespread idea of Malthus's *unqualified* pessimism, and more specifically Hollander's claim that moral restraint according to Malthus has not only played no relevant role in the past history of mankind (which is correct) but also will play no relevant role in the future (which is clearly mistaken since it contradicts Malthus's main line of argument as reconstructed above).

Malthus's argument for gradual abolition of public relief is that a balance should be made between more dependence and relief on the one hand and more freedom and higher wages on the other; the common measure for comparison seems to be provided by *comfort and happiness*. He writes that 'the poor themselves could be made to understand that they had purchased their right to a provision by law, by too great and extensive a sacrifice of their *liberty and happiness*'⁶⁹.

Also several unpalatable declarations that did not contribute much to Malthus's popularity fit well in this strategy. For example, a need for generalized blame for 'dependent poverty' is justified by regard to general consequences construed in terms of happiness; it should be noted that what is justified by such a line of argument is need for praise or blame, not a judgement on the acts blamed or praised as such. Malthus writes in 1798: 'hard as it may appear in individual instances, dependent poverty ought to be held disgraceful. Such a stimulus [is] necessary to promote the happiness of the great mass of mankind'⁷⁰ and he repeats in 1803 that 'disgrace' ought to be attached to dependent poverty 'for the best and most humane reasons'⁷¹.

Through subsequent approximations and under pressure of critics, Malthus yields finally a kind of Institutionalist approach to policies concerning poverty, making room for generalized basic education, free markets for labour and (from a certain date on) for corn, colonies, and allowing for a subsidiary role for private beneficence⁷². The goal to be aimed at by such a mix of policies is bringing about

circumstances which tend to elevate the character of the lower classes of society, which make them approach the nearest to beings who 'look before and after', and who consequently cannot

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*: 195.

⁶⁹ Malthus 1807: 6-7; emphasis added.

⁷⁰ Malthus 1798: 33.

⁷¹ Malthus 1803, 1: 360.

⁷² Cremaschi 2014: 161-165; Jensen 1999.

acquiesce patiently in the thought of depriving themselves and their children of the means of being *respectable, virtuous and happy*⁷³.

This, he insists, is a completely plausible goal, and one in agreement with traditional Christian teachings concerning charity, love for one's neighbour, and the dignity of every human being in his quality of child of God. And his recommendations do not run against any Biblical precept, including the precept to grow and populate the earth, unless it is understood in some unjustified way as an overriding precept or as the only precept taught by Christianity. He argues that every

express command given to man by his Creator is given in subordination to those great and uniform laws of nature which he had previously established; and we are forbidden both by reason and religion to expect that these laws will be changed in order to enable us to execute more readily the particular precept⁷⁴.

And – he adds – since we have no hope that a miracle that makes so that man can live without food would be ever worked out, 'it becomes our positive duty as reasonable creatures, and with a view of executing the commands of our Creator, to inquire into the laws which he has established for the multiplication of the species'⁷⁵, and it is 'a folly exactly of the same kind as to attempt to obey the will of our Creator by increasing population without reference to the means of its support, as to attempt to obtain an abundant crop of corn by sowing it on the wayside and in hedges, where it cannot receive its proper nourishment'⁷⁶.

Thus he may declare: I am no 'enemy to population. I am only an enemy to vice and misery, and consequently to that unfavourable proportion between population and food which produces these evils'⁷⁷, and he concludes that it is

the intention of the Creator that the earth should be replenished; but certainly with a healthy, virtuous and happy population, not an unhealthy, vicious, and miserable one⁷⁸.

⁷³ Malthus 1820: 251.

⁷⁴ Malthus 1803, 2: 205.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*: 205

⁷⁸ Malthus 1803, 2: 206 (Appendix 1806).

7. What kind of lessons Malthus's applied ethics may still teach

Malthus ethics was a rather traditional one, even if of an idiosyncratic kind. It escapes not too unusual dichotomies between religious or conservative morality and the new rational or consequentialist ethics. It was actually a kind of self-styled Christian morality, in a first phase centred on *natural* morality – which means morality based on reason, not on divine revelation – and based on theological consequentialist assumptions in the Cumberland- Gay-Paley line – once more, theological in the sense of rational or natural theology, not revealed theology. This kind of ethical theory left a number of open questions or conundrums, but Malthus managed to immunize his own theory from such difficulties. In a second phase his ethical doctrine became more and more (not less, as Hollander and others believe) centred on 'revealed' morality and in the meantime more and more focused on prudence and individual responsibility in such a way as to make his treatment of the specific issue (reproduction, poverty, dignity) compatible with different, religious or non religious, general ethical views⁷⁹.

Hollander is right when he contends that there was indeed an evolution in Malthus's positions; it is true that moral restraint as a real possibility for the future is a novelty of 1803; vice is not absolutely necessary as it was apparently in the 1798, with the resulting final sublime picture of the process of creation so close to Dante's *Inferno*; there are changes concerning partial evil, as perfect virtue would, on principle, turn the world to some extent free from partial evil; it is true that the evil of inequality is unavoidable but it may be gradually reduced up to an unknown point; also the degree of misery to which the idle and improvident are damned may be reduced in an improved society and even such reduced degree be alleviated by private charity; and finally society will always be composed of two classes, 'but the condition of each, and the proportions which they bear to each another, may be so altered, as greatly to improve the harmony and beauty of the whole'⁸⁰.

Malthus's ethical theory was far from the 'new morality' fostered then by Bentham and now by Peter Singer; he did not infer from the discovery of a new, or until then overlooked, moral dilemma to the need for substituting the old morality with something completely new; on the contrary he argued for consistent application of traditional virtues as the keystone of a new moral and political construction that was called forth to limit and control most evils arising from the

⁷⁹ Cremaschi 2014: 193-199.

⁸⁰ Malthus 1803, 2: 203

principle of population; what is new in Malthus's approach to ethical issues is instead something almost opposite to Bentham's spirit. Bentham's is a new morality of consequences, where the individual agent is made responsible for everything, a one-to-one correspondence is believed to hold between courses of action and results, and no course of action – however nasty – is ruled out if it is believed to be conducive to a more favourable balance of positive consequences. Malthus's morality is quite traditional in its contents, the Ciceronian and Christian virtues, and comparatively new in its theoretical foundations (that is, based on seventeenth-century ethical theory), and most of all it is a quite modest approach - when contrasted with ambitious approaches by Bentham, Godwin, Condorcet on the one hand, and by his romantic and traditionalist opponents on the other. The kind of 'modesty' I am pointing at consists in awareness that there are indeed virtues and moral precepts but there are also greater and lesser evils, and the moral and political science is indeed a moral science not only in the sense that is science of man but also in the sense that it is a applied moral theology, and yet, in so far as it *applied*, it cannot turn out to be abstract moralizing, the highest the value preached the better. On the contrary Malthus insists, and he does so more and more as he revises his work through several editions, that there are indeed consequences of lines of action and policies, and there are greater and lesser evils, and policies should be designed for a world made of human beings as they are, not as they ought to be. This is not tantamount to applied ethics in the end-of-twentieth-century sense, indeed it corresponds to a view of a moral and political science qua morally-oriented social science no one would nerve to vindicate nowadays, and yet it is a first step in the direction of ethics of responsibility, ethics based on overlapping consensus or intermediate principle, in a world 'ethics' instead of 'moralizing'.

The substitution of procreation for sex as the focus makes for a drastic change in the agenda. Christian moral teachings used to differ in a remarkable way from each other, ranging from proponents of a more orthodox Biblical view of marriage and love as highly positive elements in God's creation and as essential parts of the divine plan, and quite unorthodox views of sexuality as sinful, whether or not its sinfulness could be partly excused by the superior end of procreation; what had been basically lacking in the discussion up to Malthus's time was a consideration of human beings' own responsibility in the decision of procreating. This makes for a remarkable change also in the approach, namely, the discussion becomes an examination of a well-identified issue, taking cause-effect relationships into account in order to assess possible lines of conduct in the light of some, widely shared and comparatively minimal, value judgements. This is more or less the approach of what is now called applied ethics, at least according to one of its accounts, or

perhaps to the account shared by a vast majority of its practitioners. In a sense, both the subject matter, *i.e.*, sexuality, was substituted with a more restricted issue, namely reproduction, and the traditional approach, *i.e.*, moral theology and philosophy, was substituted with a more modest approach, namely, in Malthus's own words, 'moral and political science'⁸¹.

Such a drastic transformation brought about a viable framework for discussion of ethical issues still unforeseen by Malthus, namely those having to do first with the technical feasibility of eugenics programs and secondly with the scientific discovery of genetics as a field of study but also of possible intervention. Malthus's ethics had obviously enough nothing to say on those unforeseen issues in so far as it was meant to treat just the 'quantitative' dimension of procreation, that is, 'how many'. Later discussions and controversies will arise around different dimensions, that is, not just about 'how many' but also about 'how healthy, how strong, how far empowered', but what Malthus's lesson could still teach to those arguing opposite claims in such controversies is that questions may be construed in such a way as to avoid unending controversy on incompatible ultimate principles – say, *non-negotiable values* – once the strategy is turned upside down and a principle of responsibility becomes the overriding rule shared by all partners in the conversation.

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