

## MALTHUS, THOMAS ROBERT (1766 - 1834)

Thomas Robert Malthus was born in Wotton, Surrey, the son of a country gentleman. He was educated at Cambridge where he was exposed to Scottish experimental Newtonianism in epistemology, Anglican consequentialist voluntarism in ethics, and “philosophical Whiggism” in politics. After graduation he took orders and was elected a fellow of Jesus College. He carried out his pastoral duties as a curate in a small village in Surrey, until in 1805 he was offered a professorship of modern history and political economy at the “East India College” at Haileybury, Hertfordshire, an institution designed to prepare officials for the East India Company. He lived there during the following three decades while visiting London regularly to attend meetings of the Political Economy Club and to have breakfast with his friend David Ricardo, with whom he discussed economic issues.

Malthus is important in the history of Utilitarianism as the discoverer of the principle of population, which became one of the basic weapons in the philosophic radicals’s battery. In 1798 he published *Essay on the Principle of Population*, aimed at fighting utopian egalitarian doctrines, such as those formulated by Condorcet and William Godwin, by proving that a “principle” according to which population increases faster than the means of subsistence would doom every attempt at implementing social egalitarianism to failure. The pamphlet was condemned on moral grounds by both humanitarian Tories and evangelical Christians, while it was welcome to Whigs and was later included in the philosophic radicals’s canon. A new, much expanded version, slightly less dismal in its conclusions, was published in 1803 (1989a).

A remarkable and yet overlooked feature of the 1803 version of the *Essay* is that it presents a doctrine that is more empirical and yet no less moral and theological. In fact, the problem of theodicy was settled in the two final heterodox chapters to the *Essay* in 1798 in a strongly pessimist tone, but it is dealt with in the second version in more optimist tones made possible by admission of a wider scope for moral choice and responsible action. In more detail the 1803 version argues a theological consequentialist justification for moral laws in general, and for the duty of “moral restraint” in particular, and conclude that there is a duty of to defer marriage while observing chastity as the remedy to the effects of the principle of population. But, under friendly fire from his evangelical fellow-travellers, in the following four editions Malthus increasingly modified his doctrines, admitting of the possibility that in a decent society the effects of the principle might be postponed indefinitely and it would be possible “to improve the condition and increase the happiness of the lower classes of society” (1989a, vol. 2, p. 251).

The revised version of the population theory was inspired by (and in turn provided a source of inspiration for) social evangelicalism as theorized and practised by the Scottish Presbyterian Thomas Chalmers and the Anglican John B. Sumner. Ironically, while adopting a condescending attitude towards “Parson Malthus”, philosophic radicals like James Mill tended to stick to the original version of the principle of population (by then refuted by Malthus) as an essential ingredient in their own socio-political alchemy.

This story is complicated enough to account for subsequent ambivalent and self-contradictory mythologies concerning Malthus’s relationship to Utilitarianism. In fact, starting with the last decades of the nineteenth-century, Malthus was believed to have been a utilitarian *tout-court* (see Bonar, 1885). However, the Benthamites, while

gratefully accepting the principle of population, had taken Malthus's mention of "laws of nature", "virtue", and natural "rights", as a proof of his being a nonsense-preaching parson. Bonar's view was routinely repeated for almost a century, but without questioning its apparent contradictions. More recently, the contrast between the utilitarian Malthus and the Christian moralist Malthus has re-emerged in an exchange between Hollander (1989) and Winch (1993).

There are a number of problems with the standard interpretation. How could Malthus, who had no relationship to Bentham and a troubled one with James Mill, and at times was the target of campaigns planned by Mill himself against the enemies of true political economy and opponents of political Reform, be nonetheless a utilitarian? One important circumstance is that in the first three decades of the nineteenth-century Whigs and Radicals often found themselves in alliance, even though their respective political agendas differed in important ways. The principle of utility was an ingredient – albeit with a rather different function – in two different systems, namely Paley's consequentialist voluntarism (generally known under the infelicitous label "theological utilitarianism") and Bentham's secular brand of Utilitarianism and, in so far as at least the English – as contrasted with the Scottish – branch of Whiggism had Paley as its authority both currents were dimly perceived as the proponents of rather similar ideas. The cleavage emerged in full when, on the one hand, an inductivist approach to the "noble science of politics" was vindicated against the Benthamite deductive approach by Macaulay in a memorable series of essays in the *Edinburgh Review* of 1829 (Lively and Rees, 1978) and, on the other hand, Paley's authority came to be challenged from within the Anglican liberal camp by supporters of an intuitionist alternative.

Within this context Malthus had already been arguing for some time for an alternative to what Macaulay

would name utilitarian logic, while adhering (in a manner made increasingly milder by growing doses of evangelicalism) to a Paley-like ethical doctrine that made moral imperatives dependent on the divine will, but also assumed that the latter was enlightened by consequentialist calculations. In fact, Malthus frequently proposed "utility" as the test for moral laws on the grounds that the greatest sum of happiness for his creatures was the Creator's putative goal (1986, p. 77; 1989a, vol. 1, p.19; vol. 2, pp. 104, 157-8). At the same time, he often refers in the *Essay* to "fixed laws of our nature" (1986, pp.8, 59; 1989a, vol. 1, p.10; vol. 2, pp.87-8) with reference to the basic postulates of his population doctrine, and, in the *Principles of Political Economy* (1820), besides "general laws" and the usual "propositions of political economy", he refers to "laws of nature" in the sense of laws of physical nature constantly at work "in the production of necessaries" (1989b, vol. 1, pp.147-8). It is apparent, therefore, that Malthus' system of ideas made room both for the "test of utility" and for such notions as natural or innate "rights" and "laws of nature" that were believed by Bentham to be a nonsense.

The claim that Malthus was a "utilitarian" is, accordingly, either vacuous or wrong. If making use of the utility principle is what makes one a utilitarian, then clearly Malthus could be described as such. However, if being a utilitarian means sharing the family of doctrines taught by the Benthamites, then clearly Malthus was not a utilitarian. He was a follower of consequentialist voluntarism, which – far from being a not yet fully secular utilitarianism – was a self-standing doctrine with its own logic and its own waterproof, albeit unsavoury, theodicy justifying partial evil in the name of universal good. The mercilessness of such a solution and its social implications was the target of evangelical attacks and the occasion for repeated amendments to the *Essay*. The final result was that by the third decade of the nineteenth

century the Benthamites appeared to be the main supporters of a merciless social politics, while the former “ogre” Malthus had determined that the goal of any wise and just politics was to bring about circumstances which would tend to elevate the “character” of the “lower classes”, so that their members would no more “acquiesce patiently in the thought of depriving themselves and their children of the means of being respectable, virtuous and happy” (1989b, vol. 1, p.251).

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### **Further Reading**

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*See also* CONDORCET MARQUIS DE; GODWIN WILLIAM; PALEY WILLIAM; PHILOSOPHIC RADICALISM; POOR LAWS; POPULATION; RELIGIOUS UTILITARIANS; RICARDO DAVID.