**The Malthus-Ricardo correspondence:**

**sequential structure, argumentative strategies, and rationality**

by Marcelo Dascal and Sergio Cremaschi

1. Introduction

Scientific works, like Ricardo's and Malthus's published writings, can only be understood if properly contextualized. A lot of misunderstanding and pseudo-problems in the history of ideas in general, and of economic ideas in particular, arises out of a reading of *works* in isolation from their *frameworks*. Such frameworks include the extra-textual context as well as the textual co-text. Of special significance is the dialogical co-text of an ongoing discussion, where each work plays in fact the role of a major 'move' or 'counter-move'. Such a co-text is essential both for understanding the theories proposed and for capturing the rationale of their evolution.

Although the controversy between Malthus and Ricardo has long been considered to be an important source for the history of economic thought, and its protagonists represent two opposite – and enduring – styles of social theorizing, it has hardly been the object of a careful study *qua* controversy. We have undertaken to fill this gap, within the framework of a more ambitious project that places controversies at the centre of an account of the history of ideas, in science and elsewhere. We have reconstructed in a first paper, through a detailed analysis of their correspondence and other writings, the methodologies of Malthus and Ricardo, proposing a systematic comparison of their positions (Cremaschi and Dascal, 1996). In a second paper, we have reconstructed the performance of several kinds of speech acts (questioning, presuming, shifting the burden of proof, etc.) by both contenders in the actual development of the controversy, considered against the background of its co-text and context (Cremaschi and Dascal, 1998). In the present paper we want to further substantiate the importance of the dialogical co-text by a study of the controversy at two levels of analysis: (i) the sequential level of the moves and countermoves employed by each and (ii) the identification of recurrent patterns of argumentation employed by each. More specifically: first, we reconstruct, through an analysis of a chunk of the correspondence, a micro-level of specific moves and countermoves which constitute a sequential structure within which also meta-scientific and meta-controversial considerations may play a role (sect. 2); secondly, we move to the reconstruction of a macro-level of analysis, looking for patterns of argumentation, where the contenders combine various stratagems, some of which are represented by the moves and counter-moves identified in the preceding section; we devote here special attention to use of methodological arguments (sect. 3); finally we venture a few conclusions on the rationality of economic controversies (sect. 4).

Our study makes use of notions from both pragmatics and rhetoric. We believe that both disciplines can be combined in a theory grounded on the role of inferential processes in communication (cf. Dascal and Gross, forthcoming). Rhetoric focuses primarily on such processes as operative in persuasive discourse, whereas pragmatics has traditionally been concerned with the paradigmatic case of exchanges of information. In controversies, both kinds of discourse are equally important. Hence the appropriateness of a joint pragmatic-rhetoric approach for the study of controversies[[1]](#footnote-1).

2. Moves and counter-moves

At first glance, the reader of the Malthus-Ricardo correspondence gets the impression of a clash between two very different 'casts of mind' or temperaments, unable to really communicate with each other. Keynes (1972 [ 1933]: 95) expressed his own impression when faced with the newly found correspondence in the following terms: "Ricardo was the abstract and a priori theorist, Malthus the inductive and intuitive investigator who hated to stray too far from what he could test by reference to the facts and his own intuitions". Keynes here describes the opposition between Malthus and Ricardo in the broadest possible terms, that is, in terms of psychologies. Such a holistic characterization of a global attitude is what would perhaps be appropriate to call a 'style'. In our view, this (what Keynes takes as the explanans) is precisely what needs to be explained; in fact, we believe that a 'style' results from a number of different factors that can and should be discerned through a careful analysis of the actual unfolding of the controversy[[2]](#footnote-2). Furthermore, the course of a controversy is not simply the outcome of the clash between two ready-made styles, but results from the choice of strategies constantly redefined by each contender, which contribute in turn to redefine, and thus progressively constitute, his own style

2.1. A 'cycle' of the correspondence

In this section we are going to follow closely the sequential structure of a chunk of the controversy as reflected in the correspondence, paying special attention to those kinds of moves which have a distinctive function in a polemic exchange (as opposed to usual dialogues). Such moves typically involve the expression of agreement and disagreement, the use of tactics of deflecting objections and defending one's own positions, understanding or misunderstanding of the other's position, etc. The relationship between moves and counter-moves, however, shares with non-polemic dialogues the fact that each intervention in the exchange is performed in response to a 'demand' created by the preceding intervention. A question requires a reply, an objection, a rebuttal (or concession), etc. Although there are no strict rules establishing what reaction is appropriate to a given demand, i.e. that there are many ways to properly meet such 'demands', no intervention in a communicative exchange of any kind can be understood without taking into account the demand it relates to. The sequential organization of an exchange reflects, to a large extent, these relations between demands and reactions. Note also that Malthus and Ricardo differ in their choice and use of reactions to the demand set up by the opponent.

We have chosen a set of letters from a period between June 1814 and January 1815 as the sources for our analysis. The reasons for this choice are that this set exemplifies a well-documented, and yet not too complicated, section of the controversy. We know that no letter is missing; we know that Malthus and Ricardo never met personally during this period (as Ricardo was at Gatcomb and Malthus at the East India College) and that neither made any new publication, and accordingly the flow of communication between them was completely entrusted to letters; and finally, since their main works in political economy had not been published yet, the controversy was still a typically private discussion. Such a chunk of the correspondence, thus, constitutes a well-defined 'cycle' in the controversy, whose unity results prima facie from the existence of a well-defined focus, namely foreign commerce. As in other cycles, a number of subtopics come to cluster around the main one, and as in every other 'cycle', also this one never meets a 'closure' by victory or persuasion, but gradually dies away as soon as both contenders begin to realize that they have gained better comprehension both of the issue under focus and of the extent of their disagreement.

There is one shortcoming in the materials we have chosen for our micro-analysis: Malthus and Ricardo actually started discussing the issue of foreign commerce (particularly the question of the import of corn) as early as the summer of 1813, not in June 1814. The first record of this discussion is in a letter by Malthus of August 10 1813, a reply to two missing letters by Ricardo. Yet, we know little about the way in which the discussion developed between August 1813 and *June 1814,* since most letters are missing. Yet, Ricardo's letter of June 26 1814 is a good putative starting-point of this cycle, since it is a reaction to a publication by Malthus, expressing disagreement on a well-defined point, namely whether restrictions on the import of corn tend "to lower the rate of interest" (*to Ricardo* 26 June 1814. In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 108)[[3]](#footnote-3).

2.2. The Corn Laws: economic policy as an occasion for disputing about economic theory

The topic of the Corn Laws is the second one in the whole controversy: the first one was the influence of currency upon foreign trade, and it had fuelled the discussion from June 1811 to at least February 1812. As in other phases of the controversy, the choice of a new topic depends on current public debates, in this case about proposals for modification of the "Corn Laws", which was the occasion for a bitter polemic between supporters of agricultural protectionism and upholders of free trade in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars. During the wars, the resumption by British governments of a policy of heavy corn duties (which had been abandoned between 1774 and 1791), combined with the interruption of trade with the Continent, and with the effects of the uncertain British climate, resulted in price fluctuations which were ruinous both to the poor and to manufacturers. With peace, a collapse in the corn prices was inevitable, with the side-effects of either a great reduction of agricultural rents or the ruin of tenant farmers. The Parliament of 1814, dominated by the landed interest, prohibited the import of corn unless the price exceeded a certain (rather high) level.

To this debate Malthus himself contributed his *Observations on the Effects of the Corn Laws* of 1814 and Ricardo's letter of 26 June 1814 refers to this pamphlet. In the *Observations*, Malthus declares he is convinced of the soundness of the case for free trade in general, and that he even believes that Adam Smith was wrong on the particular point of a bounty on the exportation of corn, in that he left "the broad, grand, and almost unanswerable arguments which the general principles of political economy furnish in abundance against all system of bounties" entirely in the background (Malthus, [1814], p. 87). On principle, corn is not such a special case as to allow for an exception to the laws which regulate the markets for all other commodities. Yet, a number of considerations might be produced both in favour or against some kind of protectionist measure, including not only considerations of economic efficiency, but also of issues of national security, national "quiet and happiness", welfare of the labouring lasses, inconveniences possibly deriving from sudden changes, leading to an estimation of the price to be paid in terms of "sacrifices" and "restrictions" in order to attain the proposed goals. By way of conclusion, his advice is to "delay any final regulation" and, in the case of both a transitory or of a permanent regulation, to give the restrictions on import "the form of a constant duty upon foreign corn, not to act as a prohibition, but as a protecting, and at the same time, profitable tax". At the same time the old bounty on export might be continued, and allowed to operate in the same way as the duty at all times, "except in extreme cases", with a view "to prevent the great fall that might be occasioned by a glut" (Malthus, [1814], p. 109).

Two remarks are in order on the typically Malthusian kind of argument presented in the pamphlet. First, Malthus does not believe in 'purely' economic arguments, or better, he believes that arguments which are perfectly convincing *in theory* in favour of, say, free trade, can never be applied as such to *practice*, since you never face problems of economic efficiency in a void. Political economy is part of a wider political and moral science, since "wealth, population and power are, after all, only valuable, as they tend to improve, increase, and secure the mass of human virtue and happiness" (Malthus, [1814], p. 102).

The second remark is that Malthus here typically resorts to the device of piling up reasons that incline to believe, while showing how no absolutely determining argument may be produced. Thus, consequences may be drawn that may go in a direction opposite to the most firmly established principles (provided that these are principles of theory, not of practice). In this connection, he even formulates one of his most typical methodological principles:

Many of the questions, both in morals and politics, seem to be of the nature of the problems *de maximis et minimis* in Fluxions; in which there is always a point where a certain effect is the greatest, while on either side of this point it gradually diminishes (Malthus, [1814], p. 102).

Notice that this is an excellent example of how one doctrine may be played simultaneously at different registers: besides being a methodological principle establishing limits to knowledge, it is also a meta-principle for the controversy; for it amounts to saying: please, attempt no direct proof that some factor is good or evil, effective or ineffective, since *any* factor may be such up to a point; please, give me reasons to believe, because any too strong proof may resolve itself into a proof of the opposite claim.

The discussion between Malthus and Ricardo, starting with the Corn Laws, came soon to include more and more issues, reaching finally the overarching theme of the causes of the growth of wealth. Discussion of causality becomes soon the distinctive methodological topic in this cycle. The distinctions between effects and causes, "necessary" and "probable" connections (or "natural and necessary", as contrasted with "accidental" causes), and mono- and pluri-causality come to the fore more than once.

Other key-notions show up as soon as the grounds of the confrontation expand: the idea of "tendency", the notion of "final cause", the issue of the limits to effectual demand as contrasted with the unlimited character of the "wants and tastes" of mankind. At one point, the controversy reaches the level of meta-principles: here the meta-principle invoked is the distinction between the "truth" and the "utility" of a "principle", a new version of Ricardo's distinction between "questions of fact" and "questions of science" (see *to Malthus* 18 Dec. 1814. In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 163).

After the cluster of issues raised keeps expanding for a while, with a snow-ball effect, towards the end of 1814 side-issues start to be gradually dropped and both seem to lose interest in the discussion, limiting themselves to proposals for a re-definition of the point of real dissent. In February 1815, the discussion has a fresh start on a new topic, rent. This time (not unlike what had happened at the beginning of the cycle analysed) such a new start is occasioned by a publication by Malthus, *On the Nature and Progress of Rent*; they start again discussing claims advanced by Malthus in this pamphlet and the previous cycle of the discussion seems to be quickly forgotten. A new cycle has begun.

2.3. Moves and counter-moves in the letters between June 1814 and January 1815

Let us now take a close look at the moves and counter-moves performed by Malthus and Ricardo in the letters they exchanged in the six months following the publication of Malthus's *Observations*.

*50: to Malthus* 26 June 1814 (In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 107-109).

Ricardo, after conventional greetings, comes abruptly *in medias res*, clearly referring to the content of Malthus's *Observations*, employing a phrase that is worth noting: "I cannot partake of your doubts – he says – concerning the effects of restrictions on the importation of corn, since any rise in the price of corn must "necessarily" diminish the demand for other things. He introduces, as a part of the proof, a typical Ricardian presumption, namely a formulation of Say's law: "demand has no other limits but the want of power of paying for the commodities demanded" (p. 108)[[4]](#footnote-4). The final sentence – half a joke and half a threat – is also remarkable: "This is a repetition you will say of an old story... but you have set me off, and must now abide the consequences" (p. 109).

*51: to Ricardo* 6 July 1814 (In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 109-112).

Also, Malthus begins with a few conventional greetings, and then he comes too abruptly to the matter at hand. His formulation too is worth noting: "You have not yet removed my doubts". He goes ahead by a kind of escalation: "I can by no means agree with you" on Say's law (that is, on one of Ricardo's often repeated substantive claims). To this he opposes a counter-example, appealing to 'general facts' (having thus recourse to the Malthusian way of *experience*, parallel to the way of *theory*): "why do profits rise at the commencement of a war when stock is destroyed? or why do not profits invariably increase with the increase of capital, as *produce* unquestionably does" (p. 111). He suggests that *two* causes (not *one* as Ricardo always assumes) are at work here, or that "the desire to consume in those who possess revenue, must always have great influence". This psychological component is for Malthus a "great element of effective demand" while for Ricardo – we will see – this magnitude is irrelevant precisely in so far as it is assumed to be always unlimited (and this is the basis of his adhesion to Say's law).

*53: to Malthus* 25 July 1814 (In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 113-115).

Ricardo starts with an excuse embedded in conventional greetings: "I was obliged to bestow an unusual degree of attention to business of all sorts... though I had written a letter to you in answer to your last... I was so dissatisfied with it that I could not resolve to send it". All this amount probably to: I have thought quite a lot about what I am going to say. Malthus may guess *why*, i.e., what is the further implicature – if any – of such an opening. *Why* does Ricardo bother to mention that he hesitated about what to write? For argumentative reasons or because he didn't quite know how to react to Malthus's objections. Ricardo's next move in this letter eliminates the first reading, and strongly supports the second. For he chooses to counterattack by bluntly accusing Malthus of committing the fallacy of equivocation: "you have changed the proposition on which we first appeared to differ" (p. 113). Now, he argues, Malthus is qualifying his previous claim ("that restrictions on the importation of corn would not lower the rate of profits and interest") by adding "if the consequence of such restriction be a great reduction of Capital". A counterattack – claim most military strategists – is the best possible defence; especially, we would add, when one has no other strong and substantive defences. It has the further advantage of – at least momentarily – placing the opponent in a defensive position.

Ricardo completes his counterattack with a conciliatory or concessive move, in the form of a "Yes-But" clause: he agrees on the new proposition, *but* adds that "causes should be kept distinct", that is, there may be a reduction of capital independently of restrictions on importation of corn (note that here Ricardo also shifts from substantive to methodological considerations).

Ricardo's moves here can be summarized as follows:

(a) Let us discuss the general theoretical question, not your contingent prediction; the question is, whether there is any causal relationship between restrictions on importation and reduction of capital? My answer is "No".

(a1) On Malthus's counter-example (why profits rise at the commencement of a war?): I accept the fact, *but* it has nothing to do with the argument because there is an alternative explanation.

(b) My argument in (a) may suggest that I accept multicausality in principle, but *I don't*: all factors are dependent on one basic factor, namely "the difficulty and expence of producing corn".

*54: to Ricardo* 5 Aug. 1814 (In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 115-118).

Malthus starts with a story on the *Omnium* (a bond emitted by the British government in which Ricardo had invested some amount of money on his behalf) embedded in conventional greetings, in order to come to the consideration that "the present state of things" tends to confirm him "more and more" in his "old notions" (p. 116). After this, he suddenly and bluntly denies that he has "in any degree changed the proposition"(*ib.*).

In the light of the 'demands' set up by Ricardo's preceding letter, the first statement amounts to an insistence upon the relevance of 'contingent' predictions as the only way to test any theoretical proposition (contra Ricardo's claim (a)); and the second is a frontal rebuttal of Ricardo's charge of equivocation. On balance, this letter rejects *in toto* Ricardo's counterattack. The opposition between them on the issue discussed becomes at this point very sharp. Nevertheless, the opening observations on the *omnium* act as a reminder of the fact that underlying such an opposition they are jointly engaged in a *cooperative* activity – not only in science (the jointly searching for the truth) and communication, but also in practical life (Ricardo continues to act as a broker for Malthus).

*55: to Malthus* 11 Aug. 1814 (In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 118-121).

After a few words on loans, Ricardo comes to what he calls now "our present question", by *a restatement of the difference* by a distinction between "necessary" and "probable" effects. "I do not think that a diminution of Capital is a *necessary*, but a probable effect" (p. 119). Note that in letter *53* he had admitted less, in so far as a diminution of capital was assumed to be a concomitant but independent cause.

The following argument is based on a "Yes-But" clause: *Yes*, we agree "as to the consequences which will attend a diminution of capital", *but*, "I should say that a real diminution of capital", implies in turn less work, lesser wages, lesser demand for food; the consequences will be that: (a) restrictions would imply encouragement to cultivation; but (b) *if* there will be a diminution of capital, this will imply discouragement to cultivation. Thus, whether profits either rise or fall depends upon whether (a) or (b) is stronger.

Given Malthus's strong resistance to this earlier counter-attack, Ricardo here is more careful and sounds much more conciliatory. His restatement of the difference between them reduces the gap by softening his earlier position, and his "Yet-But" move subtly admits that contingent circumstances may modify the effects of determinant underlying causes.

*56: to Ricardo* 19 Aug. 1814 (In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 122-123).

After a long detour around the main topic, talking of alterations in the price of bullion and the exchanges, Malthus returns to the main topic by saying: "I always meant to say" (p. 123). This is a *softer* version of one basic stratagem (to claim that one has been misunderstood). This grants Malthus the opportunity of introducing a fresh circumstance he had not previously specified (that the actual quantity of demand would diminish if the difficulty of obtaining corn were to increase) while claiming that it was already there.

In this context, the notorious category of "tendency"[[5]](#footnote-5) shows up for the first time: Malthus admits of a *tendency* of high profits to produce saving, introducing, as a "supposition", the possibility that this tendency might not have its probable effect; the supposition in its turn is supported by one of Malthus's favourite assets, namely, a general fact ("such cases unquestionably occur in fact").

Then he stresses again their disagreement: "I can by no means agree with you" and "the reverse would take place". The point here is the supposition, which Malthus denies, that demand would diminish if capital were to be diminished. And then he introduces a further point of difference, shifting to the level of psychological assumptions in economic theory: "You do not... take into consideration the natural desires of man, which are after all the foundation of all demand" (p. 123).

*58: to Malthus* 30 Aug. 1814 (In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 128-130).

Ricardo raises the "question which has lately engaged us" by (a) a proposal concerning the proper method for solving the controversy, namely oral discussion: "if we could talk together we should not very much differ"; (b) an assessment of the difference: "our principal difference is about the permanence of the effects" (p. 128), by which he tries to shift the discussion to a more abstract level. The issue of permanent and temporary effects already emerged in the previous phase of the controversy and recurs many times throughout it. Ricardo apparently favours multicausality: he denies that it would be correct "to say that where profits are high, they are so because the demand for produce is great compared with the supply. There are many other causes which will occasion profits to be permanently high" (p. 128), for example they may be higher in a country where there is bad government and consequent insecurity of property than in another where the proportion of demand for produce were the same, but in absence of those further conditions. When read carefully, however, Ricardo's plea for multicausality turns out to be an attack on any rash supposition of the existence of a causal link where only occasional concomitance between phenomena occurs. The 'transitory' or 'permanent' character of effects depends on the time required in order that the population may "accommodate itself" to the supply of food. Therefore, he has not really yielded any ground to Malthus on multicausality.

Then Ricardo shifts to another and more abstract kind of questions, namely questions of language and terminology: "I suspect that we do not attach the same meaning to the word demand" (p. 129). He explains that for him demand is to be understood not in monetary but in real terms. Given Malthus's statement, in the preceding letter, that he "always meant to say", i.e., that the meaning had always been constant, Ricardo's apparently naive mention of semantic differences between them amounts in fact to a (soft) reflection of Malthus's defence against his earlier charge of equivocation.

At the end of the letter Ricardo drops a (recurrent) proposal of joining forces against the common enemy, the "practical men"; the occasion is provided by a report of a parliamentary committee on the Corn Laws issue, disclosing "some important facts" but showing how ignorant are people who have an influence on the parliament in the subject "as a matter of science" (p. 130). This, again, is an attempt to stress the cooperative basis of their interaction.

*59: to Ricardo* 11 Sept. 1814 (In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 131-132)

After usual preliminaries, Malthus expresses agreement on both Ricardo's appraisal of the status of the discussion and his proposal for a way of settling the dispute, namely to "talk it well over" (we already mentioned that, to our benefit, they never were able to put this solution into practice). The appeal, by both Ricardo and Malthus, to these two innocuous meta-discursive claims on which both easily agree indicates that they feel the need to re-establish some common ground, no matter how thin it turns out to be.

Malthus tries to extract an admission from Ricardo ("I think you would allow") that when capital is scanty profits will be high *not temporarily but permanently* (note that "temporary" and "permanent" have not yet been defined). After having (supposedly) obtained this admission, he immediately proceeds to exploit this putative advantage by adding that he "cannot help being of opinion that high profits always indicate a comparative excess of demand above supply, even though... should *appear* to be precisely equal" (p. 131). This amounts to nothing more than *repetition* of his own position on one of the main recurrent points of disagreement.

Here Malthus introduces for the first time a concept that will play a main role in his *Principles*, namely the notion of effectual demand[[6]](#footnote-6). "Effectual demand – he writes – consists of two elements the *power* and the *will* to purchase". The former is represented correctly by the produce of the country; the latter "will always be the greatest, the smaller is the produce compared with the population, and the more scantily the wants of the society are supplied" (p. 131). In this connection, he refers to a piece of co-text, James Mill's *Commerce Defended[[7]](#footnote-7)*. He declares: "I by no means think that the power to purchase necessarily involves a proportionate will to purchase; and I cannot agree with Mr. Mill in an ingenious position which he lays down in his answer to Mr. Spence, that in reference to a nation, supply can never exceed demand" (p. 132). In so far as Mill was Ricardo's mentor, disagreeing with Mill and, thus, questioning Mill's authority is, 'metonymically', a rather powerful way of disagreeing with Ricardo. This paves the way for the concluding attack on Ricardo for leaving one element out of the picture, since he has never "taken sufficiently into consideration the wants and tastes of mankind" (p. 132); he insists that prices are determined not only by the proportion of commodities to each other, but also by their proportion to the wants and tastes of mankind.

Note that here we face an instance of theory change or of conceptual clarification forced by the controversy. Both are drawn to make more general theoretical assumptions explicit as a result of an expansion of the controversy from a rather limited starting point consisting in a narrowly defined positive issue to more general theoretical questions.

This will become a recurrent issue in later phases of the controversy. In fact, the issue of an alternative between a taste for luxuries and a taste for "indolence" will show up in Malthus's *Principles* and in Ricardo's *Notes on Malthus*. At this later stage, Ricardo's choice of avoiding to take issue with regard to the mentioned alternative will be backed by a methodological argument: a clear-cut distinction between *positive* and *moral* issues, with the ascription of the alternative to the latter category (see Ricardo [1928], *126*, p. 210)[[8]](#footnote-8).

*60: to Malthus* 16 Sept. 1814 (In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 133-135).

Ricardo has two points to make here, and he introduces both points by a *Yes-But* clause:

(i) permanent vs temporary effects: *Yes*, "I agree with you" that capital scanty implies profits low; *But*, it will be so permanently or temporarily as the cause will be permanent or temporary; so, let us go to a deeper cause: the state of cultivation of the land is "almost the only great permanent cause" (p. 133). Note the use of the clause "almost the only" that for Ricardo is typically used as meaning "the only". Note also that here Ricardo withdraws what he had – apparently, now it turns out – admitted in Letter *55*: diminution of capital is not essentially *another cause* because it depends in its turn on the state of cultivation of land.

(ii) effectual demand: *Yes*, we "agree too that effectual demand consists of two elements, the *power* and the *will* to purchase" (p. 133), that is, he has nothing to object to Malthus's conceptual distinction. Note that Malthus's opposition between "power" and "will" is a typical *distinguo* move, which a defendant of a thesis under attack is allowed to make; Ricardo' s answer is that the distinction does hold, but it is irrelevant, by adding his *But*: "the will is very seldom wanting where the power exists" (p. 133). This use of "very seldom" (that means "never") is justified by the introduction of the idea of a "desire of accumulation" besides "a desire to consume", and the assumption that, with an increase of capital, human beings will become perhaps less inclined to accumulate but then they will have "an increased inclination for luxuries" (p. 134).

Ricardo introduces here an *ad hoc* psychology (that he had nowhere professed before): "We all wish to add to our enjoyments or power. Consumption adds to our enjoyments, – accumulation to our power, and they equally promote demand" (pp. 134-5). As a consequence, he is in a position to add: "I consider the wants and tastes of mankind as unlimited" (p. 134). Note the conceptual innovation induced here by the controversy: the distinction between power and will is made by Malthus in order to clarify for Ricardo a point he is making; the distinction is accepted by Ricardo, who adds in its turn the distinction between power and enjoyments, as connected with consumption and accumulation.

Note also that Ricardo takes over from Malthus the notion of power, as distinguished from will, and then he proceeds to neutralize the consequences drawn by Malthus by means of this distinction through a further distinction: (i) a *will* to enjoyment vs (ii) a will to *power*. *Distinguo* moves, once made by one contender, seem thus to proliferate dangerously.

Note, finally, that here a dissent on matters of economic theory overlaps with different choices in matters of economic policies, namely on the question: should we educate consumption tastes? Malthus's answer is "Yes"; Ricardo's answer – entrenched behind a distinction between economic theory and economic policy (or matters of science and matters of practice) – is "No".

*62: to Ricardo* 9 Oct. 1814 (In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 139-142).

In this letter, after a long detour concerning vacations and "distant excursions" (boiling down to the fact that he refused an invitation by Ricardo for Christmas), Malthus raises considerations on the status of the controversy. He writes:

I do not write so soon after receiving your letter as I should perhaps feel inclined, for fear of occupying too much of your time, as well as my own. But I think that a letter now and then on these subjects will do us no harm, and perhaps may be the means of settling some important points relating to the metaphysics of Political Economy (p. 139).

In this quote, Malthus takes stance first on the subject matter *definition of the controversy*: it relates to the metaphysics of Political Economy, where metaphysics should be understood as it was in the 18th century, namely as roughly equivalent to philosophy of mind. Hence the controversy is understood as dealing with the core of economic science, that is, with its basic psychological assumptions. This amounts to the message: our disagreement verges on central issues.

The second aspect reflected in the quote is his *attitude to the controversy* and the ways of settling it: it is *perhaps* useful; but let's slow it down in order to think more carefully.

In fact, this letter is dated 23 days after Letter *60*, or 9 days more than the average interval between letters in this cycle. Since between Letter *51* and *60* the pace had been accelerating, and from Letter *62* onward it begins to slow down (as a consequence of Malthus's delay), one may recognize between Letter *60* and *64* the turning point after which the cycle gradually slows down till it will be silenced. It is of the utmost interest to us that Malthus is proposing to slow down at the very moment when he is suggesting that they are getting to the core of the thing: this may suggest that the controversialist's not avowed goal is self-clarification, not persuasion or victory.

Malthus then turns to argument. He begins with a repetition of Ricardo's first point in Letter *60* ("the state of production from the land... is almost the sole cause" regulating profits) and then goes ahead to criticize it. He introduces first a kind of *argumentum ad verecundiam*, that is, remember that the authority *you* are quoting is *myself* ("After all I have written on the subject of food and population I can hardly be supposed not to allow a very great effect to so very great a cause", p. 140). Then, he resorts to realism\concreteness to protect *his own* theory "of food and population" from criticism. He insists that it would work only under a number of highly implausible conditions: no *delay* and no *disproportion* in the rise of the price of labour, no action of other causes, as improvements or new leases and new taxes; thus, the assertion of this connection would not be "correct in practice"(p. 140). Note the use of the expression "in practice", that is always a mark of irrelevance in Ricardo, and a mark of *reality* in Malthus.

The structure of Malthus's following argument is this: (a) "the doctrine is evidently not correct in practice"; (b) as all these "contemporaneous effects are... not only improbable but impossible", it follows that it is "useless to lay much stress upon it even as a theoretical groundwork" (p.140). Thus,

in the interval between the two extremes, considerable variations may take place; and... practically no country was ever in such a state as not to admit of increase of profits on the land, for a period of some duration, from the advanced price of raw produce" (p. 140).

This is a stronger than usual attack by Malthus. It involves a shift from *practice* to *theory*: since the model is unrealistic, it is not worth examining even as a theoretical model; but the assumption is not spelled out that we need models of states in the interval between the two extremes, not of the extremes.

Malthus shifts then to the second point of Letter *60*: effectual demand. He repeats his accusation that Ricardo has underrated "the wants and tastes of mankind in affecting prices", which he dubs "the error of Mr. Mill". In this connection another heavy philosophical cannon-ball, after "metaphysics", is shot by Malthus: *final cause*. Sugar and tobacco are sold at a higher price than the exported manufactured goods because "there is no greater power to purchase them, but there is a greater will. And the notion of *final cause* of the wealth which the country derives from these commodities... is the existence of a taste for them" (p. 141). This is a repetition of Malthus's reflection of Say's law, with the intriguing addition of 'final causes'. What does Malthus mean? On the one hand, he is just reasserting Adam Smith's idea that all economy works eventually for the consumer, not for the producer. On the other, he is making a philosophical raid in the camp of positive economic theory: he may be implying that economics belongs to the moral, not the physical world, and that commodities may not count as physical magnitudes, but are entities of a different kind. This kind of entities – if one takes a closer look at a part of Malthus's co-text, namely Paley's writings – may be thought to consist of quanta of pleasure[[9]](#footnote-9).

Malthus concludes with a denial that "desire of accumulation" is a component of effectual demand, because this is a way of voiding effectual demand of its precise meaning ("this is how I understand the term effective demand"). The issue thus becomes one of *language and definitions*, and a dissent on a positive issue is – rightly or wrongly – reduced to a semantic dissent; to this an *argumentum ad verecundiam* is added: "and this I think is the interpretation of it given by Adam Smith" (p. 142).

64: to Malthus 23 Oct. 1814 (In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 144-149).

Ricardo is not so prone to abide by Malthus's request to slow down the exchange.

Perhaps the reason was merely circumstantial: Malthus had been teaching for several weeks at the East India College; Ricardo, precisely from the beginning of our cycle, had been enjoying the life of a country gentleman at Gatcomb Park, and so his letter is written after an interval only one day longer than the average.

After a reiterated invitation for a visit "during your next summer vacation", a peculiar retaliation to the warnings in Malthus's last letter comes. He writes: "I hope you will not repent having set me the example of using a larger sized paper. If you are tired with my long letter you only will be to blame for it" (p. 144). That amounts to saying: if you want to slow down the correspondence in time, I may enlarge it in space; there is much to be said.

An assessment of the status of the controversy follows: "It does not appear to me that we very materially differ in our idea". He accepts Malthus's charitable reading of his own words on the causes regulating profits: "the state of production from the land... is almost the sole cause"; yet, he rejects another reading by Malthus: "it is the *quantity* of produce compared with the expence of production"; he re-describes Malthus's position: "You, instead of allowing the facility of obtaining food to be almost the sole cause of high profits, think it may be safely said to be the main cause" (note that Malthus's wording was "a great cause"); and finally concludes: "There appears to me to be very little difference in these statements" (pp. 144-5). Note that here Ricardo is *shifting the argument's direction*, so as to make Malthus's statement support his own position. In this kind of moves, the interpretation of terms such as *almost*, *very little*, *great*, *main*, etc. is crucial. Here Ricardo makes believe that Malthus's concession that something is a *great* cause amounts to saying that it is the *main* cause; just add a little bit, and you get Ricardo's *almost the sole*, i.e., *the sole*, since the 'almost' is just a matter of courtesy, or of getting rid of objections.

After having thus employed an indirect tactic on point (a), he resorts to a more direct rebuttal on point (b). He writes:

I am not aware that I have under-rated the effect of the wants and tastes of mankind on profits, – they frequently occasion large profits on *particular* commodities for *short* periods, – but they do *not* I think *often* [inserted] operate on *general* profits because they do *not often* influence the growth of raw produce (p. 148; emphasis added).

He adds a precise quotation from Adam Smith (thus implying: I am able to quote Smith too; I also can rely on his authority), and then exploits further his earlier shift in the argument's direction by performing a complete reversal (which is actually a verbal trick) of Malthus's charge: "I go much further than you in ascribing effects to the wants and tastes of mankind, – I believe them to be *unlimited*... wants are *insatiable*" (p. 148; emphasis added).

The structure of the above argument is as follows: (i) first a concession, conveyed by the terms *particular*, *short*, *not often*; (ii) a call on authority (Adam Smith) adopting one of the stratagems we will discuss in sect. 3.2: "quote a prestigious authority on an irrelevant point"; in fact Ricardo's is a *non sequitur*, since lower prices (what Adam Smith talks about in the quotation) do not mean lower profits (which is the issue under contention); (iii) Malthus's cause (the wants and tastes) is so generalized as to become irrelevant (falling always under the *ceteris paribus* clause). Note that there is a *contradiction* between (i) and (iii). This reveals that Ricardo is aware that 'always' (used in point iii) means "irrelevant".

Another point that deserves attention in this letter is Ricardo's *silence* (which is also a 'move') on Malthus's use of the notion of final cause. In the course of the whole controversy, Ricardo will remain always reluctant to discuss philosophical concepts with Malthus. Finally, the somewhat aggressive last sentence may be noted (and related with the opening as well as with the tactic moves in the body of the letter): "You will by this time feel that you have enough if not too much" (p. 149) – *ipsis litteris?*, one might comment.

*67: to Ricardo* 23 Nov. 1814 (In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 151- 156).

Malthus starts with a clarification of what he meant, thereby (implicitly) responding to a 'demand' (implicitly) set up by Ricardo's 'interpretation' of Malthus's words: "I have never that I recollect doubted or denied the general *tendency* of the accumulation of capital upon the land to diminish profits". But this is "very different" from saying that "the state of the land *regulates* profits" (p. 152); that is: a *tendency* is not a *cause*. The issue of semantic – in fact, pragmatic – interpretation continues to be focal in this letter. Malthus goes on to accept Ricardo's reading of his position (and this reduplicates the move Ricardo had taken in Letter *64*, by a kind of ping-pong): "the state of the land is the main cause" ("the main cause" was the result of Ricardo's subtle transformation of Malthus's "grand cause"). But he insists that the "main cause" is different from "the sole or regulating cause" (p. 152). He thus blocks Ricardo's attempt to put his (Malthus's) claim at the service of his (Ricardo's) argument. He further blocks Ricardo's 'courtesy' use of 'almost', insisting on the *logical* significance of this term: if you say *almost*, you cannot say *regulating* (but he had formerly forced Ricardo to introduce the 'almost' clause).

In this letter Malthus mentions repeatedly "theory or experience" (pp. 152 and 153) as two sources of knowledge; besides, while accepting a general statement that he proceeds to prove irrelevant (that "from the state of production from the land... you can infer with certainty the state of general profits") he ascribes to Ricardo more than Ricardo contends, in so far as the 'almost' contradicts the 'with certainty'; finally, he makes use again of the "*caeteris paribus*" clause ("this is merely saying what every body knows, that all profits must *caeteris paribus* be on a level").

Immediately after having conceded so much, Malthus reformulates what the *true* deeper causes (not Ricardo's) are: "But the question is whether agriculture always takes the lead in the determination? and I should certainly say that it did not" (p. 153). He goes on arguing that the state of the land "is by no means the sole cause which determines profits, but as they are powerfully influenced by the varying demands for produce occasioned by the prosperous or adverse state of commerce and manufactures, and the constant tendency to fall in the wages of labour, it neither accords with theory or experience to call the state of the land the *regulator* of general profits". Malthus goes on denying that "agriculture always takes the lead in the determination" of profits and asserting that often foreign commerce does, and adds that "the throwing of new objects of desire into the market", i.e., keeping effective demand high, may also raise profits "for a period of some duration" (p. 153).

This positive argument is accompanied by a methodological distinction between "natural and necessary" causes and "accidental" ones (p. 154). The point of drawing this distinction here is that not only the state of the land, but also socio-cultural factors (the tastes and wants of mankind "as contradistinguished from the desire of mere necessaries" plus the state of property) should be included in the natural and necessary causes. A corollary is that "natural" causes, which refer not only to an ahistorical permanent state, but also to "other causes *naturally* accompanying the progress of improvement" (p.154), may counterbalance at times the *tendency* of the accumulation of capital to lower profits.

Note also the distinction introduced between "tastes and wants" and "desire of mere necessaries" (Malthus even estimates the respective magnitudes) which goes with a somewhat scornful discarding of Ricardo's notion of a desire to accumulate: "Taking man, as he is, and not supposing him to accumulate without motive" (p. 155).

This introduces a new counterattack, staged through pp. 154-5 (and belonging to a sort of sub-cycle of the controversy verging on Say's law that had been developing through Letter *59*, p. 132, *60*, p. 134, *62*, p. 142, *64*, p. 148). Malthus draws a distinction between accumulation of produce and accumulation of capital (p. 155). Ricardo will later take up Malthus's distinction between two senses of "accumulation", namely the economic sense of the term and that of "hoarding" (see Ricardo [1928],*208*, p. 120). This holds true in so far as "accumulation of produce is not accumulation of capital, unless what is accumulated is worth more than it costs" (p. 155); and a high effective demand accordingly accounts for more production and more employment of capital. Here Malthus argues that the "will" (as opposed to the power) is a relevant variable, and that this is what Ricardo is overlooking.

In this sub-cycle, the practical implication of theory emerges as a further reason for dispute, and for insisting on the clarification of meaning. The contingent predictions they formulate are opposed. In Letter *64*, Ricardo had clarified his position as implying that the

very term accumulation of capital supposes a power somewhere to employ more labour, – it supposes the total income of the society to be increased and therefore to create a demand for more food and more commodities... we are speaking of larger incomes not of the same incomes, and instead of anticipating a fall in the price of commodities we should expect a rise (p. 148).

In the present letter Malthus reaffirms that he was right in what he "said about the *same incomes*", since

unless the commodities produced are new and more desirable, or cheaper, the producers will certainly be left to consume what they have produced them selves... I mean to include of course a rise of produce accompanied by a still greater rise in the prices of production... a positive fall of price... will always take place when produce is increased by the employment of an unusual quantity of capital, before the wants and tastes of mankind and their power of purchasing have been increased in proportion" (pp. 155-6)

*70: to Malthus*, 18 Dec. 1814 (In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 161-65).

This letter, near the end of the cycle, after providing news about Say's recent visit, opens with an assessment of the *status of the controversy*: "I perceive that we are not nearly agreed on the subject we have been lately discussing" (p. 162). Note that, while in Letter *58* Ricardo still believed that if they could talk together, they "should not very much differ" (p. 128), the mood has become now pessimistic. This pessimistic mood is reflected in his less conciliatory moves. On the whole, he reasserts in this letter his prior positions, withdraws from concessions he made, ignores Malthus's conceptual distinctions which he had accepted, and tries to redefine the issue in his own terms. It is as if no progress at all was made in this cycle. Responding to Malthus's suggestions about multi-causality, he resorts to his earlier *one cause* claim. He refuses to confirm an admission that Malthus attributed to him in Letter *67* ("When a new foreign commerce is opened... you allow that in this case capital may be taken from the land", p. 153), saying: "I do not recollect ever having allowed that an extension of foreign commerce will take capital from the land" (p. 163). Then he repeats his recurrent anti-practice Credo, connected with the already introduced distinction between questions of fact and questions of science. Here it is presented through the distinction between the "truth" and the "utility" of a principle ("That the rate of profits can never permanently rise unless capital be withdrawn from the land") – Ricardo insists on his interest in the truth of the principle for the truth's sake, apart from its "being of any use" (p. 163). Note that, here, escaping into methodological discussion is a way of evading the issue: Ricardo is reading Malthus as saying something less than what he actually said. In fact, Malthus's argument had been that: "When a new commerce is opened... the profits of such commerce must be higher than usual; and you allow that in this case capital may be taken from the land. But to allow this is at once to allow that the profits of foreign commerce determine in this case the profits on the land and that whichever is the highest will take the lead of the other" (*67: to Ricardo* 23 Nov. 1814, p. 153).

Ricardo then redefines the question at issue, emphasizing the importance of precise quantitative statements: "It is here [i.e., on Say's law, that is, whether if "we double the quantity, or rather double the facility of making stockings, we diminish their value one half, as compared with *all* other commodities"] I think, that our difference rests and I hope soon to hear all that you have to advance in favour of your view of the question" (p. 163).

He then refers to another authority (Say) and repeats again the story of Say's law: "Accumulation necessarily increases production and as necessarily increases consumption", thus denying the importance of the conceptual distinction introduced by Malthus (but does so by introducing another distinction): "accumulation of produce *if properly selected* may always be accumulation of capital, and it cannot fail to be worth more than its cost, estimated in corn or labour" (emphasis added). The reason is that a shoemaker has an effective demand for bread, as well as the baker has an effective demand for shoes, and if the shoemaker's demand of bread must be limited by his wants, yet "whilst he has shoes to offer in exchange he will have an effective demand for other things", and finally, if the shoemaker's shoes are not in demand, "it shews that he has not been governed by the just principles of trade, and that he has not used his capital and his labour in the manufacture of the commodity required by the society" (p. 164). Note that this proviso is one more version of Ricardo's recurrent distinction between questions of *fact* and questions of *science*.

Finally – and for the third time in one letter – Ricardo comes back to the *definition of the issue*. Now, he proposes a new definition of the difference between them as focusing on the consideration of either a *real* or a *monetary* economy: "the consideration of money value may be the foundation of our difference on this point" (p. 164).

*72: to Ricardo* 29 Dec. 1814 (In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 167-169).

This and the following letter by Ricardo mark the close of the cycle. Instead of conventional greetings, Malthus announces what will become the starting-point of the next cycle: his *Inquiry into the nature and origin of rent*. He presents this as a reason why he is "very busy" (and has perhaps lost interest in continuing the discussion).

Then he proposes a *terminological definition* of their difference: "We should explain what we mean by *permanently*... all that I contend for is that a period of some duration may occur (20 years for instance) when the profits of commerce will take the lead, and regulate the profits of agriculture" (p. 167).

He then *declares surprise* on Ricardo's not agreeing with him on the idea that "foreign commerce increases the value of the whole mass of commodities". To be 'surprised' by Ricardo's adhesion to Say's law at this stage is surely an ironical move. And (making a typical controversialist's move) he offers Ricardo a problem to solve: he asks him to explain one of those general facts that Malthus liked so much ("the fact that from 1720 to 1750 the interest of money and the profits of stock fell very considerably and were very low at the same time that the price of corn was gradually becoming cheaper", p. 168).

*73: to Malthus* 13 Jan. 1815 (In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 169-171).

Ricardo, after few considerations on Lord Lauderdale's *A Letter on the Corn Laws*, again proposes a definition of the difference between them. He writes: "I thought you maintained... I now understand you to say" (p. 170). Thus Ricardo (after having been optimistic and then pessimistic about the usefulness of the controversy) returns to moderate optimism, by concluding that they do basically agree. At least – he seems to believe – they can understand each other, and thus understand where they disagree. These words by Ricardo are worth noting, since they close this cycle and support our claim that clarification of their own grasp of the issue, much more than of victory over the opponent, was probably the (unconscious) aim of the contenders all along.

The two theses Ricardo ascribes to Malthus are: (i) "that the high or low profits on commerce were totally independent of the amount of capital which might be employed on the land; consequently that high profits might continue as long as commerce was prosperous, whether that was for 20 or for 100 years"; (ii) "that the profits of commerce may take the lead, and may regulate the profits of agriculture for a period of some duration, possibly for 20 years".

The second thesis is something Ricardo has allegedly "always allowed", provided that the period "of some duration" be understood as "a short period"; and he bargains the length of this period: "instead of 20 years I should limit it to about 4 or 5" (p. 170). Optimism, once more, involves a willingness to admit conceptual flexibility – especially by the opponent!

There is no answer to Letter *73*, and the following, again by Ricardo, starts by comments on Malthus's *The Origin of Rent*, without any mention of earlier discussion. With this letter a new cycle begins, with several structural similarities to the one we have analysed.

3. Patterns of argumentation

We have now a reconstruction of 'raw data' from a cycle in the controversy, along with some analytic commentary. This may be taken as a 'thick description', to be added to the more comprehensive, but unavoidably more shallow descriptions in our two previous papers. Philosophers of science preferred, until recently, to leave tasks such as the one we have carried out to historians of science who, in turn, were more eager to exercise their hermeneutic or sociological powers on schools or paradigms at large than to examine the dynamic intricacies of a developing polemic. The effort of doing this, however, is the price to pay for our concern with examining the actual workings of criticism, as reflected in the conduct of a real debate, not stripped of its pragmatic and rhetorical aspects. In this section, we try to get the first bunch of results for this price. We proceed from the micro-level of sequential moves to a higher level, where we try to detect certain patterns of argumentation employed by the contenders.

3.1. Recurrent sequential moves

Besides the already mentioned circumstances (that there is a one year time-span covered only by a few letters by Ricardo before the 'real' discussion begins; that the start seems to have been given by a publication; and that the end of the cycle is marked by no real 'closure', and even less by victory by either Malthus or Ricardo, but instead by a loss of interest by both), we may note the following pragmatic-rhetoric features of the exchange as represented in this cycle:

(a) The recurrence of *Yes-But* clauses in Ricardo's letters. A *Yes (p) – But (q)* utterance is a double-edged weapon in a polemic exchange, like a defensive-attacking move in Chinese martial arts. The *Yes* part accepts the proposition (*p*) put forth by the opponent. But the opponent usually puts it forth to support a further proposition, say, *r*. For instance, "John is tall" (*p*) may be used by a basketball coach to support the conclusion "John should be hired" (*r*). If coupled with "he weighs over 150 kg" (*q*) through a *but*, however, which supports the opposite conclusion (not *r*), the total weight of '*p* bur *q*' is presented as *not* supporting the opponent's *conclusion*, which is what really matters for him (see Dascal and Katriel, 1977, for an analysis of *but*).

(b) The way Ricardo deals with factual refutations, namely by addition of facts in order to deflect Malthus's objections. This tactic has important epistemological implications. In particular one may ask: were additions, using Lakatos's terminology (Lakatos 1970) "progressive" or were they merely *ad hoc*?

(c) The use of repetition (of previously made admissions, of disclaimers, etc.). Repetition is one of the well-known devices acknowledged by traditional rhetoric. Here, it has the effect of actually *showing* through *form* a difference in *content*: Ricardo thereby seems to be 'demonstrating' that, while Malthus deals with circumstantial, transitory, and hence non-essential factors, he, Ricardo, sticks to the essential, permanent ones, which remain untouched even under a flurry of apparent objections.

(d) Reinterpretation moves. 'Reinterpretation' of one's own claims or of the opponent's is a tactic ever present in polemical discourse. It takes advantage of the fact that 'pragmatic interpretation' of an utterance is the norm – not the exception – because the semantic meaning of one's words usually underdetermines the meaning, these words are intended to convey in context. In polemical discourse, however, the normal need of pragmatic interpretation is extended beyond its usual limits, thus becoming 'rhetorical' moves or countermoves designed to enhance the strength of one's position in the dispute.

(e) Shifts in the argument's direction by use of such terms as "quite" and "almost". These modifiers act here as 'Hedges' whose interpretation is context-dependent. Here, they play for each contender a different role: either suggesting that a given factor holds in almost 100% cases, and therefore may be assumed to hold generally, or that it does not hold in a certain percentage of cases, and accordingly does *not* hold generally.

(f) Silences. As already noted, silences in an exchange always convey implicatures. They may suggest, for instance that some aspects are not 'useful', or even dangerous, from one's point of view, or that there are some issues one would prefer to drop, etc.

(g) Use of clauses such as "we agree on" to obtain some concession from the other party, or to draw limits to the domain of the dispute.

(h) Recurrent attempts to define "what is our present question". Definition of 'the question at stake' (*staseis* in traditional rhetoric) is essential in a dispute, for it allocates the 'burden of proof' to one contender or the other. This apparently 'procedural' issue may thus determine the outcome of a dispute.

3.2. Metalinguistic claims

Of particular significance for a pragmatic-rhetorical analysis of debates is the frequent reliance by the contenders on their implicit or explicit conceptions about ordinary language as well as about what they take to be the ideal 'language of science'. In the case here studied, disagreements are often formulated in terms of divergences regarding the degree of precision or vagueness of the language employed, the meanings assigned to key terms, and the way in which the issue at stake is best formulated (see point h in the preceding section). Both accuse each other of deficient use of language. It is remarkable that each of them resorts in his own turn to considerations of accuracy of definitions and accuses the other of inconsistency whenever this may fit the purpose of winning an argument. For example, in the *Principles* Malthus criticizes Ricardo for departing from "the ordinary and most correct language of society" (Malthus, [1820], II: 217; see also the footnote added to p. 336, *ib.*, pp. 244-245); Ricardo (in a piece of related co-text) criticizes Malthus for "sometimes attaching one meaning" to words and "sometimes another" (*Ricardo to Mill* 1 Jan. 1821. In Ricardo, 1951-1973, VIII: 331); in the correspondence he writes to Malthus that some of his objections "are merely verbal" (*to Malthus* 4 Sept. 1820, *ib.*, VIII: 228); in the *Notes* he criticizes him for mistaking disputes on words for discussions on facts (Ricardo, [1928]. *143*, p. 225).

Whenever each of them proceeds in this way, he is of course appealing to (supposedly) shared standards of linguistic propriety. Ricardo constantly *presumes* that proper use of language is tantamount to *precision* and *univocity*; Malthus always *presumes* that propriety is tantamount to *explicit definitions* and conformity to the *usage of the best educated part of society*. One important piece of co-text on this issue is Malthus's *Definitions in Political Economy*, written after Ricardo's death, where his presumptions are spelled out (See particularly Malthus, [1827], pp. 6-7). Such an appeal to tacit standards of linguistic propriety, being used tactically every time one lacks more direct arguments, is the source of endless misunderstanding. For example, Ricardo in a letter to Mill makes a caustic and somewhat unfair remark reducing Malthus's vindication of 'anti-naturalism' in the social sciences to alleged abuse of language (*Ricardo to Mill* 1 Jan. 1821. In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VIII: 331). Malthus, in the second edition of his *Principles*, requests Ricardo to conform to "the ordinary and most correct language of society" (Malthus, [1820], II: 217); besides, he contends that the latter's strong cases amount to tautologies, in so far as *he had built in his own definitions* the very consequences he intended to draw (*ib.*, p. 245).

We believe that there was indeed a degree of misunderstanding in such attacks since, in the course of the dispute, these 'standards' were biased or 'interpreted' so as to (bene)fit the actual use of the contender that makes appeal to the standard in question. Malthus did not draw a clear distinction between a request addressed to Ricardo to make his own definitions explicit, and a different request to adopt Malthus's own definitions. Conforming to "the most usual language of society"[[10]](#footnote-10) was a request formulated in such a way as to sound obvious; in fact, it was a means of adding further weight to a request of conforming to his own choice in matters of definitions. But, as Ricardo did not appear to share the same concern with conformity to ordinary language (probably because he had learnt from Belsham that scientific terminology should try to be precise at the price of looking artificial and even arbitrary, since "many combinations of ideas" occur frequently in the "arts and sciences", which do not occur in "common life" (Belsham 1801, 320), Malthus's move amounted – for Ricardo – to little more than a *petitio principii*. Ricardo, in his turn, does not seem to grasp (or makes believe that he does not grasp) Malthus's point even when reduced to its minimal version, namely the request to make the difference explicit between Ricardo's and Adam Smith's usage with regard to such terms as "natural price"[[11]](#footnote-11).

The examples given may be enough to suggest the conclusion that, also here, some general principle in matters of methodology (on the relationship of scientific and ordinary language, on the need for explicit definitions, etc.) is subordinated to the needs of the dispute and bent to serve them. Nevertheless, mutual criticism on language and definitions seems to have been beneficial: Malthus's *On Definitions* is a systematic restatement of points he had been drawn to make by his dispute with Ricardo; and secondly, Ricardo too did learn something from Malthus on this count; in our cycle, Malthus 'teaches' him that "accumulation of produce is not accumulation of capital, unless what is accumulated is worth more than it costs" (Letter *67*, p. 155); but Ricardo insists that "accumulation of *produce* if properly selected *may* always be accumulation of *capital*" (Letter *70*, p. 164); and yet, in the *Notes on Malthus*, he employs the distinction between accumulating and hoarding as a weapon against Malthus (see Ricardo, [1928], *208*, p. 210).

A heightened metalinguistic awareness, put to use to a contender's advantage in the debate, also appears in some of the moves described above as well as in the 'strata- gems' described below. An example of the latter is stratagem 3 (see the next section), while an example of the former is redefinition of 'what is at stake' (see move h, in the preceding section). Behind each 'redefinition' one should be able to detect an attempt to shift the burden of proof in one's favour. Recall some of these redefinitions. Ricardo's initial proposal for an assessment is that the (real) issue between them is whether there is any causal relationship between restrictions on importation of corn and reduction of capital (Letter 53: 113-114). At the end of the cycle Ricardo proposes a redefinition of the issue to whether "the rate of profits can ... permanently rise unless capital be withdrawn from the land" (Letter 70: 163). To this Malthus has little to object; in fact, he restricts his objection to a 'terminological' issue: we "should explain – he suggests – what we mean by permanently", and he adds that all that he contends is "that a period of some duration may occur (20 years for instance) when the profits of commerce will take the lead, and regulate the profits of agriculture" (Letter 72: 167). Ricardo has the final word, and curiously enough he further restricts the topic. He says: "I thought you maintained ... I now understand you to say" that the profits of commerce will regulate the profits of agriculture for a period, possibly of 20 years; and the only thing he has to object is the duration of such a period, that he would limit 'to about 4 or 5' (Letter 73: 170). When the question is initially reframed by Ricardo in terms of permanent effects, he hopes thereby to get rid of Malthus's concrete examples that challenge his 'law' – for Malthus's cases can always be dealt with as momentary variations that shouldn't be taken as relevant for the idealized model. When Malthus, on the other hand, insists on relativizing the very notion of 'permanence', he has redistributed the burden of proof to his advantage: the issue now is empirically decidable through observations of the kind Malthus favours – and the (empirical) question of how long a 'Malthusian' effect can last becomes crucial to determine whether it is a 'mere variation' or a cause that economic theory must take into account. To be sure, what appeared to be at the beginning a grand theoretical question turns out at the end to be a difference in degree, concerning magnitudes of a shared model. But this very shift towards a shared definition of the difference clearly favours Malthus, as we have seen. Presumably, this is the reason why both seem to have lost any interest in discussing the remaining differences and in convincing the other, and to rest content with having understood the issue. But they may be acting in this way for different reasons. Ricardo, because he understands he has conceded too much; Malthus, because he sees no need to push towards a final, humiliating, checkmate.

3.3. An arsenal of Stratagems

In a polemical exchange, a contender has a choice of reasons he may choose to provide and a choice of ways of providing them, and her choices may be well described in game-theoretic terms, as 'strategic', for their outcome always depends on the other player's moves. In these choices it is obvious that motives other than the pure love of truth have a say: a desire to win, a desire to improve one's own argument taking advantage of one's opponent's unwilling help, a desire of securing a public reputation, a desire of winning the opponent's private respect (if not his wholehearted assent), etc. Other, even less reputable, motives may also be at work, whose 'rationality' is questionable, and may lead a disputant to resort to 'stratagems' that may grant him immediate satisfaction without yielding any progress in knowledge. Schopenhauer noted this tension between victory and truth and was led by it to be quite sceptical about the value of any debate to advance knowledge.

Quite often, in the beginning we are seriously convinced of the truth of our claim; but then the opponent's argument seems to overthrow it; if we give up immediately, we often realize that instead we were right; our proof was false, but for the same claim a correct one was available; that is, the final argument did not occur to us from the beginning. Thus, we are drawn to adopt the maxim to keep on fighting anyway the opposite argument, even when it appears to be right and conclusive, pinning our hopes on the fact that its pertinence too might be merely apparent, and that in the course of the controversy another argument will occur to us by which we could overthrow it, or confirm our truth in some other way; thus, we are almost compelled, or at least easily induced to unfairness in arguing... It follows that, as a rule, a controversialist does not fight for truth, but in order to impose his own thesis on the opponent, as if *pro ara et focis* [for his home and fireside], and proceeds *per fas et nefas*, because, as I have shown, he is not in a position to act otherwise (Schopenhauer, [1864], pp. 666-667).

Schopenhauer is right in so far as we can easily single out a number of recurrent stratagems of the kind he describes that our two respectable scientists use for the sake of easy victory. But he is wrong in being so pessimistic: perhaps truth itself does not emerge from such skirmishes, but there is no doubt that controversy contributes to the progress of knowledge – whatever this may turn out to be. More on this in the last section.

We describe a set of eight stratagems, more or less frequently employed by each opponent in the controversy here studied. Whenever possible, we will illustrate these stratagems with examples taken from the cycle described above.

Stratagem 1. *Turn your opponent's charge against the opponent*.

This is, together with stratagem 3, one of the strongest. The present one is 'aggressive', while stratagem 3 is 'conciliatory'. It is not surprising, according to what we have said about the temperaments of our authors, and about their respective beliefs on the usefulness of controversy, that this stratagem is followed more often by Ricardo and seldom by Malthus.

In the cycle we have analyzed this stratagem is adopted by Ricardo in Letter *53* where he charges Malthus with the fallacy of equivocation; in Letter *59* where he retorts Malthus's accusation of not taking "sufficiently into consideration the wants and tastes of mankind"; in Letter *60* where he declares that it is Malthus who underestimates these wants and tastes, while Ricardo considers them "as unlimited"; it is adopted also by Malthus in Letter *61*.

Elsewhere in the controversy one example of this stratagem is Ricardo's reaction to Malthus's attempt at introducing considerations of language and definitions in the discussion. In his *Notes on Malthus* he first charges Malthus with having adopted a definition (that of the "real value" of a commodity) Malthus himself had called arbitrary (Ricardo, [1928], *26*, p. 65), and secondly he defends his own usage (that is, to call "high" those salaries that have a high real – as opposed to nominal – value) on the basis of Malthus's claim of a purely "nominal" character of monetary salaries (*ib.*, *210*, p. 322). In ch. 1 of the *Principles*, Ricardo repeats the same argument on the "real value" of commodities. To Malthus's objections in ch. 2, sect. vii of his *Principles* (Malthus [1820], pp. 130-133) he replies that the "unusual, and indeed inconsistent, language" is that used by his opponent (Ricardo, [1817], p. 19).

Malthus uses this stratagem less often than Ricardo. One occasion in which he does so is possibly a letter where he presents his own position as satisfying a "desire to simplify" and suggests that Ricardo, by excluding an action of the principle of supply and demand on profits, is introducing an unjustified anomaly in "the laws which operate upon all other commodities" (*to Ricardo* 11 Oct. 1815. In Ricardo, 1951-1973. VI: 296).

Stratagem 2. *Divide et impera: declare that you accept something the opponent says elsewhere, and then proceed to prove that it contradicts what he says now*.

In our cycle this stratagem is adopted by Ricardo in Letter *53* by Yes-But clauses (he accepts Malthus's new formulation of the *explanandum*, but keeping two possible cause for the phenomenon described distinct) and in Letter *60*; by Ricardo in Letter *58* by asserting that there may be many causes for one phenomenon, but in order to raise doubts on the existence of the causal link in whose existence Malthus believed; by Ricardo in Letter *60* introducing again more complexity by the distinction between power and enjoyments, meant to neutralize Malthus's distinction between power and will; again by Malthus in Letter *67* by the further distinction between tastes and wants and a desire of mere necessaries used to discard Ricardo's notion of a desire to accumulate.

Stratagem 3. *Claim that you have been misunderstood or misrepresented*.

In our cycle this stratagem is adopted by Malthus in Letter *56*; by Ricardo in a softer way (apparently a recourse to Stratagem 7, i.e., to methodological discussion) in Letter *58* by raising the suspect that they do not attach the same meaning to words.

Elsewhere Malthus seems more prone to use of this stratagem; Ricardo uses it more at later stages of the controversy.

In 1821, after many years of discussion, Malthus concludes: "it seems as if we should never thoroughly understand each other" (*to Ricardo* 16 July 1821. In Ricardo, 1951-1973. IX: 19). In previous years he had expressed the complaint that Ricardo had understood his statements pushing them "too far" and not recollecting "the limitations" they must comply with (*to Ricardo* 24 March 1815, *ib.*, VI: 199), or, on the opposite, not pushing them "far enough" (*to Ricardo* 2 April 1815, *ib.*, p. 207); he had complained that Ricardo had understood him as arguing a different claim from the one he intended (*to Ricardo* 11 Oct. 1815, *ib.*, p. 296; *to Ricardo* 2 Jan. 1816, *ib.*, VII: 3; *to Ricardo* 7 July 1821, *ib.*, IX: 10).

Ricardo resorts to this stratagem shortly after publication of Malthus's *Principles*. He says: "I find in your book some allusions to opinions which you represent as mine and which I do not really hold" (*to Malthus* 24 Nov. 1820, *ib.*, VIII: 301). In fact, when the amount and the weight of modifications introduced in his *Principles* as responses to Malthus's criticism are taken into account, one may wonder whether what Ricardo presented as clarification of what he 'really meant', was not a disguised application of our Stratagem 4 (accepting defeat and retreating to 'safer' ground). These modifications might be interpreted, at best, as an implicit admission of the need to clarify his own views so as to avoid further misrepresentation, assuming that avowing this was a way not to "lose points". Ricardo also complained that Malthus always made him say that profits depend on the low price of corn, while his *real* meaning was that they depended on wages, and wages in turn were *mainly*, but not *entirely*, regulated by "the facility of obtaining necessaries" (*to Malthus* 11 Oct. 1821, *ib.*, IX: 99). Finally, in the third edition of the *Principles*, he complains that Malthus had not understood that for him cost and value of a thing were equivalent only if cost is understood as 'production cost', including profits:

Mr Malthus appears to think that it is a part of my doctrine, that the cost and value of a thing should be the same; – it is, if he means by cost, "cost of production" including profits. In the above passage, this is what he does not mean, and therefore he has not clearly understood me" (Ricardo, [1817], p. 47 fn.).

This stratagem raises the question of the "uses of misunderstanding" (See Dascal, 1990a) to which we have briefly alluded in sect. 2.3, that is, the question of what is *gained* by misrepresenting the opponent's statement. Claiming that one has been misunderstood is a device useful for many purposes: it allows one to employ the powerful *distinguo* move, to insinuate that the opponent is stupid or acting on ill-faith, and also – more positively – it leaves room for amendments in one's own positions without having to admit defeat. *Complaint* of misunderstanding seems to be easier for Ricardo, while it occurs comparatively less frequently in Malthus's writings. This may have something to do with the different assumptions in matters of language and definitions each of them held. In fact, Ricardo defends an artificialist view of scientific language, while Malthus asserts a continuity between ordinary language and the language of the moral and political sciences[[12]](#footnote-12).

Another question is: how far did they *really* misrepresent each other? This seems indeed to occur, quite apart from their complaints of misunderstanding, as if they were actually unaware of it. Our authors seem often to miss the other's *point for saying what he is saying*. Misunderstanding here depends on their sticking to literal meaning, to pure semantics, without engaging in the necessary step of pragmatic interpretation (cf. Dascal, 1985). In polemics it may be due to the fact that each contender does not have before his eyes the 'broader picture' the other constantly keeps in mind. This is the case, for example, of Malthus's reasons for taking considerations "of higher rank than wealth" constantly into account, that is, for keeping political economy within the framework of a wider science of morals and legislation (See Malthus [1820], I: 437) and of Ricardo's reasons for keeping matters of fact distinct from value judgements (See Ricardo [1928], pp. 337-8). In such cases, they did understand fairly well what the other was *saying*, but they did not accept it or its implications, and did not want to go so far off the track as to discuss all the reasons for those implications. But actual misunderstanding in disputes may also derive – as suggested by Schopenhauer – from a peculiar 'blindness' one develops towards the position of the opponent, a blindness which forces one to oversimplify and often caricature it, to ensure its early defeat.

Stratagem 4. *Accept 'defeat' on some point that you proceed to show to be minor or irrelevant*.

In our cycle this stratagem is adopted by Malthus in Letter *60* twice, the first time adducing *himself* as an authority; the second time quoting Adam Smith; to this Ricardo respond in Letter *61* by quoting himself Smith; again, by Ricardo in Letter *70* quoting Say.

In general, this stratagem is used quite often by Ricardo, in so far as it helps him – like the much more complex Stratagem 6 – to incorporate Malthus's criticism, only slightly modified, to his own system, without modifying the core of his research programme. The basic Ricardian device is the "strong case" and the related distinction between "intervals" and "permanent states"; his counter-objection is typically: this may be true in practice, but I was trying to establish a point of theory. What he really *does*, after such counter-objections, is to accept more and more 'anomalies', trying to incorporate them into his own theory.

Malthus employs this stratagem in a version which is specular to Ricardo's; he typically counter-objects: this is true, but only in theory; in practice there are other causes at work[[13]](#footnote-13).

Stratagem 5. *Rely on a prestigious paradigm*.

This is the old *argumentum ad verecundiam*, or Schopenhauer's stratagem n. 30: "Instead of arguments, avail yourself of authorities, such as your opponent may be acquainted with" (Schopenhauer, [1864], p. 684). Reliance on a paradigm-exemplar may serve the purpose of adding more plausibility to an argument that does not prove totally convincing. A similar purpose is served by the twin-stratagem 7 in its positive version (resorting to methodological discussion).

In our cycle this stratagem is adopted by Ricardo in Letters *60* and *64*, combined with stratagem 2, by distinguishing between permanently and temporarily high or low profits (after having accepted Malthus's causal connection between scarcity of capital and profits) and by accepting Malthus' distinction between two elements of effectual demand just in order prove that one of them is irrelevant, provided that its unlimited presence may be always taken for granted; again by Ricardo in Letter *70* by drawing his recurrent distinction between questions of fact and questions of science.

In general, reliance on authority by Malthus is quite explicit. He constantly presents his own claims as aligned with those of Adam Smith, who is acknowledged by both as the greatest authority. But while Ricardo concentrates on criticism of a few Smithian doctrines, Malthus – who, as a rule, avoids criticizing Smith – tries instead to develop further consequences from Smithian ideas. A typical example of this attitude is the transformation by Malthus (cf. sect. 2.1) of Smith's occasional mention of "effective demand" (Smith, [1776], I. viii) into the notion of the demand that results from the sum of the power plus the will to purchase (See Letter *61*, pp. 131-132); this will become the kernel of Malthus's complex theory of demand, centred precisely on this notion (see Malthus [1820], pp. 417 ff.).

Yet, even if Malthus plays the role of the faithful follower of Adam Smith, who prefers to present every innovation as a development rather than as a criticism, there is an important difference between himself and Smith, having to do with stratagem 7. It lies in the role assigned to methodological discussion. The methodological scaffolding of political economy had in fact been left in the shadow in Smith's masterpiece, even if the structure of the work owed much to this scaffolding. In Malthus's *Principles*, on the contrary, methodological considerations are profuse, and they draw from the Scottish methodological tradition, to which Smith himself had contributed. There are many reasons for this: different audiences (Adam Smith addressed a lay audience; Malthus was the first professor of Political Economy in Great Britain and one of the first in Europe, and he already could address an audience of would-be specialists); the fact that Malthus's *Principles* were born in the midst of a theoretical controversy; furthermore, Malthus's *Principles* belong to one of those phases in the history of a science which come *after* a paradigm-exemplar has been established, while Smith was carrying out one of those paradigm-founding revolutions which typically leave less time and energies for exercises in methodology.

Since Ricardo, unlike Malthus, used to play the role of an innovator, he had less opportunities to shield himself behind somebody's else prestige. Yet, the commonplace recourse to the authority of Newtonian physics as the paramount example of scientific achievement is also available to Ricardo; a couple of times he compares his own laws with the law of gravitation, taken as the paramount case of certainty of a scientific law (See *to Malthus* 27 March 1815. In Ricardo, 1951-1973 VI: 204; Ricardo, [1817], p. 108). We have argued that the unspecified implications of these comparisons could have been different for each of the opponents, granted that the images of Newton each had in mind resulted from different methodological traditions (represented by Priestley and Belsham for Ricardo, by Hume, the Cambridge *via media*, and Dugald Stewart for Malthus).

A more subtle instance of the use of this stratagem takes place in the context of the controversy. It is the association of Ricardian economics with Benthamism. This association was established by means of propaganda and was never really argued for. This example illustrates well the dynamic nature of 'authorities' and the mutual benefits that may arise from the use of this stratagem: becoming the economic chapter of a political Credo contributed to the establishment, even if not to a faithful understanding, of what a Ricardian orthodoxy; but the fact of being thereby apparently supported by an economic theory, supposedly yielding ready-made policy advice was at the time a decisive asset for Benthamism.

Stratagem 6. *Protect your position by restricting the scope of application of the opponent's objections to a domain you don't really care about*

This stratagem is based on the *distinguo* move (cf. Letters *60* and *61*)[[14]](#footnote-14), but its special features and frequent use deserve separate treatment. As we shall see, this stratagem underlies (part of) the use of stratagems 7 and 8. Its general purpose is to shift the discussion from one level or domain to a different one, more favourable to the defendant. In this way, although the opponent's objections are acknowledged, their capacity to "hurt" the defendant is nullified. The defendant's position (or its doctrinal core) is thereby protected by a security belt that insulates it from a certain type of criticism[[15]](#footnote-15). The price the defendant pays is, of course, to restrict the scope of application of his own doctrines, but this is a price that thinkers desirous to prove the 'necessary' character of their theories willingly pay. Kant's trascendentalisation of reason, for example, allows him to redirect sceptical criticism of the alleged universal and necessary basis of our knowledge to a 'subjective' or 'psychological' level, where they no longer can shake Kant's attempts to ground the objective character of the knowledge achieved by a 'transcendental subject'. The Pyrrhonian sceptic also often employs this stratagem. When accused by his opponents that, by challenging *every* claim to knowledge, scepticism is undermining the very possibility of taking the daily decisions necessary for living, the sceptic retorts by distinguishing between a *theoretical* domain and the domain of *practical life*. Sceptical doubt is then claimed to apply to the former but not to the latter, which need not be based on pretentious claims of knowing what underlies appearances (cf. Burnyeat, 1984: 225-227, 247-251; Dascal, 1990b).

The insulating move depends on the possibility to establish a clear *demarcation* between the domains distinguished; conversely, whenever demarcation alone is invoked, it usually serves the purpose of insulating one of the domains. Thus, when the Vienna Circle and Popper insist in 'demarcating' science from metaphysics and other non-scientific domains, they are in fact trying to create an area of theorizing protected from certain 'contaminating' factors. The same is the case for their distinction between the 'context of discovery' and the 'context of justification' of a theory: the former has nothing to do with the 'philosophy of science' because it has to do with the mysteries of the psychology of creativity; only the latter allows for the application of the logical methods these thinkers view as the only legitimate ones.

In our cycle this stratagem is adopted by Ricardo in Letters *60* and *64*, combined with stratagem 2, by distinguishing between permanently and temporarily high profits (after having accepted Malthus's causal connection between scarcity of capital and profits) and by accepting Malthus' distinction between two elements of effectual demand, but just in order to prove that one of them is irrelevant, since it may be always taken for granted; again by Ricardo in Letter *70* by drawing his recurrent distinction between questions of fact and questions of science.

In the controversy as a whole, use of the insulating stratagem is most typical of Ricardo. This is hardly surprising, in the light of Ricardo's awareness of the power of sceptical doubts and of his clear preference for abstract idealized models. Here are some examples of his attempt at establishing privileged areas immune from such doubts:

(i) Introduction of a distinction between 'practical' concerns and 'transitory' phenomena on the one hand, and the 'theoretical' concern with permanent states on the other;

(ii) Use of sceptical doubts, based on awareness of the multiplicity of causes making it impossible to go beyond approximations, as a tool to draw a distinction between the theory of value and distribution, the 'pure' part of the science, and the remainder, a wasteland into which it is safer not to venture;

(iii) Stressing the distinction between value and wealth, in order to be able to define rent as the creation of value rather than of wealth (See Ricardo, [1817], p. 398), and to declare Malthus's concern with welfare 'unscientific'.

Not unlike Ricardo's use of stratagem 4, Malthus employs a 'top down' version of the insulating strategy. In the Introduction to his *Principles* he seems to counter-attack Ricardo's scepticism-cum-apriorism (applying stratagem 1) by a hyper-insulation. In fact, he draws a distinction between political economy on the one hand and the exact sciences on the other, implying that no area of political economy might reach the same degree of exactness as that of mathematics and the natural sciences. What he is doing here is to insulate the *whole* realm of the social sciences from that of the natural sciences, thus blurring the line drawn by Ricardo between a restricted core (the theory of value and distribution) and a wider peripheral wasteland, in so far as *all* areas of political economy become susceptible of *the same* degree of exactness (indeed a *very limited* one). Clearly, this is also a *demarcation move*, for Malthus is in fact saying: don't mix methods, for what is good for one domain is not good for another. We know too well how recourses to demarcation breed endless disputes about the proper way of drawing the boundaries between the putative domains[[16]](#footnote-16).

Stratagem 7. *Resort to methodological discussion either in order to build a protective belt around already established positive results, or in order to keep the discipline's boundaries open. If, instead, you want to concentrate on a restricted number of factors, either avoid methodological discussion or find ad hoc pro-insulation methodological considerations.*

In our cycle this stratagem is adopted by Ricardo in Letter *53*; by Malthus in Letter *67*, in order to defend his own use of multi-causality; by Ricardo in Letter *70*.

In general, the methodological ground is preferred by Malthus and it is most of the time avoided by Ricardo. Yet, both appeal at some point to methodological considerations for at least one basic purpose: adding plausibility to a positive claim. It is for this reason that Malthus gradually emphasizes the role of "proportions", an idea that he had implicitly introduced in the *Essay* and then brought to the fore in the *Principles*, where he claims that "all the great results in political economy... depend upon *proportions*" (Malthus [1820], I: 430). This doctrine backs up his aversion to the "tendency to extremes", (p. 352n), one of the great sources of error in political economy (Malthus [1820], II: 252). In the 1817 edition of the *Essay*, he derives from that doctrine a criticism of the argument that "what is good to a certain extent is good to any extent" (Malthus [1803], II: 70), applying this criticism to the issues of saving, unproductive consumption, effective demand, population, and the distribution of property. The doctrine of proportions implies the assumption of an intrinsic limit to the certainty of our knowledge, determined by the difficulty of ascertaining where the right proportion lies (Malthus, [1820]. I: 9-10). The main consequence of our inability to know where the right proportion between different factors lies is to further stress the need for "modifications, limitations and exceptions" to every "rule or proposition" (*ib.*, p. 7). Thus, the doctrine of proportions acts as a protective belt to policy recommendations in which Malthus believed, without having waterproof arguments in their favour. In fact, he believed in these policy recommendations on the basis of meta-considerations other than purely methodological. These considerations, which included the usefulness of a certain division of property in order to preserve Britain's "mixed constitution", were unlikely to arouse Ricardo's enthusiasm because of Ricardo's different political views.

It is for similar reasons that Ricardo, at a certain stage, adds a methodological defence to his already established "law of value" by introducing the conception of political economy as a science of the laws of distribution (Ricardo, [1817], p. 5). Ricardo's resorting to methodology in this connection is remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, because it twists sceptical considerations into a defence of abstraction and exactness. That is, by applying stratagem 6, Ricardo claims that it is precisely because nothing certain can be said concerning most of economic phenomena that they must be left outside the gates of science, while the laws of distribution, being the part susceptible of a rigorous treatment, should be identified with the whole of economic science. Secondly, because it is associated with a double use of stratagem 4: in the 1st edition of the *Principles* Ricardo had advanced the claim that labour is the determinant of value for "the *greatest part* of the commodities" (the exception being those commodities whose value is determined by their scarcity alone, but these "form a very small part of the mass of commodities"). In the third edition – after he had admitted in his *Notes on Malthus*, that his own labour value theory was not able to account for *all* the phenomena – he substitutes, in the assertion that the value of the greatest part of the commodities depends on the comparative quantity of labour expended on each, the phrase "depends almost exclusively" for "depends solely" (notice that also stratagem 6, besides stratagem 4, is being used here, because the claim is said to hold true "in the early stages of society")[[17]](#footnote-17).

The appeal to methodological themes in the controversy is neither like using a set of efficient *machines à theoriser*, which produce economic arguments and positive results, nor like using powerful but idling engines, just for impressing the audience. Methodological claims have no doubt a strategic role in the contenders' argumentation, as well as some importance in shaping their theoretical positions. This dual role explains why, although there is an elective affinity between an author's methodological statements and his positive claims, it is also the case that occasionally the same methodological statements are used – by each contender – for opposite purposes. It remains to be seen whether, in addition to strategy and tactics, there is some further rationale for shifting or not shifting to methodological discussion at any particular point of a debate. What is clear from our analysis so far is that theory construction and evolution is far from being merely the result of the application of a well-defined set of methodological principles. Theorizing follows a non-linear path, heavily influenced by the demands of the polemical context within which it unfolds.

Stratagem 8. *Escape either to idealization/abstraction or to realism/complexity*.

In our cycle this stratagem is adopted by Malthus in Letter *51* by introducing a new fact and by proposing two causes for one phenomenon instead of one; again by Malthus in Letter *62* in order to protect his own theory of population from falsification by adding a protective belt of side-conditions for its predicted effects to manifest themselves; again by Ricardo in Letter *72* by mentioning a fact in order to give the opponent a problem to solve.

In general, this stratagem instantiates one of the most frequent moves in our controversy. It is also of particular interest because of its twofold character: when faced with difficulties, each opponent moves in a direction opposite to the other. So, Ricardo, moving from the shared premise of multi-causality, argues either that his own theory is immunized to criticism by its being an abstract model which has little to do with the actual world, while Malthus argues that his own theory cannot be defeated on the basis of logical deductions within an abstract model because the actual world has little to do with that model, and more causes should be taken into account. Thus, opposite methodological preoccupations are used as equivalent devices in order to protect given positive theories from criticism.

4. The rationality of a scientific controversy

We have observed how two gentlemen and friends, two scientists interested in the truth and in the progress of their discipline, while performing all the motions of civility in their correspondence, nevertheless conduct their dispute by resorting at their convenience to rather flexible methodological considerations, to invalid arguments, to inconsistencies, to unjustified stubbornness (Peirce's 'tenacity') and to all sorts of astute stratagems. If this is how the exercise of criticism is supposed to lead to the growth of knowledge, one may well ask whether such a growth is indeed 'rational'. Perhaps, instead, Feyerabend, Foucault, or McCloskey are – each or all of them – right. Perhaps science 'progresses' not through a rational process, but rather through 'anarchy', power struggles, or the rhetorical manipulation of emotions. Unless one can show that this conclusion is unwarranted. We think Feyerabend, Foucault, and McCloskey are right insofar as they have called attention to important aspects of the scientific enterprise that have been systematically overlooked by the idealized normative image of science that can be found in the writings of philosophers of science like Popper. Methodological opportunism, political struggle, and the temptation to achieve short-lived victory through persuasive tricks are indeed ever present in science and can be observed at work precisely by looking at scientific controversies, which are certainly not governed only – or even mainly – by lofty logical standards. What this means, however, is not that there is no 'rationality' at work in the workings of science; it only means that a particular form of rationality, which equates reason with logic, is not found there. To look at controversies (and at the criticism therein practiced) as 'valuable' just in case they lead to a clear-cut decision as to which of the opposing theories should be 'accepted' and which 'rejected' by the Supreme Court of Reason (embodied in the absolutely impartial judgment of an ideal Scientific Community), is to overlook the fact that controversies – such as the one here studied – call into question, among other things, the very 'laws' and 'procedures' according to which such a Court is supposed to judge. That is to say, it is to overlook the possibly radical character of the differences between the contenders, i.e. strict logic. Such a view implies that, whenever such radical differences occur – as they do in fact occur – the controversy lies beyond the jurisdiction of reason, i.e. it is not properly viewed as a 'scientific' controversy, but rather as an 'ideological' one, where 'rationality' has little or no role whatsoever (cf. Popper, 1981 [1975]). Adopting such a view, therefore, would be to play straightforwardly into the hands of Feyerabend, Foucault, McCloskey, and also of the early Kuhn, in so far as it would amount to admitting that the actual process of scientific 'progress' – where controversies certainly play a decisive role – is the result of factors alien to the concept of rationality. The question, then, is whether there is an alternative between these two extremes, i.e., whether it is possible to discern, in the actual conduct of scientific controversies, some other, somewhat ' softer' form of rationality than the only variety acknowledged by normative philosophy of science, i.e. strict logic. Such a question can only be answered by an empirical study of controversies, like the one we have been conducting in the present case. In what follows, we discuss those findings that, in our opinion, substantiate the existence and some of the features of such a kind of rationality.

4.1. The growth of understanding

We have analysed in detail one cycle in the Malthus-Ricardo correspondence. Can we say that this cycle has contributed to the 'growth of knowledge'? Can we say, for example, that it led to the discovery of new facts, to the establishment of new scientific laws? Can we say that it solved the problem (the economic effect of the Corn Laws) it set out to discuss? The answer is certainly 'No'. If 'growth of knowledge' is taken to mean more data, solved problems, and agreement on the acceptance of a theory at the expense of another, our cycle did not contribute to it. If, however, this notion is reasonably broadened to include, say, the 'growth of understanding', then the answer is definitely 'Yes'. Ricardo suggests that this is what the present cycle has achieved when, after a final attempt to characterize the difference between them, he writes: "I thought you maintained ... I now understand you to say ..." (Letter 73: 170). Ricardo refers here to a mutual understanding that consists in being able to grasp the difference between the contending positions. Such a non-trivial achievement, however, was reached only through a winding path in the course of which, as we saw in the analysis of the cycle here studied, the contenders were confronted with a vast panorama of each other's views, ranging from very specific factual beliefs, though divergent definitions of key concepts, up to different methodological assumptions and different conceptions of the scope and purpose of the discipline itself. This *tour d'horizon* may be considered idle insofar as its contribution to the solution of a well-defined problem through a 'better' explanation is concerned. But it can hardly be said to be useless. For, when deeply diverging perspectives or 'paradigms' confront each other – as is usually the case in scientific controversies – no problem is, in fact, a 'narrowly' defined problem and it is not easy to determine which explanation is better. Addressing any problem calls into question the whole paradigm. To make progress in the confrontation, therefore, it is necessary to explore the breadth and depth of the divergence. Even if it does not yield a 'solution' to the initial problem (since each paradigm has different criteria for what counts as a solution) it permits however to clarify the issues at stake, i.e. to understand better the true nature of the opposition – including what would count as overcoming it. This kind of understanding, in our view, should be considered as a significant contribution to the growth of knowledge, and it exemplifies the first component of the 'soft' rationality whose presence in scientific controversies we are seeking to detect. Its significance lies, first and foremost, in the fact that, without an acceptable under- standing of the opponent's position, there is no satisfactory way (a) to contrast it properly with one's own position, (b) to provide efficient arguments against it, and ultimately (c) to evaluate it. In this sense, understanding is a pre-condition for the successful conduct of a controversy by those engaged in it, just as it is a pre-condition for any comparative assessment – by a 'neutral' observer – of the respective merits of the opposing theories. But, as we have seen, understanding is not a 'given', in a controversy. Quite on the contrary – as the recurrent complaints of misunderstanding make clear – understanding is the result of a laborious negotiation of meaning, where the mutual objections play a decisive role not only in (eventually) clearing up misunderstandings, but mainly in provoking a truly 'constructive' process, whereby the participants elaborate their meanings in the light of such objections. The making of distinctions, the redefinition of concepts, the hedging of generalizations, the 'insulation' of claims in order to thwart counter-arguments – are some of the moves in this construction of meaning. Mutual understanding, therefore, does not consist in the discovery of an initially hidden meaning, but rather in the joint – even though conflictual – construction of such a meaning. It is an achievement of the contenders, which can only be under- stood – in fact 're-constructed' – by an external observer if the polemic context where it develops is taken into account. To be sure, such an understanding per se bears no guarantee that the controversy will end in agreement by the contenders, nor in a clear-cut decision – by an external observer – about which of the theories should be adopted by the scientific community. But without it, any such decision would be precarious, and hence subject to the influence of 'extraneous' factors to a larger extent than if the difficulties involved in achieving understanding are appreciated. It should be clear by now that the constructive negotiation of meaning that yields understanding is not a 'logical' process, strictly speaking. There are no deductive rules specifying how a contender should modify, say, a definition, in order to cope with a given objection. Nor are there rules specifying whether s/he should do so at all. Instead, a contender can undertake a number of other moves – e.g., engaging in a 'digression' about scientific language – in order to preserve her or his original definition. His or her choice cannot, therefore, be predicted in advance – which is also why the direction which the 'construction' of meaning will take in a controversy is unpredictable (and hence truly creative). And yet, such moves are far from aleatory and arbitrary. At the very least they obey – as we will presently see – the constraints of communication and of cognitive rhetoric, precisely because they must be understandable in the dialectical context where they are performed, as well as intellectually persuasive vis-a-vis their intended audience.

4.2. The constraints of communication

The understanding we have been discussing is not some idyllic union of minds and hearts that poets (and perhaps also thinkers such as Martin Buber) are after. What we are talking about is understanding achieved through regular communication, and whatever rationality it possesses is at least the kind of rationality involved in communicative interactions.

To be sure, communicative understanding is also an impressive achievement, given the ubiquity of misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and other forms of (alleged or real) communicative failure, some of which we have observed in the controversy here studied (cf. Dascal, 1985, and forthcoming; Fraser, 1994). If natural languages were 'transparent', i.e., if their semantic rules were sufficient to account for the meanings conveyed through their use, then communicative failures could not occur, and any allegation of such a failure should be ascribed to *mauvaise foi* or illiteracy. But the use of natural languages is not transparent. More often than not, we convey only implicitly and indirectly what we mean. Understanding thus always requires a complex inferential process whereby the speaker's actual meaning is determined. The theory that seeks to account for such a process is pragmatics. Pragmatics deals with a form of causal explanation, for it consists in attributing to a speaker, on the basis of his linguistic behaviour and other contextual information, a communicative intention that serves as a cause for that behaviour. However, both regarding the way in which a mental state can act as a cause and regarding the inference that allows for such an attribution to an agent, pragmatic interpretation differs from explanation (e.g., the usual explanation based on physical causality), because it depends essentially on the fact that the speaker's communicative intention and his corresponding linguistic behaviour have a 'content', whose recognition by the hearer is indispensable if communication has to be successful.

This content, however, is not forever fixed by the semantic rules of the language. It must be inferentially construed on the basis of the semantics of the utterance *cum* contextual and co-textual information. Pragmatics, therefore, does not *replace* semantics but rather cohabits with it. Semantics accounts for the codifications of meanings in a system of rules. Pragmatics permits one to use that system in a flexible way, occasionally violating its rules, without thereby sacrificing intelligibility. Initially, the semantic meaning is only *presumed* to be the speaker's meaning. If some discrepancy is found between such a meaning and co- and contextual information, then the initial presumption in its favour is abandoned and an inferential process is triggered to reach a plausible pragmatic interpretation. In a controversy, a recurrent source of such a discrepancy are the opponent's objections to the presumed meaning of one's utterance, and this prompt both contenders to raise conjectures as to its pragmatic interpretation. This process explains the "open-endedness" of understanding or negotiation of meaning discussed above (sect. 4.1).

Pragmatics is ruled by norms which ensure the intelligibility of communicative acts, but such norms, in contrast to semantic rules, are not algorithmic in nature but rather heuristic. Since the sequential structure of a communicative exchange (e.g., a dialogue or conversation) consists in the concatenation of the actual meanings conveyed by the speakers, rather than merely in the concatenation of semantic meanings, and since speakers' meanings are always construed through an open-ended conjectural (or 'abductive') process of pragmatic interpretation, it is useless to try to define that structure in pure logico-semantic terms. It is, rather, a 'weaker' or 'looser' structure, based on the looser, heuristic, rules of pragmatics. In particular, it displays a rather loose relationship between the 'demands' set up by speaker A's intervention and the 'reactions' to these demands by speaker B's following intervention. A question by A, for example, requires a 'reply' by B. But such a reply may take different forms, depending on how B interprets A's 'question' (is it an informative question, a request for clarification, an objection, a rhetorical question, etc.?) and on B's goals, both his global goals and those pursued in that particular phase of the exchange. B's reply, therefore, can take many forms (including – as we have seen – outright silence or diversion moves, such as methodological digressions). All of these reactions, however, may qualify as pragmatically 'well-formed', provided both B's goals and his interpretation of the demand set up by A's intervention, as well as other co- and contextual information, are taken into account (cf. Dascal, 1992).

In spite of the looseness of the pragmatic structuration of natural language communication, mutual understanding *is* (quite often) achieved (to some extent). This fact indicates that the pragmatic rules whereby it can be achieved are shared by communicators, who mutually and cooperatively rely on them as the tools that allow them to reach their communicative goals. In other words, they incorporate at least an instrumental rationality, which – as we have seen – is non-reducible to algorithmic or deductive rationality. Pragmatics, therefore, not only serves as the appropriate tool for analysing controversies *qua* communicative exchanges of, but also as an example of the kind of 'weak' rationality that characterize such exchanges[[18]](#footnote-18)..

4.3. The constraints of persuasion[[19]](#footnote-19)

Broadly conceived, rhetoric is the art of persuasion. On such a broad view, it includes means of persuasion – e.g. advertising – which by no standards would be called 'cognitive', let alone 'rational'. Yet, traditional rhetoric – and its recent rehabilitation – has emphasized those forms of persuasion that resort to 'argument', for which the adjectives 'cognitive' and perhaps even 'rational' would not be out of place. The main reason for applying these terms is that in persuasion through argumentation two essential cognitive conditions of communication are preserved: (a) its reliance upon communicative causality and (b) its reliance upon inference. The former means that persuasion is supposed to be achieved by addressing the addressee's conscious powers of recognition of the speaker's communicative intention(s). The latter refers to the appeal to inference, both in the use of explicit inferences ('arguments') by the speaker and in the activation, in the audience, of inferential processes intended to lead to the desired persuasion. To this extent, speaker and audience can be said, therefore, to participate in a cooperative enterprise, which obeys the con- straints of cooperative communication as described above (section 4.2). Rhetorical uses of language, however, clearly presuppose less cooperation than 'normal' communicative practice in that, unlike the latter, they routinely admit deception – i.e. the masking of the speaker's 'real' persuasive goal. Whereas in 'normal' communication a presumption of 'transparency' holds (i.e. one assumes the interlocutor's words express fully his or her meaning), in 'rhetorical' communication the opposite presumption might perhaps hold. Still, if one knows that this is the 'rule', then this kind of communication is less cooperative only in the sense that it places upon the audience a heavier burden of interpreting – i.e. guessing – the speaker's meaning. In polemic exchanges or, in general, in competitive communication, cooperation seems to be even more questionable, since the opponents' goals are not only occult but also different. And yet, here too, participation in such a kind of exchange implies an acceptance by the contenders of at least certain procedural rules – and to that extent the exchange displays some degree of cooperation[[20]](#footnote-20). It seems possible, therefore, to integrate pragmatics and rhetoric in terms of a version of the Principle of Cooperation that is less stringent than the one originally proposed by Grice[[21]](#footnote-21). The other distinctive characteristic of rhetorical practice is the use of patently invalid forms of argument. On this count, rhetorical practice may be seen as deficient in 'rationality'. But enthymemes involving implicit, questionable premises, analogical reasoning, inductions or generalizations based on clearly insufficient samples, appeals to character, emotion, custom of authority – all of these types of inference (well represented in our list of stratagems) are acknowledged as legitimate rhetorical tools even by a cognitive rhetoric. Indeed, it is well known that rhetorical 'proof' (*pistis*) is not required – even by Aristotle – to be logical proof. And yet, the persuasive capacity of rhetorical proof is not entirely alien to reason. For, in wearing the form of inferences, such proofs take upon themselves some of the rule-governed, non-arbitrary character of inferences. True, their 'rules' cannot be formalized as in deductive logic, but they are acknowledged and respected by those who employ such inferences. Furthermore, such proofs sometimes make a positive contribution to rational decisions. An ad hominem argument is in general invalid because reliance on, say, personal characteristics of the proponent of a thesis is, strictly speaking, irrelevant for its truth. But knowing something about the reliability of its proponent may, in the absence of stronger reasons to accept or reject the thesis in question, reasonably incline one to accept one of these options. Conformity with some interpretation of 'Newtonianism' – a typical *ad verecundiam* argument – may be, in certain circumstances (e.g., within a discipline where Newton's achievements set up the paradigm to be emulated), an acceptable reason to support a certain position. Admittedly, rhetorical proofs are weaker than logical proofs on a scale that considers not their persuasive power, but their contribution to determining the truth. But how often do we possess unquestionable 'logical proof' in most scientific matters, especially those that become the core of scientific controversies? In such cases, rather than giving up altogether the idea of rationality, the constraints of cognitive rhetoric permit to retain this idea, albeit under a less stringent form.

4.4. The constraints of style

We began this paper by arguing (in sect. 2) that the different casts of minds of Malthus and Ricardo, or their 'scientific styles' comprised a variety of factors that our analysis purported to sort out, thereby explicating this notion. The analytical procedure, however, is unable to capture the holistic nature of this notion, which is akin – though not identical – to the notion of coherence. It is to this aspect of style that we want now to turn our attention, in search for a further piece in the puzzle of the rationality of a controversy.

Style is, ever since Aristotle, a traditional component of rhetoric, which the *Rhetoric* treats mainly as concerned with figuration, i.e., with the selection of those tropes most appropriate to produce desired effects. We do consider the use of metaphors – especially of 'root metaphors' – as both constitutive of scientific language and revealing the fundamental (ontological) commitments of a theory, research program, or paradigm[[22]](#footnote-22). But here we want to extend somewhat the traditional rhetorical notion of style in order to include in the repertoire of stratagems favoured by a scientist, his or her preferred argumentative strategies, and her or his 'meta-theory' of controversy, as expressed in the practice thereof.

We have pointed out (sect. 2.3) cases where both Malthus and Ricardo accuse each other of inconsistencies, but none of them feels compelled to change his views due to such charges. It is as if *logical* coherence did not rank at the top of the constraints that dictate their moves. On the other hand, we have also pointed out (sect. 3.1) a large measure of 'opportunism' in their choice of stratagems and other argumentative moves. We observed that both may employ the same stratagem for opposite purposes, that they can denounce each other's use of a stratagem, while on another occasion employing it themselves, etc. It is as if they didn't care for logical coherence, but even for some sort of *minimal* coherence in their use of moves and counter-moves in the heat of the controversy. Between such a total lack of coherence and full abeyance to logical coherence, we believe the present controversy permits to identify a measure of 'strategic coherence' by each of the contenders. We have chosen the term 'coherence' to characterize this feature by analogy with one of its uses in text theory, where it refers to a level of interrelation of various parts of a text governing its organization, but not reducible to a set of deductive relations. Aristotelian rhetoric dealt with phenomena of this kind under the rubric of 'arrangement', which corresponds quite closely to the notion of 'method' in such classical logical treatises as the 17th century *La Logique ou l'Art de Penser*. In polemic exchanges, the 'strategic' nature of such a level of coherence should be obvious. It constitutes – we surmise – a key component of the notion of 'scientific style'[[23]](#footnote-23).

Strategy – the art of the *strategos* or commander-in-chief – pertains to the overall objectives of a battle and to the design and organization of one's moves in order to achieve them. If one's objective is, say, to conquer a certain city, one's troops will be moved, sooner or later, in that city's direction. This notion of 'direction' must be, however, broadly conceived, for the actual local movements of the troops may involve all sorts of detours. Similarly, the global direction of argumentation by a contender in a polemic allows varying local orientations. It is at the global, not at the local level, that 'strategic coherence' is to be found. Thus, one of Malthus's main objectives is to produce a theory that is as close to 'reality' as possible. Therefore, he consistently objects to Ricardo's search for 'permanent causes', on the grounds that our factual knowledge never extends beyond very limited temporal 'intervals'. Accordingly, his argumentation often consists in pointing out factual counter-examples to Ricardo's overarching claims and predictions. To which Ricardo – for whom a strategic objective is to achieve theoretical simplicity and mathematical precision – usually replies by arguing that such counter-examples stem from the interference of contingent 'disturbances', that should not modify the basic mechanisms and laws posited by the theory, but rather be treated as 'exceptions'. Occasionally, both can resort to moves that are in fact 'detours' from the point of view of the overall direction of their argumentation, but this does not mean that, on the whole, they do not maintain a 'strategic coherence'.

Style, as manifested in the conduct of the controversy, depends also upon what we might call the implicit 'metatheory' of scientific interaction held by each contender. Such a metatheory expresses his or her central views about what the scientific enterprise is all about, in the form of his or her attitude to the role of criticism and debate in science. This attitude is manifest in the evaluation of the role of the controversy in the pursuit of knowledge. In our case, Ricardo clearly believed that his correspondence with Malthus was a way to clarify his own thoughts; in a later phase, when he was considering the possibility to publish his *Notes on Malthus*, he seemed to be inclined for a while to believe in public controversy as a means of conquering the enlightened part of the public to his ideas; later on, he became pessimistic on the value of the controversy; finally, at the time of the discussion about the measure of value, he became more and more pessimistic about both the controversy's value for the search for truth and about the result of his own research too. Malthus was apparently more constant in his attitude and probably more optimistic on the controversy's value; for example, he did take Ricardo's *Notes* into account while revising his *Principles*.

The contenders' attitude toward the controversy are connected to their stance on the *(un)knowability of essences*. This is not only a major topic in the epistemology of each author (be it explicitly formulated or inherited from any of his sources) but also in each one's attitude to the controversy. Ricardo's radical scepticism goes hand in hand with an attitude to the controversy that assumes it to be always inconclusive as a way of ascertaining the truth. To Ricardo's mind there is always an equilibrium between opposing arguments, and the only way of having access to truth is progressive retreat into abstraction, where the thesis argued for acquires more and more the character of a tautology. It is indeed interesting that, his meta-attitude to the controversy's value notwithstanding, Ricardo appears to be the one who has made more changes in his positions as a direct result of the other contender's criticism. Malthus's 'rationalistic empiricism', on the other hand, makes him believe that there is always a way to ascertain the truth, and that if it cannot be reached by conclusive argument, there are at least arguments that *incline* towards one conclusion even if they cannot necessitate adhesion to it[[24]](#footnote-24).

As a result, the conduct of the controversy by each is different: Malthus, the 'rationalist', seeks to resolve the controversy, i.e. to amass reasons that incline; Ricardo, the 'sceptic', seeks to show that they are in fact unresolvable, and that arguments of equal weight can be piled up on both sides, leading eventually to *isostheneia* (and therefore his apriorism is always right).

We thus see that, underlying the apparent hodgepodge of means employed by the contenders in the controversy, there is nevertheless some sort of 'weak' unity or coherence, This permits to qualify the *opportunistic* behaviour of each contender in the controversy as 'moderate' – which amounts to saying that, far from being entirely arbitrary, it displays some measure of rationality.

5. Conclusion

In spite of the complexity of the factors involved in the controversy and of the 'soft' character of the rationality it displays, one would wish to conclude by declaring one of the contenders 'the winner'. And later economists have not resisted the temptation. Marx opted for Ricardo, and Keynes rehabilitated Malthus – to mention but two prominent names. Whatever the verdict of history, however, it is clear that, at the time of its closure, it was, strictly speaking, impossible to determine the winner of the controversy for the simple reason that the contending parties maintained different criteria of 'victory'. Not only the criteria for the soundness of proofs and refutation were under dispute, but the contenders' opinions as to who had been 'convinced' by whom were far from uncontroversial and reliable. Even though an 'objective and definitive' judgment on the winner of a controversy is unattainable, there may be intrinsic evidence of communicative and rhetorical success in a controversy. Such evidence may be found, for example, in changes of views in the course of the dispute. These changes may not be heralded as resulting from persuasion (more often than not they are accompanied by disclaimers to this effect). Nevertheless, they are detectable. For example, there are works, like Malthus's Principles, which took shape in the course of a controversy and whose very choice of topics and arguments is explicitly justified also with reference to the latter; there are other works, like Ricardo's Principles, where the role of the controversy in determining the choice of topics and of lines of argument is rather concealed; and there are changes, like those in the posthumous second edition of Malthus's Principles, that originated from both an attempt at reaching more precision and clarity – what he had been constantly requested to do by Ricardo – and an 'internal' dialectic of the author with himself (cf. Pullen 1989: lxviii-lxix); other changes, like those in Ricardo's chapter on machinery, embodied important concessions to the opponent, and were clearly perceived to do so by third parties (like McCulloch), even if the concessions were not acknowledged to be such by the author; finally there are writings by Ricardo, such as the Notes on Malthus and The notes on Malthus' measure of value, that were occasioned exclusively by the controversy, and were left unpublished. Furthermore, a few general trends may be discerned, concerning both contenders' evolution. Firstly, Malthus shifts from relative apriorism to a less aprioristic attitude between 1798 and 1803; Ricardo makes a parallel shift between 1817 and 1821. Secondly, the different design of their main works in political economy depends, at least partly, on the evolution of the privately held controversy, for at a certain stage they begin to carry out also in public a sustained argument against what began to appear to each of them to be an alternative approach to which they must respond publicly[[25]](#footnote-25). Thirdly, change in their published works and in their positions was affected by the controversy more deeply than they confessed: for example, influences by third parties on Ricardo always discouraged any acknowledgment of Malthus's contribution. Fourthly, in the last two years of his life Ricardo was quickly evolving in a direction that could be hardly foretold but that would have increased the gap between himself and James Mill in so far as it implied less apriorism, less dogmatism, and more caution in matters of policy advice; how this evolution could have affected his exchange with Malthus is hard to predict. The controversy here studied thus shows that opponents ultimately do influence each other's views even when they deny it, that they obey the principles of communicative cooperation in conducting their conflict, that they follow norms of persuasion even in their use of fallacious arguments, and that their opportunistic choices of moves cluster to form a certain scientific style. The existence of such elements, which constrain the opponents' subjective tendencies, allow one to speak of a peculiar form of 'rationality' that governs a controversy. In Malthus's and Ricardo's case, as one economist puts it, the "miracle is ... that they could stand each other"; their controversy is, thus, "an inspiring case study in both the difficulty and the possibility of human communication" (Dorfman, 1989: 163).

With the usual proviso, we thank Gideon Freudenthal, Alan Gross, and Massimo Mugnai for useful comments.

**References**

Arnauld, Antoine and Nicole, Pierre. 1683. *La logique ou l'art de penser*. Paris (5th ed.)

Attardo, Salvatore. Forthcoming. "Competition and cooperation: Beyond Gricean Pragmatics". *Pragmatics and Cognition* 5.1.

Belsham, Thomas. 1801. *Elements of the Philosophy of the Mind, and of Moral Philosophy. To which is Prefixed a Compendium of Logic*. London: Johnson.

Burnyeat, Miles F. 1984. "The sceptic in his place and time". In Rorty, R.; Schneewind, J.B.; and Skinner, Q. eds., *Philosophy in History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 225-254.

Canguilhem, Georges. 1977. *La formation du concept de réflexe aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, Paris: Vrin (2nd edition).

Cremaschi, Sergio. 1988a. "Metafore, modelli, linguaggio scientifico: il dibattito postempirista". In V. Melchiorre ed., *Simbolo e conoscenza*, Milan: Vita e Pensiero, pp. 31-102.

Cremaschi, Sergio. 1988b. "Remarks on Scientific Metaphors". In M.L. Dalla Chiara and M.C. Galavotti eds., *Atti del Congresso: Temi e prospettive della Logica e Filosofia della Scienza*. Vol. II. Bologna: CLUEB. pp. 114-116.

Cremaschi, Sergio, and Dascal, Marcelo 1996. "Malthus and Ricardo on Economic Methodology". *History of Political Economy* 28.3: 475-511.

Cremaschi, Sergio, and Dascal, Marcelo 1998. "Persuasion and Argument in the Malthus-Ricardo Correspondence". *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology*. 16.

Cremaschi, Sergio, and Dascal, Marcelo Forthcoming. "Malthus and Ricardo: Two styles for economic theory". *Science in Context* (Special Issue on Controversies).

Dascal, Marcelo. 1983. *Pragmatics and the Philosophy of Mind*. Vol. 1. Amsterdam: John Benjamin’s.

Dascal, Marcelo. 1985. "The relevance of misunderstanding". In M. Dascal, ed., pp. 441-460.

Dascal, Marcelo. 1989. "Controversies as quasi-dialogues". In E. Weigand and F. Hundsnurscher ed., *Dialoganalyse II*. Tübingen, Niemeyer. I: 147-159.

Dascal, Marcelo. 1990a. "The Controversy about Ideas and the Idea of Controversy", in F. Gil. ed., *Controvérsias científicas e filosóficas*. Lisboa: Editora Fragmentos, pp. 61-100.

Dascal, Marcelo. 1990b. "La arrogancia de la razón". *Isegoría* 2: 75-103.

Dascal, Marcelo. 1992. "On the pragmatic structure of conversation". In J.R. Searle et al. *(On) Searle on Conversation*, compiled and introduced by H. Parret and J. Verschueren. Amsterdam: John Benjamin’s, pp. 35-56.

Dascal, Marcelo. 1995. "Epistemología, controversias y pragmática". *Isegoría* 12: 8-43.

Dascal, Marcelo. 1996. "The Beyond Enterprise". In J. Stewart ed., *Beyond the Symbol Model: Reflections on the Representational Nature of Language*. Albany, NY: Suny Press, pp. 303-334.

Dascal, Marcelo. (forthcoming) "The Balance of Reason". In D. Vanderveken ed., *Logic, Language, and Thought*. Oxford University Press.

Dascal, Marcelo ed. 1985. *Dialogue: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Amsterdam: Benjamín’s.

Dascal, Marcelo and Gross, Alan. Forthcoming. "Pragmatics and Rhetoric".

Dascal, Marcelo and Katriel, Tamar. 1977. "Between semantics and pragmatics: the two types of 'but' - Hebrew 'aval' and 'ela'". *Theoretical linguistics* 4: 143-172.

Dorfman, Robert. 1989. "Thomas Robert Malthus and David Ricardo". *Journal of Economic Perspectives*. 3.3: 153-64.

van Eemeren, Frans H. and Rob Grootendorst, 1984. *Speech acts in argumentative discussions*. Dordrecht: Foils.

Fraser, Bruce. 1994. "No conversation without misrepresentation". In Parret, ed., pp. 143-153.

Granger, Gilles-Gaston. 1959. "Sur la connaissance philosophique". *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 13: 96-111.

Granger, Gilles-Gaston. 1968. *Essai d'une philosophie du style*. Paris: Colin.

Granger, Gilles-Gaston. 1985. "Discussing and Convincing: An Approach Towards a Pragmatical Study of the Language of Science". In M. Dascal ed., pp. 339-351.

Grice, H.P. 1989. *Studies in the Ways of Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gy, Yueguo. 1994. "Pragmatics and rhetoric: A collaborative approach to conversation". In Parrett, ed., pp. 173-195.

Halévy, Elie. 1901. *La formation du radicalisme philosophique*. 3 vols. Paris: Alcan.

Hollander, Samuel. 1979. *The Economics of David Ricardo*. Toronto and Buffalo: The University of Toronto Press.

James, Patricia. 1979. *Population Malthus. His Life and Time*. London: Routledge.

Khalil, Elias L. 1992. "Fox, Hedgehog, and Owl: Three Temperaments in Economic Discourse". *Methodus* 4.1: 101-109.

Keynes, John Maynard [1933] 1972. "Thomas Robert Malthus". In *Essays in Biography*. Cambridge: Macmillan and St. Martin's Press.

Lakatos, Imre. 1970. "Falsification and the methodology of scientific research programmes". In Lakatos, I. and A. Musgrave eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 91-196.

McCloskey, Donald N. 1994a. *Knowledge and Persuasion in Economics*, Cambridge University Press.

McCloskey, Donald N. 1994b. "How economists persuade". *Journal of Economic Methodology* 1.1: 15-32.

Mack, Mary. 1962. *Jeremy Bentham. An Odyssey of Ideas*. London: Heinemann.

Malthus, Thomas Robert. 1986. *The Works of Thomas Robert Malthus* 8 vols. Ed. by E.A. Wrigley and D. Souden, London: Pickering.

Malthus, Thomas Robert. [1814] 1986. *Observations on the Effects of the Corn Laws*. In Malthus 1986. VII: 87-109.

Malthus, Thomas Robert. [1815] 1986. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Progress of Rent*. In Malthus, 1986. VII: 115-145.

Malthus, Thomas Robert. [1803] 1989. *An Essay on the Principle of Population. The Version Published in 1803, with the Variora of 1806, 1807, 1817 and 1826*. 2 vols. Edited by P. James. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for the Royal Economic Society.

Malthus, Thomas Robert. [1820, 1836] 1989. *Principles of political economy. Variorum edition edited by J. Pullen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for the Royal Economic Society.

Malthus, Thomas Robert. [1823] 1986. *The Measure of Value*. In Malthus, 1986. VII: 179-221.

Malthus, Thomas Robert. [1827] 1986. *Definitions in political economy*. In Malthus, 1986. VIII.

Mill, James [1808] 1965. *Commerce Defended*. New York: Kelley.

Paley, William. [1785] 1786. *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*. London: Faulder.

Malthus, Thomas Robert. [1802] 1970. *Natural Theology: or: Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature*. Westmead: Gregg.

Parrett, Herman ed. 1994. *Pretending to Communicate*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Pepper, Stephen. 1935. "The root metaphor theory of metaphysics". *Journal of Philosophy* 32: 365-374.

Popper, Karl. [1975] 1981. "The rationality of scientific revolutions". In I. Hacking ed., *Scientific Revolutions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 80-106.

Porta, Pier Luigi. 1978. "Il dibattito tra Ricardo e Malthus: aspetti di teoria del valore e della distribuzione". *Giornale degli economisti* 37.5-6: 317-43; and 37.7-8: 454-68.

Pullen, John. 1989. "Introduction to the Variorum Edition". In Malthus, [1820, 1836].

Ricardo, David. 1951-1973. *The Works and Correspondence*. 11 vols. Ed. by P. Sraffa with the collaboration of M.H. Dobb, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ricardo, David. [1817, 1821] 1951. *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*. In Ricardo, 1951-1973. I.

Ricardo, David. [1928] 1951. *Notes on Mr Malthus*. In Ricardo, 1951-1973. II.

Ricardo, David. 1952. *Absolute Value and Exchangeable Value*. In Ricardo, 1951-1973. IV: 361-412.

Ricardo, David. 1992. *Notes on Malthus' 'Measure of Value'*. Ed. by P.L. Porta. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Samuelson, Paul A. 1978. "The Canonical Classical Model of Political Economy", *Journal of Economic Literature* 16: 1415-1434.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. [1864] 1985. *Die Kunst, Recht zu behalten, in 38 Kunstgriffen dargestellt*. In *Der Handschriftliche Nachlass*. 5 vols. Ed. by A. Hübscher. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag. III: 669-695.

Smith, Adam. [1776] 1976. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. 2 vols. Ed. by R. H. Campbell; A.S. Skinner; and W.B. Todd. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Stewart, Dugald [1814]. *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*. Vol. II. Edinburgh: Constable.

1. We have deliberately refrained from engaging in theoretical comparisons with other approaches, such as van Eemeren and Grootendorst's (1984) 'pragma-dialectics' or Walton's (1995, 1998) 'new dialectics'. Such approaches may take advantage of the 'thick' description of a cycle of the controversy here presented. Our main concern is to show how the pragma-rhetorical aspects of a controversy may shed light on its epistemological significance. For further information on our point of view, see Cremaschi and Dascal (1996, 1998, forthcoming) as well as Dascal (1989, 1990a, 1995, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On economists' different "temperaments" see Khalil, 1992; on temperaments or styles in our case study see Cremaschi and Dascal, forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There is one shortcoming in the materials we have chosen for our micro-analysis: Malthus and Ricardo did actually start to discuss the issue of foreign commerce (particularly the question of the import of corn) as early as the summer of 1813, not in June 1814. The first record of this discussion is in a letter by Malthus of 10 August 1813, a reply to two missing letters by Ricardo. Yet, we know little about the way in which the discussion developed between August 1813 and June 1814, since most letters are missing. Yet, Ricardo's letter of 26 June 1814 is a good putative starting-point of this cycle, since it is a reaction to a publication by Malthus, expressing disagreement on a well-defined point, namely whether restrictions on the import of corn tend "to lower the rate of interest" (To Ricardo 26 June 1814. In: Ricardo, 1951-1973, VI: 108). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Say's law is the proposition that supply creates its own demand, or that the production of output tends of itself to generate purchasing power equal to the value of that output. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On the notion of "tendency" in classical political economy, see Cremaschi and Dascal, 1996, pp. 499-501. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Effectual demand is defined by Adam Smith as "the demand of those who are willing to pay the natural price of the commodity, or the whole value of the rent, labour, and profit" (1776, I.vii.8; vol. I, p. 73). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This pamphlet of 1808 was an attack on the views argued for by William Spence in his *Britain independent of Commerce* (1807), where he tried to "revive the system of the *Economistes*" (Mill, [1808], p. 4) arguing that "commerce" (that is, foreign trade) did not add to Britain's wealth, and thus the prospects of trade with the Continent lost because of the Napoleonic wars were no real loss. What is interesting to us is the strong reformulation of Say's law put forth by Mill as a part of his argument. Spence's claim (in its turn polemical with Adam Smith) was that it "is a condition... essential to the creation of national wealth, that the class of land-proprietors expend the greater part of the revenue which they derive from the soil". Mill declares that Spence is "confounding together two things... by failing to distinguish the double meaning of an ambiguous term. The two senses of the word *consumption* are not a little remarkable" (p. 68). Thus "there are two species of consumption... The one is an absolute destruction of property... the other is a consumption for the sake of reproduction and might perhaps with more propriety be called *employment* than consumption" (p.69). From "this very explanation of the meaning of the term", Mill continues, "it appears that it is of importance to the interests of the country, that as much as possible of its annual produce should be *employed*, but as little as possible of it consumed" (p. 70). Thus, in country's interest, the kind of consumption by landowners prompted by Spence "should be not the greatest, but the least possible. And Spence's alarm that the whole annual produce of the country may be left not consumed is completely misplaced" (p. 71). To support his argument, Mill the following proposition whose certainty is unquestionable in political economy: “The production of commodities creates, and is the one and universal cause which creates a market for the commodities produced... so that a nation can never be naturally overstocked either with capital or with commodities” (p. 81). Another piece of intellectual furniture from this pamphlet is the notion of a "desire for accumulation". It deserves mention, since it will show up in the following letters by Ricardo, *without* any direct quotation from Mill (by association of ideas? Perhaps also ideas, no less than cherries, drag each other by their leafstalk). In the concluding "General reflections" Mill adds: "Notwithstanding the avidity of immediate gratification... the disposition to accumulation seems, from experience, to be a still more powerful propensity" (p. 117). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. We have elaborated on Ricardo's way of dividing positive from moral issues and on his vindication of the *Wertfrei* character of the moral sciences in Cremaschi and Dascal, 1996, p. 497. It is worth repeating that Ricardo's vindication, far from being a mark of secularization, was just a consequence of a theological outlook different from Malthus's, namely the Unitarian divines' solution to the problem of theodicy. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. William Paley, the proponent of a version of theological utilitarianism that makes the moral quality of actions depend on the total quantity of "happiness" they bring about, writes: "In strictness, any condition may be denominated happy, in which the amount or aggregate of pleasure exceeds that of pain; and the degree of happiness depends upon the quantity of this excess. And the greatest quantity of it, ordinarily attainable in human life, is what we mean by happiness" (Paley [1785], p. 18). He adds "that pleasures differ in nothing but in continuance and intensity" (*ib.*); and "actions are to be estimated by their tendency to promote happiness. Whatever is expedient is right. It is the utility of any moral rule alone which constitutes the obligation of it" (p. 61). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Or, in Dugald Stewart' s words, to 'the prevalent use of our best writers' ([1814] 1792, II: 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In fact, natural price for Ricardo is another name for production costs; all other shades of meaning this expression had for Adam Smith are just dropped. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a discussion of Ricardo's and Malthus's different conceptions of language and definitions, see Cremaschi and Dascal (1996: 489). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Stratagem 4 is a generalization of Schopenhaeur's Stratagem 33: "This may also be true in theory; yet it is false in practice" (Schopenhauer, 1985 [1864]: 687). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. Schopenauer's Strategem, 17: "If the opponent gets us into trouble by a counter-argument, we may often get out of trouble by some subtle distinction, of which we may not even have thought, if the matter at stake allows for some double meaning or a twofold instance" (Schopenhauer, 1985 [1864]: 681). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Dascal (1990b) has coined the expression 'insulating strategy' for this kind of move. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Disputes of this kind are anticipated by Leibniz's criticism of Descartes's rule of analysis. Leibniz contends that Descartes's rule is, as such, worthless because he doesn't say where to cut, where are the 'junctures' where it is appropriate to severe a complex 'body' of phenomena into parts to be separately studied, so that the result can then be put together as a satisfactory theory of the body as a whole. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Cremaschi and Dascal (1998) for a discussion of changes in Ricardo's positions on the determinants of value. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Dascal (1995) for further elaboration of this dual role of pragmatics in accounting for controversies. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Both the pragmatic constraints mentioned in the previous section and the rhetorical constraints discussed in the present section have been illustrated by reference to the cycle of the controversy here studied in our preceding description-cum-analysis of this cycle. This is the reason for the absence of such references in these sections [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Communicative cooperation is not a yes-no phenomenon, but rather a matter of degree. For a few suggestions along these lines, see Attardo, forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Grice, 1989. For attempts to bridge the gap between pragmatics and rhetoric, see, for example, Guo, 1994, and Dascal and Gross, forthcoming, where a reconstruction of 'cognitive rhetoric' and a proposal for its integration with pragmatics is put forth. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Pepper (1935), Cremaschi (1988a, 1988b), Dascal (1996b). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. On the notion of scientific style see Granger, 1968, pp. 13-16; 1985, pp. 350-51. For further discussion of the notion of scientific style in the Malthus-Ricardo controversy, see Cremaschi and Dascal, forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. We are alluding here to Leibniz's theory of controversies which is quite unknown, and quite different from his well-known view that, as soon as his universal language were completed, all controversies could be solved by simply calculating. Leibniz realized that this "*Calculemus*!" is an ideal procedure that cannot be applied in most matters, particularly in the 'moral sciences', and came to the conclusion that another procedure should be devised to extract reasonable results in such domains (See Dascal, forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. It also depends, of course, on different precomprehensions of their self-assigned tasks (for Malthus, vindicating and developing Adam Smith's approach; for Ricardo, amending this approach on a specific point – value theory – in order to make it more consistent), and on their shared battle against the prejudices of "practical men" in the name of the correct principles of political economy. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)