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Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834)*

John Pullen**

Abstract

Malthus' relationships with the Enlightenment are considered under the following nine headings: Utilitarianism, Religion and Natural Law; Religious Education; Progress; Social Classes; Providential Order; Laissez Faire; Passions and Emotions; The Cult of Sensibility and the Sublime; and the "Doctrine of Proportions".

Key Words: Malthus; Enlightenment

* An entry in the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, Oxford University Press.

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Malthus, Thomas Robert (1766 - 1834), English political economist, studied at the University of Cambridge, graduating BA in 1788 and MA in 1791, and was elected to a Fellowship of Jesus College, Cambridge, in 1793. He was ordained as a minister of the Church of England in 1789. In 1805 he was appointed Professor of History and Political Economy at the East India College near Hertford, a position he held until his death. Among his numerous books, pamphlets and articles, the best known are *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 1798 (a further five editions were published in his lifetime) and *Principles of Political Economy*, 1820 (a second, posthumous edition, with many alterations, was published in 1836). He married in 1805, and had three children (James 1979).

There can be no doubt about the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment - particularly through Adam Smith - on Malthus, but the influence of the French Enlightenment is less direct and less obvious. His father, Daniel Malthus, was a friend and correspondent of Rousseau, and it is possible that Rousseau's pedagogical ideas influenced the unorthodox early education chosen by Daniel for his son — in the homes of private tutors and at a Dissenting Academy. Malthus's library, inherited from his father and now held in Jesus College, Cambridge, contains a 1762 edition of *Emile*, and at an earlier period contained also Rousseau's *Confessions* and *Julie*. Other French authors of the Enlightenment represented in the library include Alembert, Chateaubriand, Mercier de la Rivière, Montesquieu and Voltaire (Jesus College 1983); and in Malthus's publications there are references to Condorcet, Mirabeau, Montesquieu and Voltaire. There are thus bibliographical reasons for thinking that Malthus was well aware of the

ideas of the French Enlightenment authors; but the extent of their influence on him or whether his views would have developed independently, remains unclear.

The curious historical fact that Malthus lived almost exactly half his life in the eighteenth-century and half in the nineteenth is perhaps reflected in his relationships with the Enlightenment. In some respects he was part of the Enlightenment, absorbing and expressing its spirit and principles, but in other respects he either remained outside its influence or reacted against it.

Utilitarianism, Revelation and Natural Law

Although Malthus's known publications do not include a specific treatise on moral philosophy, there is sufficient evidence scattered throughout his writings for him to be classified as a utilitarian or consequentialist. He declared that it is "our obligation, as reasonable beings, to attend to the consequences of our actions", to examine carefully "the consequences of our natural passions" and to bring them frequently to "the test of utility" (1989a, II, 157, 163). He regarded "the principle of utility" as "the great foundation of morals" (later changed to "the great criterion of moral rules") and as "the test by which alone we can know whether [a natural passion] ought or ought not to be indulged" (1989a, II, 157; in a later edition of the *Essay* the words "independently of the revealed will of God" were added after "know").

But unlike the anti-religious and anti-clerical attitudes of some writers of the Enlightenment, his utilitarianism was not presented as an alternative to Christianity. The comments of his contemporaries and the evidence of his surviving sermons show that he remained throughout his life a sincere and devout minister of religion. For Malthus it would be inconceivable that a reasoned investigation of the

consequences and utility of any course of action could arrive at results that differ from the moral precepts of Revelation.

Now did his utilitarianism involve a rejection of a philosophy of natural law. For Malthus, the laws of nature, being the laws of the Author of nature and guides to human welfare, could not logically contradict either utility or Revelation. Natural law, utility and Revelation were three different but mutually-reinforcing ways of arriving at the same truths.

Religious Education

His religious convictions, though strong, were not narrow or bigoted, but were imbued with the spirit of religious toleration characteristic of the Enlightenment. He was a forceful advocate of the emancipation for Irish Catholics, describing them as "a people groaning under a penal code of singular severity". He condemned the bigotry of those of his fellow countrymen who refused to consider the Irish Roman Catholics "as fellow Christians worshipping the same God, and fellow subjects entitled to the same civil privileges"; and argued that the "*first step*" in ameliorating "the present moral and political degradation of the mass of the Irish poor" was "the full and complete emancipation of the Catholics" (quoted James 1979, 150-3).

Progress

Malthus's qualified attachment to Enlightenment attitudes can be seen in his views on human progress. He shared the Enlightenment belief in the possibility of progress, but rejected the extreme optimism of Godwin and Condorcet. He argued that, even though we do not know where the limits to progress might lie, there must nevertheless be limits. And he did not underestimate the social, political, economic and moral difficulties that would have to be overcome. On the question of population control, for example, he admitted that his recommended check - viz. moral restraint or delayed marriage with strictly moral pre-marital behaviour - would not be a panacea. It would be a difficult precept to practise, and there would be cases of failure. But he nevertheless believed, invoking the Enlightenment's trust in education, that if people were made aware of the nature of the population problem, a sufficient number would in time come to adopt the recommended remedy. His overall attitude to human progress could best be described as one of cautious and limited optimism.

Social classes

Some writers of the Enlightenment believed, or at least hoped, that the coming progress would extend to all classes of society. Malthus appears to have shared this aspiration, but not unambiguously. Using the analogy of a tree - which must have its leaves and flowers (the upper classes), its solid trunk (the middle classes), and its roots in the ground (the labouring classes) providing nourishment for the others - he saw the tripartite division of classes as an essential feature of the English Constitution, and, in common with leading figures of the Enlightenment, did not advocate the replacement of this traditional social hierarchy by an

egalitarian, classless society. He argued strongly in support of a landed aristocracy as the best safeguard of English liberties and privileges.

But he nevertheless recommended some re-adjustment of the relative size and importance of the three classes. He described the distribution of landed property that occurred during feudal times as "most unequal and vicious" (1989b, I, 429) and argued that society would benefit from a wider (but not too wide) distribution. Admittedly, he did not say how this wider distribution might be effected, but at least he countered (in advance) Marx's allegation that he was a spokesman for the landlord class. He also welcomed the extension of the franchise in the Reform Act of 1832, although there is no record of his having actively supported the reform campaign. Despite reservations relating to the timing and degree of the extension, and subject to the proviso that the newly-enfranchised middle classes show a respect for property and social order, he welcomed the Reform Act as a means of placing the British Constitution on "a much broader and more solid base than ever" (Malthus, 1989b, I, 437-8; II, 270, 453-4). If he were guilty of any class bias, it would be toward the middle class. He believed that a strong middle class would not only enhance social stability but would also generate the effective demand necessary for economic growth.

This attachment to bourgeois values, typical of the Enlightenment, did not exclude a genuine concern for the welfare of the lower classes. He insisted that in the *Essay*, "the practical design uppermost in the mind of the writer" had been "to improve the condition and increase the happiness of the lower classes of society" (1989a, II, 251). And he argued that an upward movement of at least some members of the labouring classes into the middle classes would be both possible and desirable.

Providential order

Although his support for Enlightenment principles was subject to some reservations, he was totally in accord with those Enlightenment authors who believed that a Providential and benevolent order guided human destiny. His principle of population, according to which population tends to press against subsistence and needs to be continually restrained by positive and preventive checks, was seen by some critics (notably Michael Sadler) as a blasphemous indictment of Divine providence; but the last two chapters of the first edition of his *Essay on Population*, 1798, show clearly his view that this tension between population and food was an essential part of the Divine plan to lead us to social progress and the "growth of mind" (Malthus 1986, I, 128). These last two theological chapters were omitted from his later editions of the *Essay*, but there is no evidence that the omission represented a recantation.

Laissez-faire

As one who saw himself as a true disciple of Adam Smith - he appears to have required his students to use Smith's *Wealth of Nations* as a textbook, even after his own *Principle of Political Economy* had been published - it is not surprising to find that his belief in Providential harmony extended to a belief that the economic interests of individuals and of society were generally identical - but, like Adam Smith, this laissez-faire individualism was of the pragmatic, not dogmatic, variety. He insisted on the need for exceptions and limitations to all the principles of political economy and warned against the dangers of premature generalizations.

Passions and emotions

Malthus was also closely aligned with the spirit of the Enlightenment in his views on the role of passions and emotions in human affairs. While in no way casting doubt on the role of reason, the written record of his diaries, correspondence and publications provides abundant evidence of the importance he attached to the passions and emotions. He described our natural human passions as "the materials of all our pleasures, as well as of all our pains; of all our happiness, as well as of all our misery; of all our virtues, as well as of all our vices" and added that they "are so necessary to our being that they could not be generally weakened or diminished, without injuring our happiness. ... It must therefore be regulation and direction that are wanted, not diminution or extinction" (Malthus 1989, II, 89, 92). If the passions are subjected to "the guidance of reason", their "regulated indulgence" will provide "the principal ingredients of human happiness" (Malthus 1989, II, 96, 105). He warned that the "passion between the sexes" if left unregulated would result in misery and vice; but in a remarkable eulogy claimed that when expressed in the form of "virtuous love" this passion would be the source of "sensual and intellectual enjoyment" and "the most exquisite gratifications", and would be "the sunny spot in [a man's] whole life, where his imagination loves most to bask, which he recollects and contemplates with the fondest regret, and which he would most wish to live over again" (Malthus 1989, II, 90-1).

The cult of sensibility and the sublime

In this emphasis on passion and emotions he shared in the cult of sensibility and the pursuit of the sublime that is said to have been characteristic of the Enlightenment. This trait is evident even at the age of 17 when in a letter to his father from the Dissenting Academy at Warrington he related that he had been

reading Longinus, *De sublimitate commentarius*, adding that Longinus "is himself the great sublime he draws" (Malthus 1997, I, 8). In further correspondence that year with his father he displays a keen interest in the current productions of the London theatre. And his diary of a holiday in the Lake District (undated, but probably 1795, at the age of 29) shows him as a devotee of the cult of the picturesque, assiduously consulting his guide books in the search for the most sublime views and prospects, and enhancing his visual pleasure with readings from James Thomson's *Seasons*.

The "doctrine of proportions"

However, this early attachment to the Enlightenment's cult of sensibility and pursuit of the sublime appears to have given way in later years to a cult of moderation. He began to place an increasing emphasis on the importance of balance and proportion in human affairs. He maintained that in political economy - where "all the great results ... respecting wealth, depend upon *proportions*" (Malthus 1989b, I, 432) - the factors determining economic growth, such as saving, consumption, and distribution, should be combined in optimum proportions; and more generally he believed that "It is not, however, in political economy alone that so much depends upon proportions, but throughout the whole range of nature and art" (Malthus 1989b, II, 269, 453). This pursuit of the golden mean was apparently reflected in his personal life, which according to contemporary sources was characterised by a spirit of moderation, symmetry and order.

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