

Thomas R. Malthus

(1766-1834)

Malthus was an English clergyman who thought deeply about economic problems and is best known for his Essay on the Principle of Population, from which this selection is taken. Unlike most classical economists, Malthus saw the possibility that gluts (depressions) could exist and argued that position strongly. The essential argument presented in this essay is that population growth can and will outstrip the food supply. This argument has entered the language with the term "Malthusian doctrine."

His suggestion that population ought to be controlled was very striking at the time. He was born with a cleft palate and a harelip and, as one of his contemporaries observed, he spoke in a "tremulous stammering voice, seemingly little fitted for the utterance of any doctrine which could be deemed dangerous to social welfare."

Malthus wrote his first version of the Essay in 1798, but for the so-called second edition (1803) he revised the work so extensively that it is really a new book. The work went through many editions, but it never again was substantially revised as far as the selection here is concerned.

Thomas Malthus. 1803 (14th edition: 1826). *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. London: J.M. Dent, pp. 1-24 *passim*.

The Theory of Population

In an inquiry concerning the improvement of society, the mode of conducting the subject which naturally presents itself, is, (1), to investigate the causes which have hitherto impeded the progress of mankind towards happiness; and (2), to examine the probability of the total or partial removal of these causes in the future. The principal object of this essay is to examine the effects of one great cause intimately united with the very nature of man. That is the constant tendency of all animated life to increase beyond the nourishment provided for it.

Through the animal and vegetable kingdoms Nature has scattered the seeds of life abroad with the most profuse and liberal hand. If the germs of existence contained in the earth could freely develop themselves, they would fill millions of worlds in the course of a few thousand years. Necessity, that imperious, all-pervading law of nature restrains them and man alike within prescribed bounds.

The effects of nature's check on man are complicated. Impelled to the increase of his species by an equally powerful instinct, reason interrupts his career, and asks whether he may not bring beings into the world, for whom he cannot provide the means of support. If he hear not this suggestion, the human race will be constantly endeavoring to increase beyond the means of subsistence. But as, by that law of our nature which makes food necessary to the life of man, population can never actually increase beyond the lowest nourishment capable of supporting it, a strong check on population, namely, the difficulty of acquiring food, must be constantly in operation. This difficulty must fall somewhere, and must necessarily be severely felt in some or other of the various forms of misery by a large portion of mankind. This conclusion will sufficiently appear from a review of the different states of society in which man has existed. But the subject will be seen in a clearer light if we endeavor to ascertain what would be the natural increase in population, if left to exert itself with perfect freedom.

Many extravagant statements have been made of the length of the period within which the population of a country can double. To be perfectly sure we are far within the truth, we will take a slow rate, and say that population, when unchecked, goes on doubling itself every 25 years, or increases in a geometrical ratio. The rate according to which the productions of the earth may be supposed to increase, it will not be so easy to determine. However, we may be perfectly certain

that the ratio of their increase in a limited territory must be of a totally different nature from the ratio of the increase in population. A thousand millions are just as easily doubled every 25 years by the power of population as a thousand. But the food will by no means be obtained with the same facility. Man is confined in room. When acre has been added to acre until all the fertile land is occupied, the yearly increase in food must depend upon the melioration of the land already in possession. This is a fund which, from the nature of all soils, instead of increasing must be gradually diminishing. But population, could it be supplied with food, would go on with unexhausted vigor, and the increase in one period would furnish a power of increase in the next, and this without any limit. If it be allowed that by the best possible policy the average produce could be doubled in the first 25 years, it will be allowing a greater increase than could with reason be expected. In the next 25 years it is impossible to suppose that the produce could be quadrupled. It would be contrary to our knowledge of the properties of land.

Let us suppose that the yearly additions which might be made to the former average produce instead of decreasing as they certainly would do, were to remain the same; and that the product of the land might be increased every 25 years, by a quantity equal to what it at present produces. The most enthusiastic speculator can not suppose a greater increase than this. Even then the land could not be made to increase faster than in an arithmetical ratio. Taking the whole earth, the human species would increase as the numbers 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, and subsistence as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. In two centuries the population would be to the means of subsistence as 256 to 9; in three centuries as 4,096 to 13, and in two thousand years the difference would be almost incalculable.

In this supposition, no limits whatever are placed to the produce of the earth. It may increase forever and be greater than any assignable quantity; yet still the power of population, being in every period so much greater, the increase of the human species can only be kept down to the level of the means of subsistence by the constant operation of the strong law of necessity, acting as a check upon the greater power.

But this ultimate check to population, the want of food, is never the immediate check except in cases of famine. The latter consists in all those customs and all those diseases, which seem to be generated by a scarcity of the means of subsistence; and all those causes which tend permanently to weaken the human frame. The checks may be classed under two general heads—the preventative and the positive.

The preventative check, peculiar to man, arises from his reasoning faculties, which enable him to calculate distant consequences. He sees the distress which frequently presses upon those who have large families; he cannot contemplate his present possessions or earnings, and calculate the amount of each share, when they must be divided, perhaps, among seven or eight, without feeling a doubt whether he may be able to support the offspring which probably will be brought into the world. Other considerations occur. Will he lower his rank in life, and be obliged to give up in great measure his former habits? Does any mode of employment present itself by which he may reasonably hope to maintain a family? Will he not subject himself to greater difficulties and more severe labor than in his present state? Will he be able to give his children adequate educational advantages? Can he face the possibility of exposing his children to poverty or charity, by his inability to provide for them? These considerations prevent a large number of people from pursuing the dictates of nature.

The positive checks to population are extremely various, and include every cause, whether arising from vice or misery, which in any degree contributes to shorten the natural duration of human life. Under this head may be enumerated all unwholesome occupations, severe labor, exposure to the seasons, extreme poverty, bad nursing of children, great towns, excesses of all kinds, the whole train of common diseases, wars, plagues, and famines.

The theory of population is resolvable into three propositions: (1) Population is necessarily limited by the means of subsistence. (2) Population invariably increases where the means of subsistence increase, unless prevented by some very powerful and obvious checks. (3) These checks which keep population on a level with the means of subsistence are all resolvable into moral restraint, vice, and misery.